



The Zen of Speed

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I began my career, such as it is, as a bicycle messenger in a zombie world.

It was a rundown city, like all of them. Nondescript brown boxy buildings all in a row. The roaming occasional zombie.

I was 11 years old.

Bicycle messengering.

Yes, this is inferior luck. Such a life naturally creates a current, a need, a yen, for something, towards something, that will help you deal with such stresses. Thus my interest in the zen arts.

You get used to some things.

The tan-hide, long-decayed zombies would amble noisily toward the bike. I'd get to a dirty office building. Hurriedly try to get a packet out of a satchel. Try to put it into an office box.

Inevitably, there'd be a situation where I couldn't reach.
There'd be like a low steel barrier in the way.

I remember once a woman stared out from the office window.
And through muffled glass she grumbled, "Put it in. Idiot. I'm
not coming out there to get it."

It was terrifying.

What are you going to do.

I'm a little kid, upset, scrambling to get the packet to the office
slot but can't.

Zombies are closing in.

I close my eyes, move from the bike, stretching, stretching—
the zombies so close I can smell their dead breath.

By which I mean their mouths are so rotten they reek to hell.

I look back. And of course at the time, I'm tied to the bike by a
long set of wires and tiny tubes that link to a socket in my back.

All concept art by Aiden Pickett



The Link. Always with me. Break free of the bike and your life
is over. Don't break free of the bike and it's likely your life is
over. Contradictions. Beauty of nature. Thus, zen
concentration is required.

So I remember stretching the limits of that wire restraint connected to the bicycle. But then there was no way I could get the packet to fit in the mail slot.

I stare desperately at the Woman in the Office. She stares placidly back. Maybe she gets some free entertainment today. My death.

So, with my eyes closed, I calmly fudge the packet down into the slot with great difficulty.

But I do it.

A zombie, very, very badly decomposed like the others, reaches slowly toward me...

I open my eyes. And I see this. Try to calmly ease back.

A zombie behind me snatches my neck.

I go crazy, desperate, I'm pulling back, sliding away, dragging this browned corpse-man with me to the bike...

Others are swarming.

I get control. I calmly tug at this grasping corpse's arm, rip it off like a dried tree limb, and—despite entanglements—race away on my bicycle.

The zombies slowly shamble after me.

I say to myself, "Rev, the world is changed, the world is unchanged, the world is pain, the world is un-pain, it is nature, it is non-nature. Solace is racing. Racing is meditation. Zen is speed. Speed is zen."

I got the words from an old left-behind book I found in an alley in Shebgott. I couldn't remember what the book actually said, but I got the gist of it.

Suddenly those words made all kinds of sense.

I decide right then and there, *I need to be faster.*

Much faster.

My bike made good time. But this—now, today—*this* is speeding.

The cockpit is sleek. I know when people see it they are impressed. It looks like you could trust this thing to get you through some shit.

I'm 18 now. I am lean, strong, calm, occasionally sad, often emotionless, quick on my feet, and highly observant, and I believe this description is accurate and free of exaggeration in a way that fits with my personal beliefs about being honest and direct. I have one of those faces, you could never figure out my ethnicity, the way everyone would like to look now. From nowhere. From everywhere.

Just moving. Just moving fast.

We must be ever-mindful of the blessings of speed.

The vehicle I drive now is worthy of long consideration. It is a racer ten times as evolved as all those of previous centuries.

It is low to the ground and wide, a bit like the design of an old formula one Indycar, but much, much bigger. Yellow and black like the god of wasps. The driver seat is inside a sharp, angular enclosed cockpit. The large car has two arcing arms that jut out from its front section. These metal arms connect to unbreakable wheels at the front end. If you were to see me from above, you'd see something like a streamlined Y-shape. Intimidating. Beautiful. Fast.

And I need it.

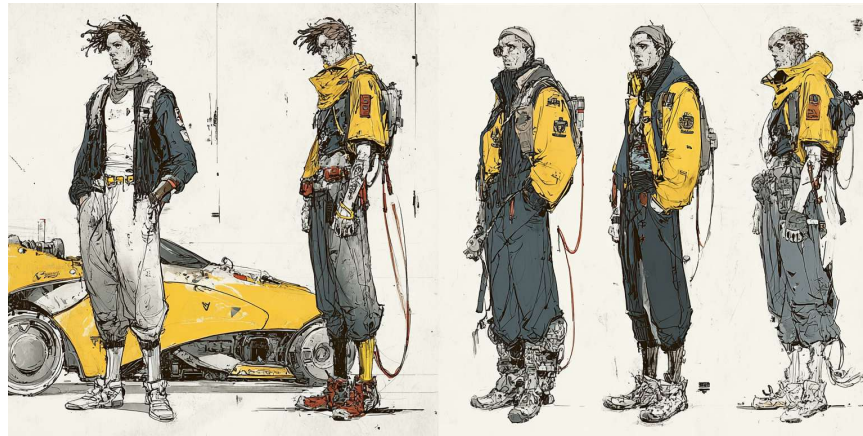
Not for the zombies of old.

Today, in the modern world, deadwalkers are of little consequence.

In fact, right at this moment in the city, my bulked-up IndyCar roars through several ambling zombies, cracking them apart.

Doesn't matter. For the time being, my life is good.

My RipCar is slicing through a palm-tree speckled town with low buildings that are painted in bright blues and pinks. Few vehicles meet up with me. When they do, they are all flashsick, either Formula One-like or heavyduty futuristic racercars akin to those ancient Bugatti Veyrons but baddened for crash-ups. I love the old lightbooks that show those things.



Point is, nothing matters as much as clean, intimidating, beautiful racecars.

My RipCar slows. Enters a building.

Two minutes later, I'm at the cantina. Other varieties of RipCar are parked inside. The patrons are mostly young, over at a central bar in the double-duty caffiehouse tavern, amid the coral-tinted Havana-like light.

I'm chatting with an attractive young waitress. They got a new one every week, but this one has hung on for a time.

She goes, "What time you get done today, Rev?"

"Always on the clock."

"If you can't pay for the caff, you can give me a peck." She smiles and leans forward for the kiss. So I do too—but I'm yanked back by the wires at my back, thicker now than when I was a kid, and connected to the old RipCar.

She grins. “Mean trick, I know.” She giggles, moves off, muttering something about me owing her for the coffee.

I try not to react in disappointment.

“Girltime,” I mumble. “There will never be time for Girltime.” They view all us speeders as damaged goods anyway. I pull at the wire tethers at my back.

Would you want to sleep with a timebomb?

“Hey, Rev,” I hear someone say.

I turn. “Narchie. How you doing?”

“Been better. I think I'm getting sick, man. But if I can't make my skedd, you know...”

Narchie's another driver, one I never viewed as a rival because of his style of play. He looks scared. I glance at the guy's tethers. All the drivers have them—long snaking wires that link back to their cars. The little tubes slither at times to avoid tangles. Smartwires.

“You don't have to be quiet, Narchie, your tether tells your story. Your boss is going to know, sooner or later.”

“No, man, I got it on the fritzonic. He can't pick up my immunology, bro, but I'm feeling it. I'm headed down. Just a cold, I think.”

“I sense there's a reason you're telling me.”

“I can tell him I got a wheel nick I gotta fix, and you can take my weekend job.”

I stare. “Oh, I can take it?”

“It's a job. You don't want a job?” He looks at the bill the waitress had left behind. “On the eye-swear, you can't afford a cup of caff, looks like.”

“I got a few expenses.”

“Behind in your drive-rent.”

“Oh, you're psychic, Akira. What's the job?”

“Just a cabbie job, like all the others.”

I'm skeptical, as you can imagine. “Who's the tow?”

“You'll like it. Trust me.” He sucks in his breath. “She's literally perfect.”

He hands me a scrap of paper. It's an address and a name and a time.

I knew he wasn't joking. And it meant trouble of some kind. Perfs... meaning perfects...are the girls and guys you would see orbiting around me right now if you were here.

You know. The giants.

Moving among the crowd of customers, mostly drivers but others too, are the Perfs, 11-foot tall people otherwise the same as human beings but wearing very little clothing and... utterly perfect. Like supermodels.

Perfs were A.I. made in the GodKnowsWhen, and only the moneyrutts could afford them. Limited supply natch. Moneyrutts meant corruption and various nastiness in my experience.

A Perf, a giant buff supermodel A.I. man, shoves me out of the way, picks up a drink from the waitress who is clearly enamored of him, and moves on.

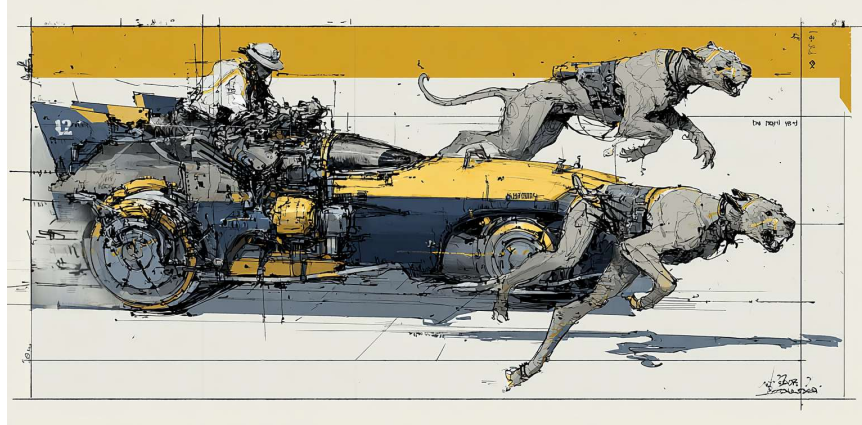
I say, “Perfs are impolite.”

“You have the luxury of choosing who you chaueffeur?”

“I could steal your client from you.”

“Two reasons that won't happen. You're too good a guy and... you don't want this client.”

Now I'm a little worried.



In the evening, RipCars like mine are spread down the street. Unmoving. Sprawled in all directions. Lights in them are going off. Drivers going to sleep. Almost no one has anything but the axles to call home.

I shuffle down in my seat, lean it way back. Try to get shut-eye.

I find myself with the disgusting, dawning sense that an adventure is about to present itself tomorrow morning.

In the morning, my RipCar rests outside a tan-gold hacienda with a pagoda rooftop. I wait for a decent hour to arrive. Then I go in.

Eventually, the tether wires from my car extend endlessly into the house, where the door is slightly ajar, and in a spacious living room, a man who seems clearly to be a gangster intones, "You're the replacement driver."

He's a very small man with a mustache and two massive gold fangs that make talking hard. He is well dressed in a dark business suit with two small TVs in the lapel that ornamentally generate pretty blue wave patterns.

I tell him, "Yes. I'm a little early."

"That's good. You nervous? Don't be nervous. You do anything wrong, then you can be nervous, but you're not going to do anything wrong."

The room has two gigantic rectangular reflecting pools that are really TV screens of bluish-green patterns that create a tropical, weird glow on everything.

A giant, 12 foot tall gorgeous supermodel A.I. perf walks in and sits beside him on the couch. She has classic high cheekbones, what I think they used to call a Russian look, and slightly empty, slightly unkind eyes.

"He won't do anything wrong," she says.

The Gangster introduces her as Jazzil. He says, "This is the precious cargo. Narchie can't do it, so you're going to take her round today. She needs to get a fire-up at the batt station and she wants some threadies at the various rags where she goes, you understand? You drive her, you don't offer any opinions about the way she looks."

"Of course. I'm the driver."

"Don't forget that."

In obvious answer, I lift up my thin tether of wires and tubes.

He snarls, "What is that, being a smartass? You know the reason you low-castes have tethers is so people of refinement can kill you at a button push."

"There is no one in my situation who doesn't know that, Mr. Sui-Generis."

"Is that being a smart ass again?" He's starting not to like me.

"You push my buttons, I'm going to push yours."

"I'm afraid we've gotten off to a bad start."

"Damnis rightis."

"I am a student of zen meditation. What I said was ill-considered. I didn't mean disrespect."

"Don't. Mess. This." He points to his A.I. girlfriend, who leans her huge beautiful face into mine and says: "Up."

My RipCar swoops along at a fine pace down the morning-glazed streets, the town in the old bookworks said to be a combination of dusty forgotten Texas tumbleweed berg and a backwater Florida or Cuban island town invaded centuries ago by Chinese and Vietnamese and what have you from Asia. Colorful. Poverty-stricken. Odd.

I don't know what most of the old references are, but from what I understand, we are some kind of mishmash prideful theme park of crime.

I'm not sure how to express it.

I tell myself, it is important for the student of zen meditation to consider his words more carefully. It is no different when conversing with a female of any variety. Choose words carefully so what you say has great meaning.

In my backseat, the gigantic supermodel model Q slumps, looking a bit uncomfortable with her legs and body crammed in, knees nearly hitting the roof. Her head is slightly tilted.

I ask her about where her apartment is. "Do you like living in the center barrel?"

"I don't actually live."

"Mm. Stupid question, huh? Are you...comfortable back there?"

"I'm not capable of comfort."

"I'm not doing too well at this, am I?"

"What are you good at?"

I grin. "Do you like going fast?"

I hit the gas. The RipCar accelerates tremendously and whips down several (largely empty) streets. Early homeless people wake to the buzz of my engines.

I've gotten to where I hardly notice the jetpack zombies anymore.

At some point in the distant history this happened and because the packs re-start after solar charging, we all have to put up with it, forever.

My vehicle swoops past several jetpack zombies, the heavily decayed corpses floating or flying around idly in the city, aimlessly, endlessly. One smacks into a wall and his jetpack just keeps thrusting him against it forever.

I speed past it.



More worrisome are my fellow cabbies, who like to act like they own the...road. Oh, God.

I'm going a little fast. As always.

Ahead, another RipCar that's much bigger has slammed into two random jetpack zombies. This tweaks some sensor, causing that RipCar to veer off at high speed, hit a wall, then bounce back into the road to tumble violently into wreckage.

I suck in air. Slam the brakes. Doesn't matter.

I smack the car accident wreckage, and flip.

At first I will admit I'm horrified. Then close my eyes and set a course for calm.

When the loudness of the destruction concludes, I open my eyes to find the RipCar is stopped. I look back.

The A.I. supermodel Perf is staring at me.

But her head is disconnected, doll-like, from her body. It is cracked over, hanging off to the side, wires protruding.

I'm pretty sure I say some swear words.

Few minutes later, at the roadside, I'm standing next to my car. Trying not to be freaked. A huge tow truck uses a cranelike contraption to right the other car, and then moves on to mine.

I am on my gono mobile with Narchie, and he's saying, "You killed Jazzle?"

"I... I mean."

"We are all dead. We are all going to die. Our families are going to die."

"I don't have a family."

"Lucky for you! Everyone I care about is dead. Because of you."

I'm thinking really hard. "Maybe it's not so bad."

"Perfs are ancient. They are from the GodKnows. There are no more left. You keep the batteries going on those babies, everyone's happy. Something like *this* happens, there's no one left on earth who knows how to fix them."

And now I'm realizing this, in horror, "I can't run."

"You can't run."

"He'll find me."

"He'll find you."

I look at his blurry image on the mobile. "What do we do?"

"What do *you* do?" He says.

"I have to go to him. Lay it open. Hope I can set it back in gear."

Narchie, sharing my fear, nods.

I call him. I watch nervously on a large xphone screen hooked on my dash. The gangster's sniffing, tearful. I'm scared as hell.

"You did the right thing, coming to me," he says. "I mean, I'm'a have to kill you but it will be a lot, a lot less painful this way."

I question this. "Does it... do we have to..."

"I can make it painful if you want. Mouth shut, you got it?"

"I have just one thing..."

"What."

"If we remain calm, all things lay open to us."

"Shut up."

"Okay."

"I said shut up. If I want zen magic in my life, I will ask for it. If that's what I want, which I do not. I could kill you right now with this button, but it will not cause you pain. And now I want you to feel pain."

I nod. Try to keep my mouth shut.

"All you had to do is get her across town." He sniffles. "No one has one like her. She's unique, you understand that?"

"Ww..."

“She would do anything for me. And unlike you, there was never a complaint.”

I mumble, “I don't remember complaining.”

“I'm adding to the pain I'm going to cause you.” He glares.

“Wait.”

“No.”

“What if I told you she's not unique?”

The Gangster stops moving toward the console in his house that will kill me.

I try, “Would that make you mad, cause I don't want to make you mad.”

“What are you showboating, speak out.”

“Long ways out, past Shynatown, I saw one like her. Years back.”

“Speak out.”

“I'm saying. There may be a way to replace her.”

“How. Where.”

“If I speak that, you'll take my life.”

“I will anyway.”

“Not if you want her back.”

“How do I know the one you saw is like my Jazzle?” He asks me. “Rev, if this is any of your—”

“We can find you a new Jazzle and make a clean swap. Good as new.”

“And you're going to cross the Heat to get me the replacement?”

“No, no, no, that's not necessary—I'm a local cabbie, I'm not going out there. I could get away from you. You want another guy to head out there, I'll give you the coordinates.”

“Like hells. My life is worse now without her. So you're life is going to be worse now.”

“Of course it is,” I murmur under my breath.

I am trying to accept things more easily these days.

The gangster adds in, “And if you don't come back with what I need, I push your Die button.”

But there was no way this would go well for me.

“Mr. Sui-Generis, I'm, I'm not really up to this.”

“Shikshine. You can do it. What do you think those engines you've got were made for?”

I know full well what they were made for. And no zen concentration would make it any smoother.

And now, here it is, the next day, outside town, and my RipCar is waiting to shred road and send me on my way.

I'm standing, looking out a slit in a huge colorful wall, at a great expanse of dead grass. Nothingness.

The engines were made for running. Running hard. It was the job of some of us cabbies—not me, not til now—to get across that wasteland called the Heat to other cities far off in the remotes. Long, long time back, people bloomed out a hate for foreign interlopers and set up barriers against illegals. Worst of the barriers was the Evolutionals... animals of a great variety designed to kill Illegals across the wasteleands. Animals designed to move at...imperious... horrific...speeds...

Now I'm heading straight for them. My RipCar howls out of that faded-pink tropical town—a gate slides shut fast—and I fury off in a dustcloud.

Trampled yellow grass extends for a million miles on.

The RipCar cuts it at a nice pace.

Honest words, I'm mortified to be out here. I've never done it before.

Narchie's voice on the xphone: "Going to finally earn your pay now."

"I made it up," I tell him.

"What?"

"I have no idea where to go or what to do."

"Rev, you are going to go out there and find a solution."

"I know."

"Because otherwise very bad things will happen."

"I know."

"Start praying to whoever's in charge of zen, because if He doesn't fix things, I'm going to kill you before Sui."

I just nod my head, driving onward in boundless heaps of worry.

"...and you better sharpshoot your wickeds, cause I'm counting on you coming back from that hell...where every single creature over two grand millennia has evolved to hunt trespassers, every single thing out there is bred to hunt, to chase, to rip up, and destroy..."

Not a pep talk. But a welcome challenge to zen equilibrium.

My RipCar shoots onward, past a few aimless jetpack zombies, and across the deadlands where bits of brittle yellow grass is tossed up behind me...

And hours later, the day takes me to the River Hell.

The river is an extremely long wide waterway that is terrifically shallow.

As my RipCar passes slightly waterlogged trees, liquid is shot up in a wall behind my vehicle. And then.

From out of the water... things rise up and pursue at surprisingly comparable speeds. By things I mean a genetic re-engineering of a crocodile so that it is barely recognizable except for the skin and a bodyform that is part cheetah, part velociraptor.

“Gatters,” I say under my breath. I think that’s what they call them.

Alongside the car, the gatters, big cats with sharp, raptor-faces, are four-legged challenges hard to reckon with.

At this moment, six in number, they begin to throw themselves bodily at the RipCar. It makes a sound like, BAM—BAM—RAKK!!

Consider: the sages used to climb mountains. The prophets always came from the desert. All elegance of wisdom comes from removing oneself from the familiar.

This is good. I shall learn from this.

I am scared. No two ways about it.

Outside my steel, the gatters are keeping pace. Then suddenly a little flock of flowing jetpack zombies drift past, and I aim for them. I lead the gatters toward the drifting meat, and they tear off that direction, leaping from the water, into the air, to snap hungrily at the flying deadmen.

My car rushes onward across the thin endless lake.

Soon I come upon all the river houseboats I’ve always heard about, barely out of the water, a flooded suburbia, where people have nasty sheds and tents built on top of the houses for safety.

I’m gazing at them sadly and I’m slowing down for a view. And the boatpeople stare back, standing on their houses, some of them done up in black metal spiky armor that covers even their faces, an optimistic wardrobe against the millions of water predators.

As I accelerate onward through the maze of water-lodged houses... I can see there are some homes where smaller gatters are constantly leaping out of the water to try to snap at people who live on the rooftops. It seems inevitable they will get killed, and the jaws will do their natural duty.

These people are the fabled Betweeners. Descendants of the much-hated illegal immigrants, forever the bounty of hunting speedpredators.

I move on, a mere curiosity to them.

Much later, in a kind of suburban hell, I motor on into a new environment, out of the water and onto weed-cracked pavement.

My car speeds through a ruins of townie sprawl.

House after house of jungle-grown eeriness.

All over the houses red-colored whiplies watch me. These are bright red hawks with serpentine tails.

With a shudder of air, they fly after my RipCar.

I can see them in the rearview cam-screen.

I've slammed all the windows tight now.

Whiplies. Let's hope they're tired by midday.

The bright-red birds are astoundingly fast.

They swarm the outside of the car.

They follow for miles on end.

Finally, they move in, taking turns pecking vehemently at the surface shell.

My wide cockpit is given fearsome cracks.

I must put my mind in a new direction.

The mindful traveler is an artist of life, and enfolds around him a peaceful ambience. He listens to birdsong as if symphonies, to wingbeats like a catechism...

I mutter this aloud from nervousness.

It is not helping me relax.

The birds are doing serious damage. I execute a series of maneuvers through the many empty suburban houses overgrown with shrubs and vines. My vehicle slashes through ancient kitchens and dining rooms with tremendous speed, knocking through walls.

The scarlet birds remain with me.

Several now cling to the car with their claws.

I need help out here.



Suddenly, the birds are ripped up by the passage of what resemble striped pterodactyl creatures that are not in my old field guide. They swarm past the smaller avians, eating them in a feathery bloodspray, and then glide back to hit my RipCar sidelong.

Nothing is going to let me pass easily.

Struggling to maneuver through what I think must have been a suburban shopping mall, I'm surprised to see two new RipCars flit past me on a straightaway, a relic highway.

A third one approaches, slowing.

I slow too.

This third RipCar blasts a series of mounted machine guns, splaying the Pterodactyl beasts into new suburban trash.

The RipCars pass, and then I, out of curiosity, continue slowing, turn, and meet up with the other car, a more armored version of my own.

The other cabbie throws back a sliding door on his cockpit. Except it's a she, a blonde punk with a relatively friendly, open look to her... I go ahead and move back my cockpit window too.

She says, "We got about thirty seconds before craywasps eat our scalps open—what are you doing out here, no weapons on your car?"

To which I say, "I... I didn't know I'd need them."

She looks at me in total disbelief.

We hear a swarm of buzzing insects somewhere. Panicked, she throws me a rifle, and then a pistol. "Here. You're an idiot. They probably won't do you any good but... you're an idiot."

"I..."

Black swarms of furious insects gather above and then descend. We slam our cockpits shut. The young punk woman in the other cab looks at me in amazement, then shoves her RipCar into fast-speed mode.

I watch the insects spatter my car furiously. I can see tiny maws yearning to get at me.

I shove my car into gear, and speed off myself.

Through the suburban hell I speed on endlessly. I pass several RipCars and jealously glimpse what's going on inside them, their relative calm...

In one, a little girl, maybe 9 or 10 years old, sits in the back, idly watching as extraordinarily vicious and huge dogs leap up at the window, slobbering, biting, and keeping pace incredibly with their RipCar.

I could almost hear her little voice, "Cabbie, are we almost there to mommy's?"

"No, but it's not too long. Sit back and read your books."

Their auto looks a lot more decked out for the environment than mine.

Inside another heavily-shielded car, an elderly couple seem to be bickering while a weird sea creature thing like an octopus lies clinging to the window, its multi-teethed mouth smacking for a desired crunch. The chubby young cabbie in that one

gives me a disinterested look and drives on, bored, swooping away on a crumbling bypass.

In yet a third speedcar, a group of teen girls are laughing and singing in the back of a very large RipCar, what we'd call a limousine crawler where I come from, and they're happily throwing money playfully at the impassive, twentysomething male driver. He looks like he's seen it all and is only mildly amused.

And then I blur past him.

I'm passing several more hunting dogs, the huge-legged, Dobermann-like canine beasts that rush madly across the suburban road-jungle.

After a while, even with all this, I'm just trying to stay awake as the world rushes by, incredibly quick.

I slow a bit, not paying much attention.

And then I see her.

I shoot by her but the surreal fact is unmistakable: *a beautiful young woman is riding her bicycle down the lane in this dying, tropical suburbia.*

Impossible.

I actually whisper out loud, "There's no goddamn way."

I hit a button. Catch a replay on the vidscreen: beautiful girl, riding her bike.

"There's no way."

I spin the wheel, arcing around the ivy-strewn, ranch-style houses, spewing up dust and leaves... and head back for her.

The young woman, I can sense, is scared as hell but persistent. She is riding her bike and nothing's going to stop her. Except the Dobermann mutants that have finally sniffed her out and are easily overtaking her... smelling her to see what the hell is so stupid or so desperate it came out here on a bicycle.

I cut down on speed—pull the rifle I've just gotten—and fire from my window.

Taking out one beast.

The other angers. Parts ways with the girl. Heading for my car.

It leaps right up to my open cockpit window—jaws snarling—spittle flying—and I put it down with a single, point-blank.

Then I spin the car around again... and catch up to the bicycling girl... who I can now see is a mixed-race girl about 20 years old in a clean, flowing dress and long pink gloves with the fingers cut out. She's weirdly elegant, composed.

It's the weirdest damn thing.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!" I scream out at her.

The girl looks up.

"THERE ARE MORE OF THEM!" I yell.

She keeps cycling. I finally notice behind her in the air are two circular gundrones, protecting her, I guess. One shoots down a smaller, nasty dogbeast.

"Hey, are you out of your mind?" My car is idling up next to her. "We're almost to the city of Shind—we're in the Fanglands—those killers are going to get faster, you get me? They're going to get faster!"

To my ears, she has a classic old Mexican accent, though she could be a mixture of any race or culture, hard to tell. She says flatly, "I'm not giving you anything in return."

"What?"

"I have to get to Shind but I am not giving you anything."

"I'm not asking for anything." Realizing, I say, "I didn't offer you anything!"

"You the one who needs help."

"Yeah?! Why's that?"

"You are in the Speedlands."

She veers off while I stay on a straightaway, heading into an old empty freeway where—KB00000M!!!—kid you not, the loudest sound I ever heard. My RipCar is struck by an immense and tremendously fast vehicle called a monstro.

The RipCar is smacked hard and spins off into suburbia while the Monstro blurs onward. It's this huge but extremely streamlined bus that I'd say is more like a train engine with no rails.

On the Monstro, barely registering the bump, a group of roadtravelers look out questioningly.

I literally hear the busdriver on his loudspeaker say, "Nothing to worry about. Minor road trash."



So I'm in the dead suburbs in the mid-day heat, and I'm left for vulture meat.

My RipCar is steaming. It is largely undamaged—they build these things unbelievably strong—but there's denting at the front end and the engine sputters oddly.

I'm mumbling, "No. No."

I click a lot of buttons, I run the urgency protocols, but this thing is done. I am stunned and horrified as then...the girl on the bicycle whips past me, not a care in the world.

What the hell?

I pop my cockpit open.

“ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?” I shout, scared for her. “YOU GOTTA GET YOUR ASS OUT OF THERE!” Thinking about it, I accuse her, “You did this to me!”

She stops. Takes a beat. Turns to me. And says, “I think you are full of shit.”

“You distracted me.”

“Your RipCar's dead.”

“Do you charge for the obviousness?”

“You have any food with you?”

“Actually, yeah,” I admit.

“Then I can help you.”

“You can help me?” I can't believe this girl.

She rides toward me, stops her bike next to my stalled car.

She breathes out, “I live out here.”

“That's impossible.”

She puts out her hands to show, *well, here I am*. “And I know a mechanic.”

There is a tremendous roaring in the distance. Threat never leaves you in the Fanglands.

The young woman tries to pull loose the wires and cables at my back. It's a nice gesture, but a waste.

“You can't do that. You pull them, I die,” I inform her.

“Could work out good for me.”

"I don't like your sense of humor."

"Who's joking? So what the hell do we do? You gotta get out, I guess."

"I can't get out! This is life support. What do you not understand about that?"

"Then we gotta drag it."

I look at her. "On your bike?"

So she crawls around the interior of my car, pulling out metal pieces to get in at wire compartments that are hidden...doing stuff I've never seen anyone do before.

I ask her what she's doing.

"You have emergency self-tow lines," she says.

"I have emergency what? How the hell do you know that?"

"I told you, I know a mechanic. "

"How do you know things about my RipCar that I don't know?"

She keeps working. "They don't tell the cabbies. They'd learn to rewire their life support."

I'm floored. "You can do that?"

"No." She thinks. "But it's possible. In the theoreticals."

I try to reach her hands, keep her off the mechanicals. "I don't like you touching my...how do I know you know what you're doing?"

"Do I look like I know what I'm doing?"

"Yeah, but..."

"You should learn to shut up and take something nice."

"I don't even know your name."

She murmurs, working, "Mmshh..."

I don't even know what she said. I repeat, "I said I don't even know your name."

Annoyed, she quips, “My name is dazzling shit.”

And I go, “Really?”

She looks at me as if, *how can anyone be this stupid*. And she says, “Okay. Yeah.”

Thin little metal arms have sprung out around my RipCar and little wheels begin slowly pushing the sleek thing about 4 miles per hour.

I’m telling you, I had no idea it could do this.

I have half my body out of the RipCar.

“I did not know it would do that,” I’m saying to her.

“I know.”

“I mean, it shouldn't do that.”

“Oh, would you just. Already I’m tired of hearing you.”

“Are there other things my car can do that I don't know?”

Suddenly—a bevy of the Dobermann mutants roar out of nowhere and crush and trash her bicycle fast, and begin leaping for the car.

I reach out, pull the girl into the safety of the interior.

I tell her, “Look, you need to stay down where it's safe, Dazzle, okay? Can I call you Dazzle?”

“Unh? Oh. No, do not.”

“I...” Then I realize I’m a moron and that is not her nickname.

She says, “My name is Tomena. You can call me Tomena.”

“How have you survived out here?”

“I'm going to show you.”

It is getting to evening as my RipCar is slowly tracking toward Tomena's home, such as it is: a truly immense angular dump truck filled with piles of trash, and surmounted by a classic woodframe house.

I can't imagine how she's made it so long. I'm asking, "...so you had to leave to get food? How often does that happen?"

"More than I would like. Jesus, with the questions."

The Dobermann mutants trail behind, circling fast around the slow moving vehicle. Several of them leap up onto the car to gnash at whatever they can get their teeth around.

I watch the weird homestead approach. "Who else... lives with you?"

Tomena looks at me warily, letting my nervousness linger.

It takes time to close the distance. The giant dumptruck looms in the near-twilight over a nest of crushed suburban houses.

Mutant Dobermanns leap continuously to get up to it. It is a constant up-and-down with these animals, like the beads on an abacus, but springing madly into the air and back down.

I look up at the truck from my cockpit. "How do we get up there?"

"There's a ladder."

"Just... a ladder...?"

She frowns at my timidity. I'm just trying to be logical. Those things are out there.

She lifts up a clutch of cables and wires from my back. "How far do these go?"

"After they spool out, a transmitter connects to the car for about a half league-mile," I answer, nervous.

She thinks about this. Then nods, satisfied I'll make it. I am not at all sure.



A rope ladder has been thrown down from the towering dumptruck.

Tomena heads up out of the cockpit and starts climbing fast.

I'm horrified.

"Move," she says.

For reasons even I don't understand, I start climbing. My cockpit slams behind me.

The sound of it draws the huge doglike predators, their sleek forms rushing and leaping for the ladder.

I choke a scream—

As protector drones, child-sized waspthings, swoop down out of the trash heap in the truck. They swarm the predator dogs, but, long depleted of gun ammo, they are forced to wield long black sword-like blades.

A dogbeast snaps for my wires. I gasp for air.

A protector drone slashes that dog in two.

Still, there are many more. As Tomena and I climb hurriedly up the many-stories-tall ladder, the dogs keep trying to fang us, leaping and tumbling desperately.

The protector drones slash black needle-like swords at them, but the dogs are fast and smart, evading death brilliantly.

Tomena reaches the top, the huge trashpile in the truck. She reaches back and hoists me up—just as one predator Dobermann swings its big body into the trash, splashing out of the debris to snarl furiously.

A protector drone stabs down into its body, driving it deep into the trashpile.

Tomena pulls me with her.

My cables have reached their limit, but are now attached to a brick-like transmitter device called a chatter that allows me to go a bit farther.

Far below me, the dogs snap at the chatter, one tugging at it. At one point on the trash heap journey, I'm yanked back, struggling to keep going.

Tomena complains, "Taking too long..."

"I'm doing fine, you watch your own self."

We get to a very simple house, bars on the windows, slung upon the piles of junk metal, boxes, luggage, car parts, consumer goods, and miscellania.

The door unlocks, takes a while.

She enters. I follow, worried.

Surprisingly pleasant inside, the shelter's a very tidy, warmly lit wooden home, if dirty and sparsely furnished.

I peer into the dim lighting.

Awaiting us are two (apparently) Asian women in their 40s, in dirty clothes but projecting intelligence, beauty and I could almost say elegance despite their circumstances. They are wary of me, that's for sure. I don't know who would want to keep them isolated out here, but centuries-old racist policies leave these former immigrant travelers forever stranded, and there's no one left to complain to, of course.

Cynically joking, Tomena says, "Mom, I finally brought a boy home."

She looks at me, gestures to the ladies: "Your mechanics."

Later in the night, we have dinner. They give me the head of the table. A bowl is slapped down by Tomena, who scoots it toward me.

Her mother says, "You're kidding? He's going to deplete me of food, too?"

I start to protest, "I... I don't..."

The mother mocks me, "'Uh, uh, I d-don't..." She rolls her eyes at Tomena. "He's one of these."

"I don't need your food," I tell her.

"We're running out." She glares.

Tomena interrupts. "He'll repay us. He owes me for the bike anyway."

I remind her, "I didn't ruin your bike."

"It got ruined. While I was helping you."

"Not a problem if you're mechanics," I point out.

As Tomena's mother and aunt set up a simple rice and vegetable dinner for me, Tomena scoots her chair up to talk: "Fine, let's talk terms."

"There's no terms. You fix my RipCar, I pay you half my earnings in cold, hard fallcash."

"Fallcash is no good to me out here."

"What am I supposed to do about that?"

"Make it good to me."

"How?"

"You spend fallcash in the city. Get me in the city."

"Wh... What."

"Smuggle me into the city."

"You're an Illegal."

"Yes."

"You live in the Illegal zone."

"Yes."

“The entire area for seven centuries is set up to kill people like you so you never reach the city.”

“True fact.”

“So I can't get you in the city.”

Tomena stares. “Then I can't fix your car.”

Her mother stops my hand as I am about to shovel in a mouthful of dinner. “And I can't feed your face,” she says.

I put down the fork. “You have any idea how much danger that would put me in?”

“Oh, you would be in danger? Oh, no, Mijo, you'd be in danger.” Tomena says, and then talks to her mother, in a series of foreign words in Spanish and Chinese and whatever which sound mockingly sad. “El Catoon Sai No Ping Tao Najita No-Toe San Pais Mor Tai Tai.”

“Okay, I didn't understand that, but it sounded insulting,” I growl.

“We fix your car, you get us in the city.”

I'm conflicted. This is no easy bargain.

“What the hell?” I wonder to myself. How did I get here. Annoyed and starving, I just start to eat. Tomena drags my plate away. I look at it, bereft.

Resigned, I say out loud, “What the hell.”

—

It's the middle of the night now. I'm so tired. The two women stare down from the darkened trashpile at my car. Tomena directs a spotlight on a tripod. Masses of moving predators, the doglike beasts of various species, rush about in weird frenzies down there. One leaps up, snarling, jagged-fangs, scary in the blastlight, but it can't reach us.



Tomena's aunt says, "This is going to cost me money."

Irritated as hell, she hits a contraption that shoots down a net onto the RipCar. The weights for the net are lanterns that light up fiercely and then create a ring of fire around the RipCar—casting away the angry dogbeasts.

In a few minutes, we've lowered ourselves down. The legion of angry animals are screeching and roaring and galloping around the RipCar, but held at bay by the fires.

Tomena snatches some kind of thin box from the front of the damaged car—then dashes into the cockpit.

The women are already working on other thin component parts, and a metal piston that looks bent. "Not so bad." Tomena's aunt remarks.

Her mother says, "Osita caramai mekoi."

"Well, he probably didn't treat it very well," the aunt says.

"What?" I'm watching them, trying not to be annoyed, and having no idea what they're up to. "I took very good care of it. It's my life."

The two women shrug, unimpressed with me.

Tomena's mother says, "It'll be done by morning-sai."

Tomena says, "And then you get the bill."

"The bill?" I answer. "We already settled on the bill—you. Smuggled past the border."

"Us."

"Us?"

Tomena explains, "Mi familia."

"Oh, no, no, no. We had a deal."

"For the car repair. You have to pay for dinner."

"And how much is dinner?" I'm staring at her. "Your whole family?"

I scoff at her. She puts up a finger, warning me. Her mother and aunt stop working on the car. I'm glaring at her now. But I

can't meditate this away. I sigh. Nodding angrily, trying not to be angry.

Light clicks on in another room. Illuminated: an entire Spanish-Chinese immigrant family. 9-year old little boy, 14 year old gloomy boy, oldish plump grandfather...then the mother and the aunt.

I can't even believe it. "This is all I have to fit in my car? Just this."

"Your car that is working because of us?" Tomena responds.

Her mother says, "You get to spend the night for free."

So, on an uncomfortable cot in a corner of the wooden shelter, I try to get some shut-eye that night. The cries of horrible creatures can always be heard distantly.

I get up, creep toward the exit door. A dim light clicks on—it's Tomena by the door, sleepily holding the light and a weird handgun that looks like it could do the job.

She barely bothers to fully awake. "Like hell you are."

My escape cut off, depressed, I scowl back at her, thinking. "You just told me you don't have the food to survive right now, how we gonna be on the road and feed--how many we got here, six people?"

"Seven."

"What?"

She motions with her head. Another figure eases into the light. It's a shy, worried young woman, tall and slight with a perfect frame—*because she is the exact image of the A.I. model perf, Jazzle.*

I'm in total shock. "What the shikshine, who are you? Who is this?"

Tomena explains, "This, my cousin Majeena."

“Your cousin? She doesn't look anything like you...”

I wander over in absolute awe. The model woman looks fearful and awkward, obviously can't speak the language. I'm losing my mind. What, where does she come from? “How do you know her?”

“I told you, migo. She's my cousin,” Tomena says.

“This doesn't make any sense. She looks like... I mean, she looks just like... This is impossible.”

“Why?”

“She looks exactly like an AI Perf from my town. How can she be identical to an ancient robotic, huh, how is that possible?”

“Mon Dio. You are not smart.”

“Yeah? Why's that?”

“Duh shit. She was the model for your A.I.”

I'm totally bewildered.

Tomena says, “I told you we are a family of mechanics, Migo. My uncle, her father, makes the AI Perfs. He made one like her.”

“Wai, wai, wai--what do you mean, he makes A.I.? No one makes A.I.”

The aunts in their corner beds begin talking in Changish, angry, annoyed at my dull-mindedness.

“Tomena,” I say, “this is very important-- your uncle can make a Perf like her?”

“He has dozens of them.”

“Dozens??” She starts to explain, I cut her off, saying, “Bring him out here--where is he?”

“He lives in the city.”

“The city I came from??”

She shakes her head. “Moncosina.”

Disappointed, thinking, leaning back, I murmur, “All the way out there...”

“They are having big problems out there. That's why she's here. “ Tomena slaps me on the back, relaxes. “You better get some sleep 'fore tomorrow, Migo.”

I just look over in amazement at the model-girl.

Morning. The RipCar fires up its engines.

It's alive.

“Of course it's alive,” Tomena says.

I didn't realize I said it out loud. I'm looking unhappily at the family, crammed in at the back. “This is never going to work. They barely fit.”

Tomena replies, “We didn't charge you for breaking the drone. Get moving.”

I hit the gas.

We soar across the empty dirt field.

Armies of mutated dogs rush to keep up with us.

But they're doing it.

Tomena says quietly, “Remember your own warning. When we get up here, they're going to get faster and meaner...”

“I know what I said.”

So we keep going, moving into the suburban deadlands. The RipCar, ever trailed by the huge, fearsome dogbeasts, heads past the ruins of houses...emerging into an immense abandoned theme park, miles of it, rollercoaster skeletons and ferris wheels with weird tattered flags whipping in the winds.

I have only seen such things in pictures.

Now I can see in my vidvisors the dogbeasts stop, whimper, turn tail, and run back.

The RipCar continues on its way.

Then.

From out of the landscape of funhouses and Sphinx-like pirate head sculptures and of plastic Vikings, something dashes out. Ferocious, lean, four-legged raptorthings coming out to play. And they are incredibly fast.

The skinny, red-skinned beasts swarm the RipCar.

Tomena looks out in horror. These things are amazing. They easily outpace the RipCar. They are like blurs, moving around, trying to see inside the car...

One comes close—and now I can plainly see its red skin is topped by a toothy yellow serpent head.

Its jaws snap at Tomena.

The younger kids scream.

“Shut up--I can't drive!” I yell.

“You shut up—they're climbing on the car!” Tomena shouts.

The little boy is urging, “Go faster!”

“I'm going as fast as I can!”

The Raptorthings, which Tomena says are called Needlelegs because of their spiky four legs, flurry along and on top of the RipCar, gnashing at it.

They are smart.

One clamps teeth on an important-looking screw and begins spinning its head—unscrewing the car as it's driving.

I'm feeling smartmouthed. “You said you were hungry--have at one... they look tasty.”

Tomena says, “They're poison, genius, all things are out here--your job is to drive. So drive.”

I grumble to myself and I do my job. “Hey, I have a question for you. If we get through this terror like I expect to, how exactly am I going to smuggle you in to the city? I've got nowhere to hide you.”

“You think we are stupid, don't you? We have a plan for that.”

BAM, BAM, metal getting pounded. The needlelegs thrust at the car...

“Great,” I tell her. “Good. What is that plan, so the guy who is risking his life can know what the plan is.”

“We are going to die.”

I glance over. “You're going to play dead?”

“How stupid do you think they are?” She shakes her head. “No, we are going to really die.”

“And how are you going to slapdash that together?”

“No slapdash. Thought through. We have a chemical. Drug-pill. Puts us out. Cold to the touch. Pulse becomes so slow, we might as well be dead.”

“Well, why would they let me in with a cargo of dead bodies?”

“They don't care about dead bodies.”

“But they'll think I'm a... murderer... cannibal or something.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait, they'll let a cannibal serial killer in, but not immigrants of any kind?”

“Yeah.”

My vehicle burns rubber across the ruined roadway. The needlelegs show no signs of giving up. Small ones now cling and crawl underneath the car, trying to unscrew other parts of it!!

Anything gets out of my car—it's going to be massacred.

It's excruciating how long this goes on, the car threatened with being dismantled as we go. I keep driving as Tomena hands out slender green pills to all the others.

I ask her, “How'm I supposed to find your uncle once you're out?”

“You'll have to wake us up.” She eyes me. “I'm not trusting you to leave us dead.”

“I wouldn't do that.”

“You almost left us last night.”

“My life depends on you, too.”

“That's the way I like it.”

She looks at the family, weightily, worried: “Children, don't be afraid. This is only going to kill you.”

Late in the day, we reach the urban gateway of Moncosina.

My RipCar slows with this accompanying stampede of sleek scarlet lizards ambling alongside, hungrily, and I head for the gateway.

I slip in. Doors close behind us.

A handful of the needleleg raptorthings remain, still snapping madly at the car's metal.

A group of men blast at them with rifles.

The RipCar then rises on an elevator platform. I feel us lifted.

It gets to a border patrol window.

The border patrol are extremely vigilant. They surround the car, very ready to shoot using long M-rifles.

At the window, the clerks are skinnier, dreary people, six of them staring coldly at me. A man and a woman in charge lean out to look at me.

The woman clerk says, “Before we go charging in there, what do you have to declare?”

I answer, “I'm returning some wayward souls who tried to make it on foot to the town of Elsorandai. They wish to be buried here.”

Unmoved: "So, dead bodies."

"Yes."

"Verify," she says. The soldier-types move in, throwing aside the dead raptor beasts and climbing in to my car roughly.

The clerks let loose bumblebee-sized minidrones that swarm in and out of my car.

I protest this with a shout, but the woman patrol officer explains, "It will verify you're not bringing in illegal contraband. You want in? Then shut up."

The men and the minidrones throw everything around, including the bodies of Tomena and her family who truly look dead. The patrol looks unconcerned.

One officer says, "You didn't have some way of covering them up?"

"No, I didn't," I say.

"You're disgusting." He looks at the window clerks. "Let him through."

Someone hits a switch. There's a hiss of air released. The elevator lifts my vehicle up further, opens a gate before it, and the RipCar enters the city.

I roll down a long sloping ramp into a small city with low buildings painted brightly, with many more Asian pagoda rooftops than my hometown.

I try to contain my reaction, seeing a town that seems in the throes of mild panic. People in Asian pajama-like garb scramble quickly wherever they are going, and shopkeepers are busy boarding up shops—the ones that are not loading things into boxes as if preparing to leave.

What's going on here.

I look back as if expecting an answer. But Tomena and family are lolling about on the backseat like corpses. No answers coming there.

I pull my car into an alley to wait for Tomena to wake. I get a call on the dashboard vidscreen. It's the gangster Sui-Generis.

Scared, I pick it up, answering impulsively, and hanging up all in one quick move, saying, "Hey, there, Mr. Sui--can't get a good connection out here--just letting you know even I though I ran into a snag or two, I'm headed back with everything under control, thank you, don't worry, thank you."

I click it off, it goes dark, I breathe out in worry.

I look out the windshield to see people rushing about everywhere.

I look up through my RipCar canopy. Far above on a balcony, villagers gaze down on me, curiously, perhaps menacingly.

I hear Tomena struggle into waking.

Thank God. "Something weird is going on here," I tell her, slapping her lightly to get her conscious. "We need to PDQ your uncle and get out of here."

Tomena grabs my hand, slaps me back.

A few minutes later and we are still inside the wall but at the city limits, at a pagoda-style warehouse, bright red with long slit windows barred up.

Tomena leads me into the giant workspace filled with various types of machinery, including body shells for A.I. robotics.

Her family trails far behind us.

"Mokeeah," Tomena calls out. Then she says tiredly, "I know you saw us roll up, Mokeeah. You let us in the door. What's the point keeping out of sight now?"

Pause.

High up in the cross-rafters, a male dark figure calls down. "Had to make sure you didn't let anyone else behind you." His tone turns harsh: "What the hell kind of stupid you are, coming here--you have any idea what's happening?"

Tomena looks perplexed.

In the end, he welcomes us, more or less. The family sits in a wide circle around a woodstove on an Afghan type circular rug. They drink tea.

I'm sitting with Tomena, close to Uncle Mokeeah, a bulky, blocky Russian-looking man with a floppy hat covered in different kinds of goggles and magnifiers... to me, he comes across as a dangerous-ex-con-turned-half-insane inventor.

"Yeah, I can fix her, but you never should've come here. This place is going to pieces," he is saying.

"Seemed okay when we came in," I point out.

Mokeeah stares. "This guy's perceptive."

"I know," Tomena says.

He adds, "Something's happening out there that has never happened before."

Tomena's cousin says, "El Nai Sameena?"

"I'll show you," Mokeeah answers. He pulls out what looks like an oversized computer tablet. On it is a satellite map, an aerial of a wide territory. "You see we're about here? And this, from probe-sats way up, it shows this huge stormfront over here from the coast."

Tomena looks it over. "Okay."

"But it's no ordinary stormfront. This is a toxic cloud. It has been building for...I think centuries. I've hacked in and watched it a long time. I believed it would over the coming years engulf and destroy the world. It will, one day. But even now the winds are changing. The winds have been bringing it over the territories."

I lean closer to see the map.

"This is driving some of the coastal predators inland," Mokeeah continues morbidly. "We don't know these predators. They are new. They are faster than ours. And they are evolving quickly. They are growing very smart."

I feel a sense of horror as this starts to come clear to me.

We go up to the upper level of the warehouse at her uncle's insistence. "Take a look out there," Mokeeah says.

We all peer out the dirty windows.

We have a view of the vast deadlands outside the town.

The territory from this side look like a bright green bamboo forest grown out of control.

"Keep watching," urges Mokeeah.

And now it becomes clear.

Slipping here and there behind the sea of emerald, behind the bamboo trees, are new predatorthings.

And they are very unusual.

These animals look something like fearsome horses but far more flexible, with legs that allow them easier sideways movement. Their heads are what I would describe as somewhat dragonlike with a jagged-shape color pattern.

"I've seen worse," I assert bravely.

"No, you haven't," Mokeeah answers.

A group of border soldiers fires on the dragon-horses. Some soldiers are on the wall. Some are marching forward, trying to get the animals to rush backward.

One dragonhorse falls. The others take their hits, but still rush against the marchers.

They cut through them like butter, 20 men, toppled, crushed, ripped up, or thrown to their deaths.

But the shocking part is what they do with the bodies.

The dragonhorses then move in, give a high shrieking call, and are soon flanked by herds of blurring, fast moving ratlike things with rhinoskin and hard exoskeletons.

These big rat-things with their agile arms snatch up their rifles, break them apart into smaller weapons, lift them onto their shoulders so there is a gun barrel on either side of their heads...*take aim and fire back.*

I'm in shock.

Men on the wall are shot down.

The dragonhorses trot back intelligently while the rat-things dive in and out behind the emerald bamboo stalks for cover. They are blurringly fast.

“They work together,” Tomena realizes aloud.

I whisper, “They're intelligent.”

“Very,” Mokeeah adds.

Several of the rhinoskin-rats quickly retrieve gasmasks off the dead, pop them over their own snouts, and cleverly fire poison-gas RPG weapons back at the settlement.

Tomena and I are side by side as we watch the clouds unfurl.

I can only shake my head. I could almost laugh, but the sight of the dead, open-eyed soldiers falling before me stills my reaction.

My God.

Mokeeah points out, “That's barely half what they can do. They're going to take this place apart. And everyone knows it.”

We start rushing out of the old warehouse that evening to load small pieces of machine parts and tools into the RipCar.

I look up at the wall...

A border soldier is fighting with an extremely agile dragonhorse, small and lithe, which is clinging to the interior part of the wall, having leapt in.

Rhinoskin-rats clamor over the horse and snatch away the man's riot-shield. Bash at him with it. Finally the other guards fire enough shot to bring them down.

The zen masters teach us that a predator is simply performing as designed.

It has yet to be determined if humankind is meant to be predator or prey in these times.

Therefore, it makes no sense to accept an early death.

I'm getting the hell out of here.

Once inside the cockpit, I tell the others I will need quiet in order to concentrate on the way.

"Work fast--it's going to collapse all around us, Migo," Tomena says.

The family is piled into the circular backseat area. Mokeeah has been added to the group, and is working on the A.I., on Jazzle's damaged neck.

"This one you have...I can fix this," he explains.

His daughter stares at her gigantic robotic double and shakes her head, disturbed. "So weird..." she whispers.

There is a banging on the car from behind.

Mokeeah shouts, "GET GOING!"

I hit the revver.

My huge indycar speeder rolls away from the warehouse, where the dragonhorses are leaping over the wall—now in bold numbers.

Mokeeah says, "I hope that clanging is from the speedpredators, man. There's half a dozen shady characters I got business tied up with in here."

The RipCar accelerates, knocking a small dragonhorse off its back, and swoops toward a part of the town's perimeter wall that has been caved in by the dragonhorses.

Suddenly it becomes obvious that my incredibly-fast car is not moving forward anymore. It is held in place.

Then the world drops away from it.

My beautiful RipCar has been seized by a magnet above it. The speedcar is now held by a gigantic crane machine whose arm swoops it up and away from the chaos of the gates.

I'm trying to get a look at what's going on. The car is dangled on the crane's arm as the crane itself launches forward, quickly crossing town on its stilt-like wheels.

Quickly we are lowered down to the relative quiet of another colorful neighborhood...

To arrive at the feet of three very angry Black women.

The first snarls, "You owe us de goodamn work, Mokeeah!"

Mokeeah says to me, "I warned you about this."

"You did," I admit.

The three women stand angrily, arms crossed as the car is lowered almost to the ground.

These three talk and look somewhat like Carribbean ladies I've met in the past but they look different, with Asian ornamental hairpins weaved into their dreadlocks. Tomena tells me they are known as The Carolinas.

Mokeeah slides the window open. "Ladies, I help you, I totally plan to help you."

The first woman snaps, "I'm sure you do, mon."

I interrupt, "We are in a real hurry—"

"We talking to you, boy?"

More women, some with weapons and bandoleros, gaze angrily at us from a nearby bullet-ridden mansion.

The first woman goes on. "Everyone in a hurry now. We in a hurry to get our work done from Mokeeah."

There's no getting out of this. We have to enter their mansion.

Some of the armed women stand guard on the elevated RipCar.

Me, Tomena, and Mokeeah are led by the three leader-women toward the mansion.

The first female tells the gunners, "You watch on them. We need deese ones with us."

Tomena asks, "What is it we have to do here?"

"Something shoulda been done long ago, maiden-girl."

"Which is what?"

"Our prettyfolk is sick. You going to fix our prettyfolk."

I don't have any idea what she means.

I'm led with the others into a large parlor area, a greeting room, in the bullet-ridden mansion. No one seems to understand the urgency of getting free of the city. I tell the women, "You realize the city is falling apart, we all need to, we really need to get out of here..."

"Oh, everybody going somewhere sometimes, mon, but you going nowhere til you do what's been paid," one woman says.

Mokeeah answers, "I'm ready to go. I just got busy with some other—"

"No more other. Now you do work for the Carolinas."

Tomena asks, "Where is the work?"

"Don't rush your genius, maiden-girl. This work be done right or not at all." One of the Carolinas says.

"Of course," Mokeeah agrees.

Tomena repeats, "Of course," but at this point I can tell she is getting very frantic, voice barely controlled.

I insert a note of caution. "Mokeeah, we need to get out of here, there's no time for any—"

The first woman interjects, "Our Papi stop his working. Mokeeah say he going to fix our Papi. But he never fix our Papi."

"No, I got started," Mokeeah says, "I just needed to finish up a little thing—"

“You are a stupid genius,” she answers. “You should've come here first to us. Our Papi do many things.”

I ask her, “ ‘Papi’?”

“You have illegals with you. If dey goin to find anywhere to go, dey must have the right blood,” she answers, confusingly.

Tomena says, “Yes.”

The woman explains, “The Illegals do not have the right DNA markers in da blood. Papi, he put the proper markers in da blood, your Illegals get past the po-lice.”

“He can do that?” Tomena asks. “He can get us past the border guards?”

“Any city you want,” she replies, and then to Mokeeah, she orders: “You get our Papi going.”

“Show me to him.”

Deeper in the parlor, the Carolinas soon stand before a sleeping A.I. perf who is, like all androids, 11 ft tall...only this one is clearly modeled on a just-about-forgotten 1980s rock icon that I only know about because of a cab fare with an antiquarian music dealer. The rockstar’s name was Prince. He dressed, like this A.I., in purple longcoats and dazzlements.

“Our Papi,” the first woman says.

I roll my eyes, badly stressed. God, I'm getting sick of people and their 'significant others.'

Outside there is the tremendous noise of speedpredator devastation.

“You work fast,” the first woman orders.

Mokeeah does. He quickly retrieves a computer and some kind of liquid-bubbling tank contraption hooked up to the giant-AI, who more than ever looks like a wax figure stolen from a museum.

He’s taking too long, and I tell him that.

The First Carolina snarls at me, "No rushing. Boss-Prince must be perfect man."

"Boss-Prince?"

All the ladies angrily tell me, "Boss-Prince."

I can literally hear buildings falling apart outside.

Tomena whispers, "Uncle, please..."

"Few more minutes," Mokeeah answers.

I complain, "I swear to God, just show them what to do, we get out of here--"

"Where is your zen mindset--shh..." he reprimands.

The First Carolina says, "Boss-Prince is no ordinary Papi. He save all your lifes."

"Yeah? How's he going to do that?" I mumble.

"He smarter than your genius-man. He have a secret against the speed-predators."

I must look quizzical. She gives me an arrogant, knowing look.

The eyes of the AI Perf flutter. The huge 11-foot man stirs slowly into an upright position. All the women sigh with great relief.

The Boss-Prince says in a quiet voice, "Was I asleep long?"

It's evening when we get out of the mansion. We rush back to the RipCar, while the giant A.I. man walks with his coterie of women to a different vehicle, this one an indycar build-up with neon styling.

The Boss-Prince shouts to Mokeeah, "Hey, old man, you didn't help me for nothin. You follow us out, we show you some appreciation."

I'm confused again.

A stray rat-thing rushes the group, and the Boss-Prince puts his fast, giant foot down on it, blasting it with a silver pistol.

Outside the town, seconds later, my RipCar finally joins the speed exodus going on almost everywhere, as the town comes apart. I leave behind the AI Perf's fancy automobile, overloaded with female allies, as the Boss-Prince watches us accelerate far ahead, and I see him shake his head disappointedly.

By the time we reach the bamboo forest, I am shredding the old road, dust shot out into the emerald wall around me.

A bevy of dragonhorses chase after us at daunting speed.

The smaller rat-things swarm their backs, like symbiotic fleas.

Tomena says, "You realize you're going the wrong way."

I snap at her, "Have to go where I have to go. I know what I'm doing."

"Let him do his thing," Mokeeah supplies helpfully.

"Thank you."

"But tell him to go faster," he adds.

The dragonhorses are big—when they smack the car, it shudders and drifts a bit off course.

And they are only getting more aggressive.

Many other cars are evacuating the town, so the highspeed competition for roadspace is nothing short of amazing.

I watch on my vidscreens as the town is ripped down by the dragonhorses, walls crumbling, civilization gone.

No going back now.

Many of the dragonhorses turn back and head for the easy meat in the fallen city...

Several others still snap with bloody jaws at the moving RipCar and the other jet-fast vehicles alongside it.

The rats slip from the backs of the equine creatures onto the RipCars, some toppling off...

This battle progresses for a while until the bamboo forest ends, the bright emerald surroundings fall away, and my RipCar is zooming over a huge suspension bridge over a dry riverbed.

Dozens of other suspension bridges riddle the area, some lower down and older, others higher up... all of them draped in billowing ivy and flowers.

Tomena and her family look out in awe.

“You said there were predators out here,” Tomena says.

Mokeyeah nods. “Just wait.”

We pass in quiet for only a few moments. Falling from the bridge heights are lion-sized howler monkeys with reptilian body skin—ringers, I’ve heard them called, named for the ring patterns on their muscular bodies.

Several smack down atop the RipCars trying to get across the bridges.

Mine fares well for a second.

Some other cars tumble off the bridge as the huge monkeys tear people out of the windows to slash apart and eat.

We can handle this. I focus on the road ahead. I am calm. I really am.

“This is not the problem,” Mokeyeah mutters.

Tomena looks at him. “This is not the problem? Then what is?”

“You’ll see.”

It’s sunset now and the ivy bridge is painted with a sinister light. I try not to see anything in the shadows. My RipCar has nearly got to the other side.

There is a bank of fog that is rolling in from the flatlands ahead.

My vehicle...now swarmed with the fearsome Ringers, and chased by the residual dragonhorses and their rat symbiotes...slashes over the bridge and slams into the fog wall.

Almost immediately I have to brake and swerve madly, drifting wildly, because I’ve entered a mass graveyard of wrecked cars.

Mokeyeah intones quietly, "The Ringers work in concert with Damagers."

I echo him, "Damagers? I've never heard of Damagers..."

"The Ringers wreck the cars, the Damagers tear them open...they share the meals... the entire ecosystem is working together, a terrible... harmony..."

Tomena says, "We could've used a warning, not this ominous shit."

Mokeyeah complains, "The older you get, the more attitude."

The other women angrily bark at Mokeyeah in Changish.

The passage across the interminable bridge takes a very long time.

At last my RipCar, now alone, works free of the bridge.

Fog everywhere. I maneuver carefully through the wasteland of small and large destroyed cars. I've heard of this kind of thing, but this is a first for me.

It's almost impossible for the RipCar to drive slowly, but I'm trying.

But something--shadowy, huge--drifts about in the fog amid the jumble of wreckage.

It might be better if we head back to town.

I say that out loud then, and Tomena points out, "There is no town anymore."

"Still might be better than out in the open in a damaged car."

"No, cabbie, there's no other way," Mokeyeah says. "These things are evolving."

I'm not sure what he means. But as I slow down and look into the night fog, Tomena moves up in equal awe, and in our floodlights we can make out the ringers up ahead in the gloomy light, working at something, moving around...hands busy...

Amazingly, the monkeythings swing some kind of backpack-type arrangement of wires, and hook themselves onto an extreme minimal chassis: just small wheels and a metal frame to cling to, a jetlike engine on the back, the wires loped on the

creature's shoulder to help adhere the beast to the machine... they are *connecting* to junked cars.

These animals have wheels.

Tomena whispers something like a prayer. "Madre Quai..."

"They...modified junk chassis..." I realize aloud.

"The Damagers don't even need that," Mokeah responds.

"They were engineered with wheels. Getting back is going to be a game of speed we can't win."

Tomena snaps, "Then why the hell are we trying?"

Mokeeah mumbles, "Trying is what humans do."

"Very zen," I say to him. "Hold on tight."

I hit the gas.

We storm past the laboring Ringers.

My car heads right into the shadowy huge monstrosities I was fearing to find: the Damagers.

These are towering, ten-story tall Rhino-like beasts that are leaner and more deft than you could ever imagine.

And...their heavy legs end with hoof-like claws *that are wrapped around small, smooth wheels.*

When the RipCar accelerates by them in the fog, the Damagers flex those muscles, and something astounding is activated: the wheels spin at ferocious speed.

Now my RipCar is swooping through the maze of dead cars with fog whipping past as the Damagers pursue at speed, knocking out of the way the ruined vehicles, using the hammering of their rhino-shaped heads.

Wheeled animals are pursuing me.

This is another first.

Eventually the RipCar emerges out of the car graveyard and travels fast down a bizarre line of downward-pointed 747 airplanes, a lane of huge broken aircraft from the days of old. How they got in this arrangement I will never know.

With the Damagers in pursuit, the RipCar stays barely a car length ahead—but the size and power of the Damagers means one tiny slip up and we're all dead.

It's going to be a long night.

Across the fog plains that night, my RipCar charges through the thick white smokelike sea, but the predators chasing now are wheeled creatures: monkeylike animals on stripped-down futuristic carts, and massive wheeled rhinobeasts.

Which means everything goes even faster.

"We can't keep this speed up and still have power," I'm muttering.

"We don't need to know that," says Tomena.

"I'm telling you the truth."

"A truth we can't solve—so shut up!"

I give her a quick, grim smile. She's a firecracker I enjoy setting off. I turn my focus to getting over the plains at the highest speed I can muster, which at this point is better than 200 mph.

Two damagers begin coordinating attacks, their huge wheeled bodies slamming the RipCar from both sides.

I cut speed. The two monstrosities zip past. A momentary solution only: two more behind me accelerate to attack.

I'm trying to meditate without closing my eyes.

I tell myself in a whisper, "None of this is real."

"Seems like it is," Tomena says back.

With a crashing attack, one damager hits us from behind.

This happens just as a new RipCar enters the insanity.

It's the neon roadster of the Boss-Prince. He fires small mounted guns with a flurry in the night. The damagers are hit with flat disks that stick to their haunches.

The disks pulse with light, as if transmitting something.

Gone mad, the damagers ram into each other, the creatures with the disks attacking the others.

I ask out loud, "How did he do that?"

"Don't ask questions," Tomena warns. "Just drive."

It's not a complete solution—a handful of the damagers and their howler compatriots remain in play—but I'm out ahead, and able to outrun them, though it seems to me the chase will never end. The animals never seem to tire.

Boss-Prince smiles from his car, nods, the girls surrounding him shouting something. His RipCar peels off in another direction, as we speed onward.

We are approaching a huge abandoned freeway. I'm just trying to stay awake, adrenaline pumping through me, making me shake, but my eyes still want to close.

Our speeding racer now comes upon a nighttime car wreck. Fresh.

Two big cars lie on their sides with people crawling from them while up ahead, a Monstro, the massive sleek trolley-like vehicle, is dead on the road.

We all watch as the scene whips by.

The people from the crashed cars are quickly ambushed and devoured by the ringers as the rhinos roar in fury at the lost food.

Tomena says, "You have to go back."

"What?"

"The people on the Monstro. They'll be killed," she tells me.

"What the hell can I do about that?"

She has a pleading tone, but also an order. "We're mechanics."

She's hard to argue with. Burying my anger and my fear, I turn the car around, swooping over toward the site of the stalled Monstro vehicle.

The damagers are crashing against it with no real effect.

“Link to it,” Tomena says.

“I don't want to,” I answer.

“Do it. Hurry.”

Frowning, I slow the RipCar after a few orbits, and come in close to a side not being harassed by damagers.

A short tubeway emerges out of the trolley vehicle and latches to my RipCar.

Within seconds, I'm handing Tomena the rifle, lifting my own gun. Getting ready.

“You don't know what's in there,” I warn her.

The cockpit is suddenly clicked open and from the tubeway link comes a chorus of old-people voices. I hear some woman say, “Oh, Thank God.”

Old people. Great.

Inside the Monstro, Tomena, me, and the two mechanic women move aboard cautiously. The bus has mostly elderly passengers, and about six heavy-muscled men who look in no mood for chit-chat.

Within a few seconds, their leader, a massive guy with a mustache as thick as my hair, stands over me, growling, “Sounds like we got a simple exchange here...You're running out of power, you need our battery fuel. We need your expertise. We loan you one, you loan us the other. Snik snak.”

The frame of the huge craft rocks from the damagers' striking it.

The leader goes on, “I'm pretty sure you brought these things to us. Far as I'm concerned, you owe us.”

“We can owe each other,” I say. “You hand over the fuel-batts first.”

“Wait a chek, cabbie, we give you that, what's to keep you from rolling off into the sunset and never giving them back? That's 50,000 fallsworth of battery, and we need them back. They'll get you across the flats and then you hand them over. Good deal all around.”

“How are you in a position to bargain?”

The six angry men lean forward angrily, weapons at the ready.

The leader says, “You were dumb enough to stop.”

Well, he’s got me there.

Tomena interrupts. “You mean 'kind enough'? We have weapons, too.”

I question him. “We're going to kill each other and leave everything to the fangs out there?”

The leader shrugs.

There’s no time for this. So I concede. “Alright. We'll take your deal.”

“Good.” He swings Tomena into a headlock, gun at her temple. “We keep her as collateral. We get to the city, everyone trades back, goes on their way.”

I’m a bit shocked. I shouldn’t be. “No, no, no, listen, you don't need to do that—”

“That's the way it's going to work.”

“No, it doesn't work that way, you want my gun in your face?”

Tomena looks surprised at my passion for her.

The Leader sniffs. “We aren't terrible people, Cabbie. But we're just as desperate as you, and I *will* kill her. You willing to see what happens?”

Under the rumble of the constant collisions with speedpredators hungry for murder, Mokeeah starts coming up as I’m coming down. He hands me a thick battery.

I say, “No time for coffeehouse chatter, Mokeeah, we've got what we need, we've got to go.”

“Where's Tomena?”

I hesitate to say. Tomena's mother and aunt angrily rush past him, telling Mokeeah something furious in their language.

I plead with them. "I didn't have a choice!"

My RipCar disengages and speeds forward.

The predators roll after it.

The beautiful lines of my sleek RipCar have been badly dented and cracked, but it's as fast as ever.

The Monstro finally rumbles to life behind it.

I'm looking back, worried.

Nothing is happening that isn't supposed to happen. ...the world is changed, the world is unchanged, the world is pain, the world is un-pain, it is nature, it is non-nature. Solace is racing. Racing is meditation. Zen is speed. Speed is zen.

Mokeeah looks over at me. "I've got your gangster's girl nearly operational. Just needs power."

"We can't let him see your daughter," I tell him. "He can't know a human version exists."

"I'm more worried about how you get us past the border."

"They keep my girl Tomena safe, I got a plan for that."

"Your girl?"

I keep driving without looking at him.

Far out on the outskirts, with a spitting hail of dirt behind my RipCar, I approach my old hometown.

By now, the trail of predators has generated a cloud of dust behind it as well.

I slow the RipCar.

The Monstro slows.

I hit a switch on the dash. "Monstro, you hear me?"

Speakerphone filter. The reply comes: "We aren't supposed to talk til we get there."

"We don't have papers."

There's a little explosion of swearing on the speaker. "What the... how the hell you gonna put me dragging illegals in? You want me to kill you now?"

"You have any cargo space on there?"

"What?"

I ponder the situation a bit more. Slow the car more.

And then just as morning is breaking, I arrive back in town.

The RipCar charges forward, enters the border wall at a small gate that hooks my car and slows it.

The Monstro enters at a huge gateway that clasps the vehicle like a vice and pulls it into a holding area.

Gunmen with huge RPG weapons blast at the damagers to get the wall gates closed again.

The city wall is being battered hard, no doubt.

Big, wasplike predator drones howl out of the town to machinegun the massive Damagers. They are fearsomely effective.

In the holding area, a border guard, one among many, approaches my RipCar.

I tell him: "I bring monsters."

"Yeah, don't you worry, we'll get that under control. Papers."

“Here goes.” I’m very confident at this point.

As the border men interrogate me standing outside my RipCar, they are inevitably distracted by the Monstro driver, the leader, who is being questioned as well but answering loudly, angry. He looks to me. Hits a switch at his vest.

The Monstro rear cargo doors clang open and inside the city, the howler beastmonkeys on their streamlined wheeled platforms race out of confinement.

And wreak havoc on the city.

I watch comfortably as Tomena's family easily slinks into the shadows as the guards behind me rush to deal with an unprecedented crisis.

It is not a moment of great honesty and decency.

It is dangerous as all hell.

It might have all fallen apart.

But I have confidence in our border patrol and its infinite power and wisdom.

Amid the chaos of gunfire and racing predators in the streets, I look over to Tomena striding safely off the trolley vehicle.

And I justify myself by saying at the moment I am under the influence of what we call in zen teaching... outrageous, unfathomable... love.

She smiles at me coyly.

I smile back.

The world around us is momentarily collapsing.

This is where I would end my story if I were a genius fiction writer.

“But I am a cabbie. A driver. And the story doesn't end there...”
I say to the men in the police station that night.

I'm tied to a chair with huge, angry cops roaming the room,
ready to administer a beating.

One cop is lecturing me furiously, lifting my lifeline back cables
threateningly.



Additional concept studies by Aiden Pickett

The cops have figured out how it all happened.

We argued the speedpredators were smart, broke in and
stowed a ride straight in. But they knew.

A new man enters my cell. It's a fearsome old judge in black
robes who listened to the lecture and stares angrily at me.

The way it works out, they are unsure enough that they don't
kill me. They don't throw me to the speedpredators either.

The judge eventually grins, an idea coming to him.

My repaired car is soon swooping off into the dead-yellow grass prairielands.

Skeletons of damagers riddling the roadway.

While my girl stays waiting for me back home...

Tomena, I imagine, is working on a meal with a steaming skillet while her mother and aunt work beside her, repairing mechanical gears and wheels. The family orbit her, busy with what looks like a robot-raptor thing of Mokeeah's. I know what is happening even if I am not there.

And my old boss has found his territory shrinking but his homelife is glowing. His giant AI Perf would be massaging his back about now, maybe a little too harshly...

While I have a new boss...

I'm out here driving, looking back, where there are bars to the rear seat, and an obese, tattooed and fearsome looking convict sitting there, plottingly.

I'm a driver for the police.

Extraditions.

And I have to tell you, we have the most interesting conversations. Some of these people are crazy, some revolutionaries. But in these moments of travel, talking to those who have lost everything and want it all back, I have found the strangest sense of...Truth.

I've learned more zen from criminals than those who have their freedom. You learn the most profound things travelling at profound speeds. You find zen...at the limits of life... That's where it is.

Passing by, I see an ancient speed limit sign finally blown off its post, spinning to death.

A host of raptorlike gallopers head after me, as we drift onward.

Headed for hell at all new velocities.

THE END.