

H8 SOCIETY

HOW
ATOMIC
FART
SAVED
THE
WORLD?



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How an Atomic Fart Saved the World

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PROLOGUE

It's 3 AM...

...a pink haze shrouds a nondescript, dystopian town that is so deadly quiet you can hear a single needle drop—and then it does with a piercing, metallic ring. Landing on an immaculately polished marble floor, a blood-soaked, sterling silver syringe breaks the eerie silence. Not that it makes a bit of difference to the kid, who drifts into a drug-induced stupor from the custom-brewed cocktail of cocaine, heroin and morphine that he just injected between his toes. Even the sharp pain from his head bouncing off the gold-inlaid toilet like a basketball has no effect, until the gruesome morning light, when he awakes to find a throbbing purple knot protruding from his ear.

...the distinctive crinkling noise of plastic wrappers being ripped apart breaks the silence as a gargantuan girl ferociously devours a dozen boxes of Twinkies. Sitting up on her bed in a pitch-black room, her face smeared with cream, she fantasizes about a career as an official quality control manager for Hostess, and dreams of a mansion constructed of butterscotch ice cream filled with caramel clusters, fudge chunks and marshmallow swirls.

...a short man with a thick, black mustache hunches over a dimly lit kitchen table as he lights a cigarette. Laid out in front of him is a mess of scribbled notes, building photos and a hand-drawn floor plan. Like a coach mapping out details of his game plan, he draws a dashed line down the

street marking a large “X” in the center of the local post office. A gaunt, full-bearded man stumbles into the room, half-awake, opens the refrigerator and guzzles down a bottle of goat’s milk, while chomping on a moldy slice of bacon cheesy pizza.

...a muffled female scream floats through the stale, smog-filled air like an alley cat in heat. Panties ripped open and sweating, she covers her mouth so she won’t wake her mother. An insatiable urge has kept the girl awake all night. Eyes now closed, she dreams that he is inside her, and their bodies are locked in an Olympic love fest. If only her fingers were longer.

...the uber athlete desperately claps his hands over his ears to blunt the thumping sound of a head in the next room hitting the wall over and over again. He must endure the sound of a team of jackhammers working overtime every single night. The enraged young man buries his head in three layers of pillows trying to make the sound go away. But it doesn’t—and never will.

...an old man’s hands carefully guide a freshly minted stack of gold coins across a polished mahogany desk. His long bony fingers meticulously drop each coin into the mouth of a giant, six feet tall, gold piggybank, while utilizing a 3D holographic calculator to account for each coin deposited. Behind him is a vast room filled as far as the eye can see with hundreds of sparkling gold pigs, which only the old man knows exactly, to the pig, how many.

It's 3 AM and the needle drops on an old vinyl copy of Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*. TS Reely High's most troubled senior is committing every syllable of each lyric to memory like he's reciting a verse in bible class. "What would Woody do today?" he muses. "Would he join an unruly gang of misfits? Would Woody lead the Sprawl Lords?"

CHAPTER 1

American Apocalypse

“A white panel van with a smiling ‘Udder Delights’ cow logo painted on the side.” That’s how the police report will describe the vehicle—assuming there is anything left to describe.

Today is starting just like any other day in this gleeless dystopia of crumbling tract homes, dilapidated strip malls, and traffic-choked freeways. The sky is a sickly gray clouded with carbon monoxide gas. The streets are littered with used condoms and methamphetamines, here in the very heart—and soul—of America’s burning moral wasteland.

A lone sparrow flutters through the toxic exhaust wafting up from the serpentine mass of rusting gridlock below. Dizzy and coughing from a lack of breathable air, the disoriented little bird makes a last gasping effort to climb out of the poisonous cloud—until it has nothing left to give. Falling limp, the poor sparrow tumbles effortlessly towards earth in a lifeless spiral, before it crashes headfirst into the white panel van, leaving a crimson smear across the ‘Udder Delights’ logo—and turning the ‘smiling cow’ into something resembling more ‘mad cow.’

Unaware of the tragedy playing out on the side of his van, a rail-thin [Middle Eastern driver](#) grips the wheel, staring blankly at the infinite sea of traffic ahead. His crooked sunglasses are smudged with fingerprints. His sparse attempt at a mustache is partially penciled in. His faded t-shirt depicts Muammar Gaddafi as king, screaming, “Oh, shit!”

Like so many of the wide-eyed, enthusiastic youths who

come to this country illegally, hoping for a better life, a chance to succeed, or to star in their own reality TV show, he now finds himself trapped in the abject horror of a meaningless life. No green card, no work, no family, no hope. It's clear to him there's only one thing left to do: lash out, by venting his pent-up frustration and rage on America.

With cigarette in hand, the fidgety driver gestures passionately as he clumsily raps. "Listen up, world! Shout out to the Black Mus'Tasche, mack! Weez the heazy-ist jihadists in the pack! Sling'n death on America, smack!"

He takes a long drag on his cigarette as he pulls alongside a picture-perfect blonde in a candy-apple convertible. He winks at her confidently through the window. "But not their blonde women, yo. Here's a fact—we keep them ho's for ourselves, Jack!"

Smirking with pride and imagining himself a YouTube global phenomenon, he hits the gas—unaware that the valve on the 1,000-gallon propane tank in back is rattling loose. His cell phone rings. He checks the ID. Now thoroughly annoyed, he answers. "I got this, 'kay? You can depend on me!"

A commanding Middle-Eastern voice barks back, "You are two hours late! I believe you when you deliver the goods!"

The booming voice belongs to the leader of the Black Mus'Tasche Brigade—a pudgy, balding man who proudly sports a bristling, black push-broom of a mustache that obscures half his face. He lounges in the cozy breakfast nook of his dilapidated ranch-style home, fiddling with the volume on his earbud and chain-smoking between gulps of Coke.

Thinking it would net him a harem of nubile young girls, he originally came to this country to make millions selling ladies' lingerie. Unfortunately, the shipload of burlap Victoria's Secret knockoffs he brought from his home country never caught on. Bitter, broke, and frustrated, he found consolation in a local, radicalized faction that recruited him to become an eternally rewarded hero. The Black Mus'Tasche is his destiny and nothing is going to get in the way of his grand plan.

The leader of the Black Mus'Tasche smirks at the motley group of bearded simpletons clad in urban-camo pajamas who huff and puff through a mousetrap-like obstacle course cobbled together with stained plumbing pipe—right in the middle of his sunken living room. His hapless 'troops' imagine themselves to be the most ruthlessly efficient super-killers on the planet. In reality, the comic degree of their inept inabilities makes the Three Stooges look like Seal Team Six.

The makeshift monkey bars collapse, spilling the troops into a shrieking heap. Still on the phone, the disgusted leader showers them with a cascade of Arabic insults: "To hell with you! Your mothers are all donkeys!"

The confused young driver responds into his phone, "My mother is what?"

"I wasn't talking to you! Now, don't screw up!"

This only irritates the young driver further. He angrily flicks his cigarette out the window while raging into his phone. "You'll see...I will finally prove my value to the Brigade!"

But he missed the window. The cigarette ricochets off the door and lands in the back of the van on the propane

tank, whose now-open valve is sloshing out copious volumes of flammable gas.

POP! It ignites.

Oblivious to the burning plume, the driver grumbles how a thicker mustache would score him the respect he so obviously deserves. Then he notices the flames dancing in his rear-view mirror. Stammering, “Fuck me,” he quickly snatches up a copy of *Hustler* from the seat and reaches back to swat out the growing inferno.

The van swerves wildly back and forth, until it veers straight into the path of oncoming traffic. Still strapped in but now arched over his seat, the young driver desperately tears off his t-shirt in a futile attempt to put out the now-raging fire.

A big-rig horn blares. The driver turns just in time to see the grill of an oncoming tractor-trailer.

“Nooooo!”

CRASH!

Extremely annoyed by the delay in his delivery schedule, the Stetson-wearing big rig cowboy grabs a baseball bat from under his seat, fully intending to teach this idiot some manners. He quickly jumps out, but has to shield his widened eyes from the erupting flames. “Oh, shit.”

The cowboy finds the young driver pinned to the steering wheel, his face imprinted against the big rig’s Mack daddy grill. Recognizing their mutual doom, he slips off his Stetson and covers his heart. “Looks like you just cooked both our shit, boy.”

The young driver can only sigh, “Allah, forgive me.”

KA-BOOM!

The sub-sonic shockwave from the blast radiates through

the sea of cars and across the strip-mall-infested wasteland—to a moist set of tonsils vibrating deep inside the wide-open mouth of a buxom cheerleader. “Get Reely High!” is the mantra she screams on the sideline of the greatest American ritual—high school football.

The TS Reely High School scoreboard shimmers in the dust of the explosion’s towering mushroom cloud. But the rambling crowd of twelve hundred spectators is numbed to anything but the carnage unfolding on the field. These overweight, pill-fed reflections of working class America were once proud townsfolk filled with the kind of God-fearing glow of a middle-class ethos that made them the envy of the world. Now, all that remains after years of hopeless unemployment, endless downsizing, and shuddered factories is the TS Reely High School football team—the last pearl to be found in the endless sprawl. In these steroid-infused young men rests the entire community’s embodiment of hope and conquest—all that is righteous, and all that is vengeful.

Behind the bleachers and beyond the pent-up madness, a striking and darkly beautiful Latin girl named [Kara](#) chats with the school’s number one malcontent, [Cage](#), whose distinctive multiracial features are framed by long, free-flowing dreadlocks. These two are more interested in the enormous plume of smoke billowing over the scoreboard than the results of the game.

Cage mumbles to himself, “Chaos is beautiful.”

Cage and Kara’s deep connection goes back to the day Cage playfully challenged Kara to a game of chicken in the school cafeteria, with a whole turkey and a gallon of mashed potatoes and gravy. Needless to say, it turned into a historic,

schoolwide food fight that would put *Animal House* to shame. The priceless image of the school principal, Cornelius Winky, covered in dripping globs of creamed corn and spinach causes Kara to shudder every Thanksgiving, thanks to the weeklong suspension she and Cage had to suffer. Even so, nothing could stop her from falling over a cliff for Cage.

Kara's gaze lingers on Cage's strong, classic profile. She smiles, admiring his glistening charcoal eyes.

Every other eye in the stadium is eagerly fixed on the wiry wide receiver galloping down the field, vectoring toward a Hail Mary long-bomb. But as any athlete will attest: ill focus never pays dividends on the field—and he is distracted by the odd vision of the looming mushroom-cloud.

The ball arrives. And so does the massive, 'roid-fed' frame of [The Ox](#), completely blacking out the sky. His twisted sneer is purely sociopathic as he descends on the wiry receiver.

“What the—?!”

CRUNCH!

The explosive impact of The Ox completely pulverizes the minuscule receiver into a bloody spray of mud and bone fragments.

The ball pops up. The crowd gasps.

Until an intolerably good-looking African American named [Face](#) snatches it out of the air. Face is keenly aware of his statuesque talents, striking photogenic poses for every photographer he passes as he races toward the opposite goal.

“That's it!” shouts someone in the crowd. “That's our boys!”

The crowd roars, “Kill ’em! Maim ’em! Destroy ’em!”

Face is quickly surrounded by a pack of beefy opposing lineman, so rather than risk denting his precious veneer, he pitches the ball in a pose worthy of an *SI* cover.

The crowd gasps again as the ball lofts over a cluster of outreaching arms, to finally be pulled down by [Boomer](#), the school’s self-possessed, lily-white uber athlete.

Boomer knows full well that he is the reigning alpha male in town. The term ‘golden boy’ would apply if not for the constant smirk on his chiseled face and the evil stare he applies to all. But as fate would have it, his physical prowess is at odds with his mental capacity. Mean without reason, he beams a very dark aura.

Boomer relishes the feeling of cleats stomping on human flesh. He charges like a crazed bull, quickly trampling several smaller, helpless opponents, then sets his sights on the last, trembling goal line defender. Boomer lowers his head and plows violently into the poor kid, vaulting him into the goalpost like a lifeless crash test dummy, cracking both the goalpost and the kid completely in half.

SNAP!

A triumphant Boomer performs a high-stepping show horse prance as he penetrates the end zone for the winning score—then winds up his hulking arm and drills the ball through the scoreboard like a bullet. Five, four, three, two—*SWOOSH!* Boomer lifts his head to the heavens and howls like a bloodsoaked banshee dancing over his kill—as Face and The Ox and the now-insane, cheering crowd completely swarm him.

Cage smirks at the ritualistic mass celebration unfolding on the field. “Pussy gladiators.”

Kara looks at him curiously. “What’d you say?”

Cage moves in front of Kara and points to his ear. “Got your ears on?”

Kara has been near-deaf since birth. Unable to hear much of anything without her ‘ears,’ she has found being without them a very convenient way to tune everything and everyone out.

She shakes her head. “Too noisy. I’d rather concentrate on your lips.” Fixated on Cage’s infectious smile, Kara wonders aloud, “Why don’t you rap to me, *mi amore*? You got the looks...”

Cage smirks. “Musicians crave attention. I crave the shadows. Like a phantom poet. Rhym’n ’bout the dark side of our sick existence.” He strokes her long raven hair. “Besides, the money’s gone. Tunes are all free. And I ain’t pimp’n some new can of soda just to be on *X Factor*.”

Kara points to two very hot girls on the other side of the parking lot. “They think you’re a star.”

Cage eagerly checks them out. “Tell me more.”

Kara focuses closely on the girls’ moving lips. Then laughs. Another advantage of being deaf is her very keen ability to read lips.

This gets Cage going. “What’d they say?”

Now she has him squirming, Kara grins. “They’re dying to dangle your dongle in their love fork.”

Cage smiles. “Here I am—”

Kara cuts him off. “But heard you are a *chilito maricón*.”

Cage scoffs and unbuckles his fly. “*Chilito my ass! ¡Mi dongle es mucho grande!*”

Kara nods as she playfully buttons him up. “Show me that moneymaker later and I’ll make all your dreams come

true.” She transfixes Cage with her eyes as she provocatively teases, sensually caressing his chest with her hands.

Cage grins as she slowly moves her hands down, ever so slowly down. Down to the obviously impressive bulge in his pants. Cage shutters and is about to explode when Kara wraps him in a wet, tongue-locking kiss.

A loud commotion emerges in the stadium.

It’s Boomer arrogantly mowing a path through his overly exuberant fans as he struts off the field. He stops cold when he spies Kara locking tongues with Cage and turns red with rage. “I’m gonna kick that half-breed’s ass!”

Boomer lowers his shoulder and mows right into Cage, knocking him off Kara. Striking a clumsy white-boy ‘gangsta’ pose, Boomer attempts to rap. “Yo yo! Keep your stinkn’ mojo off my ho, ho!”

An enraged Kara screams, “Your what?” as Cage reaches for his blade. But he suppresses his urge to split Boomer open like a pig and, instead, struggles to restrain a now-emo-inflamed Kara. “Better apologize before she stomps the white right out of you.”

Kara shrieks, “*¡Tu madre es una puta fea, pendejo!*”

Stunned by Kara’s wrath, Boomer can only stammer incoherently.

Kara shrieks again, “*¡Váyase fucking ahora!*”

Not about to tango in Spanish, a sulking Boomer retreats.

Cage pulls the steaming Kara into his arms while relaxing his hand on a well-concealed blade.

In a darkened alley between the stadium locker rooms, another set of tonsils vibrates. These belong to a terrified

teen girl screaming, “Bastard!” as she clutches what’s left of her shredded bra and dashes from a glittering gold Escalade. Twenty-dollar bills trail the fleeing girl, wafting over the Escalade’s diamond studded ‘\$£A¥€R’ license plate.

Inside the garishly gold vehicle sits a smug, greasy-haired kid named [Wadd](#) who grins as he buttons his fly. Smirking at the fleeing girl he shouts, “My mind on my money, my money on my mind!”

Roll’n dirty with access to millions, Wadd possesses only a grain of sand of his father’s largesse. But he can make his own dreams come true by booking Snoop for his private prom party. He mutters to himself, “If only Tupac were alive.” Then his phone chirps, signaling an incoming text: *LR, now!!*

Wanting to please TS Reely High’s established chick magnets, Wadd shuffles into the locker room to find it filled with towel-snapping jock-straps, and the king of all jocks, a scheming Boomer.

Boomer pulls Wadd close. “You’re gonna help me castrate that motherfucker Cage.”

Wadd grins. “I’m down with that.”

Face joins them. “You gotta plan?”

“Don’t I always?” smirks Boomer.

The Ox elbows in, clenching his powerful fists. “I’ll crush him like a bug.”

Boomer shakes his head. “That’s too easy, too quick. We need to give him a one-way ticket to oblivion.”

Boomer notices a nearby teammate spraying silicone ‘new skin’ on his badly blistered heal. “Exactly.” He snaps his fingers and The Ox grabs the can. Grinning like a kid who just crapped his pants and likes it, Boomer sprays his

hand with a thick coat of new skin.



A super-tricked, nitro-fed convertible '64 Chevy Impala pulls up next to a still-embracing Kara and Cage.

Cage grins. “Sup, boys?”

Two members of his loyal mob, Hard Drive and Wrek, spill out.

[Hard Drive](#) is a pale, vegan-fed techno-brain with an oversized cranium who sees the world in code: the simplicity of ones and zeroes rules his every impression and thought. Hacking the NSA, pulling down the power grid, data-mining every email on the planet is simple child’s play

to Hard Drive.

[Wrek](#) is a hybrid Mex-Asian mechanical wizard with a serious fetish for mod cars. He grips the wheel of his pride and joy like an astronaut ready for takeoff. Wrek's super-charged wheels are the envy of every gearhead at TS Reely High.

They approach Cage and Kara with mischievous grins.

Hard Drive winks. "Remember, we got an important date in the AM."

Wrek snaps his fingers. "With our *pinche* principal, Mr. Winky."

Cage smiles. "Yeah."

Wrek continues. "Not our fault he needed to take a dump."

"Just as the M-80 went off!" laughs Hard Drive.

They all join in: "Blew his ass right up!"

"Talk about toxic waste!" injects Kara to more laughter.

Then Wrek proudly announces, "What would Reely High do without us, *ése*?"

Cage contemplates for a moment. "I'm think'n Wednesday's Sloppy Joe's—spiked with poppers."

Kara licks her chops. "Mmm. My favorite—'Poppy Joe's!'"

A beaming Hard Drive pulls out his hot, self-modified Chromebook and caresses the screen as if he's enjoying a processor-infused sexual encounter. With a sweep of his hand, he reveals the stunningly spectacular prototype of his latest video game app.

Everyone is awestruck.

"It'll be locked and loaded tomorrow. Full scale. Full immersion," grins Hard Drive.

“Speaking of full scale...”

They turn to see Load sauntering up with a cadence and rhythm only possible in someone swinging four hundred pounds of sweaty flesh. [Load](#) is a huge girl bursting out of XXXL hip-hop clothes. She has learned to accept her colossal girth as a gift from heaven, a gift that just keeps on giving and giving.



She grins. “Last time I saw ‘full scale, full immersion’ was two bull elephants tap’n each other’s asses at the zoo!”

Everyone laughs. They love Load. Her sense of humor is always in sync with their desperate need for comic relief.

The other unmistakable, standout trait about Load is: *she stinks*. And just so no one will forget this fact, she cuts loose

a thundering fart that clouds the air with noxious gas—
BRAAP!

The laughter stops short as Kara gags. “Shit, girl! I'm gonna get you a can of Poo-Pouri.”

Hard Drive plugs his nose. “I’m in aroma agony!”

“You should bottle that stink and sell it to terrorists!” adds an annoyed Cage.

Load is unapologetic.

Wrek quickly sticks up for her. “She’s my supply line, *é*se. You want a cool ride? Got to embrace the stink.”

Load smiles. “Cost of admission.”

Everyone has to laugh. Load’s valuable friendship is well worth the cost.

But their mood changes when Boomer emerges from the locker room with Wadd, Face, and The Ox in tow. Boomer approaches the group with a snake-oil salesman smile. “No hard feelings?”

Cage & Co form a protective perimeter around Kara. She scoffs, “No hard anything from what I can see.”

Even Face and The Ox snicker at this one. But a simmering Boomer keeps his cool. “Listen, I’m big enough to admit defeat.” A kinder, gentler Boomer graciously extends his hand to Cage. “You win, bro. Let’s shake on it.”

Cage hesitates, but Boomer insists: “Come on, you can trust me.”

Cage looks to his friends for support. They all nod. So he very slowly, very reluctantly shakes Boomer’s hand. “I’m not your bro, dick.”

Boomer nearly bites through his lip as he struggles to contain his glee. He really just wants to shout, right in Cage’s face, “Got you, motherfucker!” But instead, he

stammers out, “Sure thing.”

Brimming with a feeling of ultimate conquest, Boomer gathers his crew and they quickly depart, careful to hide their shit-eating grins.

Cage and friends look at each other, wondering what just happened.

Wadd stops Boomer at the far end of the parking lot. “Let me see! Did it work?”

“The castration begins,” Boomer smirks as he carefully peels the new skin off his hand.

Wadd takes the peel and mists it with electrostatic powder. “This’ll cut him deep.”

They all watch closely as the chalky powder covering the peel slowly reveals Cage’s fingerprints.

Boomer happily nods. “And bleed him out.”

Sneering like twisted hyenas, they jump into Wadd’s Escalade and disappear down the street.

—

On the other side of town, a now quiet and reflective Cage & Co motor past boarded up pawnshops and dilapidated used car lots in Wrek’s super-tricked Chevy.

Wrek parks outside a ‘Lost Our Lease’ RadioShack and Hard Drive piles out. He winks at Cage. “More Winky wackiness in the morning.”

Cage just smiles and nods.

Wrek’s Chevy motors off. Hard Drive hesitates a moment to gather himself, before he enters the rundown apartment building next door.

Hard Drive daydreams all the time. Inside his head,

anything is possible. Unlike most of his peers who are fixated on teenage erotic fantasies, Hard Drive is obsessed with modifying video game hardware and software to propel his own fantasies, when he's not formulating a solution to the Riemann hypothesis. Outside his head is a different reality that he's never been totally comfortable with or in control of: the mean streak that runs through society and the blind worship of physical attributes vs. mental cunning. Apart from the tight bond he has with Cage, Load, and Wrek, he is a loner and detached from everyone.

Hard Drive is a digital boy-toy maverick who prefers Android OS because it's a cowboy-computing platform. 'Anonymous' would be the perfect virtual gang for Hard Drive if it was less driven by a political agenda: he can't be bothered with shutting down world banks or screwing with the NSA because he has much more fun hacking school computers and dominating the local 'vidiot' scene.

Hard Drive has no ambition to rule the new world. He's more interested in turning everything within a 20-mile radius upside down so he can personally see and feel every moment of the chaos he's created—and take full credit along with Cage, Wrek and Load, his best friends and coconspirators.

Hard Drive quickly sheds his laidback demeanor as he enters the building. He looks like a different person: his furrowed brow etches deep into his forehead and his skin turns a ghostly white. Leaving the comfort and safety of his friends is a difficult experience because what awaits him at home is more than unpredictable; it is usually downright dangerous.

Hard Drive climbs the creaking stairs with great

trepidation and arrives at a door secured by seventeen deadbolts. Knowing not to knock—the last person who did that lost an eye—he slowly leans in close to the door. “Ma, it’s me. Let me in.”

But the sound of a shotgun chambering on the other side tells him he’d better duck.

Luckily for Hard Drive, he takes cover just before a double-barrel twelve-gauge blasts a gigantic hole through the door, right where his head was—*BOOM!*

As the smoke clears, Hard Drive cautiously peeks from behind the wall to see his shotgun-toting mother, ravaged by schizophrenic paranoia, poking her head through the hole. “Who’s out there?! I’ll count to three before I really start shoot’n!”

HD’s mom should not have been neglected by the community mental health services. But statewide budget cuts have filled the streets with people who are in desperate need of help. And no insurance means no meds. Hard Drive does what he can for his mom: shopping for food, keeping the rent paid and the lights on with her meager social security checks, but in the end, it’s never really enough. Hard Drive and his mom, like his friends, live on the edge of a dying, forgotten American class that is deemed of no value to society.

An exasperated Hard Drive pleads, again, “Ma, it’s me, HD. Put away the gun and let me in.”

“Why didn’t you say so, boy? Now we gotta get a new door!”

Wrek’s Chevy pulls up to chain-linked fence surrounding a mountain of trash that’s being picked over by crows and rats—the city dump.

Load has to struggle to get her giantness out of the car. “When are you gonna get something with a real back seat?”

Wrek shakes his head. “Never.”

Load leans in. “Did I tell you an original 426 Hemi showed up here today?”

Wrek nearly creams himself. “Gimme gimme gimme!”

Load smiles. “Tomorrow, cowboy. I promise. Now scatter. It’s feeding time!”

Cage pats Wrek on the back as they watch Load lumber off. “I know why you hang with her.”

“She may stink, *ése*—but her parts smell sweeet to me!” boasts Wrek.

Cage coughs. “Her what?”

Embarrassed, Wrek quickly explains. “After-market car parts! What did you think?”

Cage looks at Wrek and they both break out laughing. Wrek hits the gas and they motor off.

Load pauses outside the gatehouse of the town dump, already locked down for the day. “Hey!” she shouts.

The yard’s owner, her older brother, quickly emerges. “Hey, Sis.”

Written off as ‘slow,’ Load’s brother is the jovial sort who loves his work at the dump. Loves the treasures he finds every day in the vast amount of waste that people casually throw away.

“Time to fuel up, Sis.” He escorts his sister into a shack that looks like a foreclosed outhouse.

Load loves to take care of her brother. Loves to eat. Loves to love. Someday she dreams that true love will find a path to the heavy load of loving she has to offer. But tonight, anyway, Load has the love of her younger brother—

which is more than enough for her.

She changes into an old, discarded XXXL tee decorated with a Kansas City chicken shack logo, claiming, ‘We choke our own chickens,’ then cheerfully prepares a giant pan of fried chicken and bananas, her favorite.

Her brother shoots cans of Genesee beer while he watches Load lovingly cook the culinary delight. “You ought to be on one of those chef cook’n shows on TV. Nobody ever heard of chicken ’n’ bananas.”

Load laughs as the two get ready to gorge—a world-class feeding frenzy is about to begin.

Next stop for Wrek is Cage’s home, a small, rundown bodega. A now-solemn Cage exits Wrek’s vehicle without saying a word.

Wrek issues some advice to his friend. “Keep your head low, *cabrón*.”

Coming home for Cage is painful, but he’s learned to combat the agony by turning off, almost freezing his emotions. After a long, deep breath he slowly pushes every ounce of pride from his soul. The uber cool leader of the Sprawl Lords suppresses the essence of his witty, modern, beat poet, sexual confidence into a deep and dark void inside his consciousness. He pushes and squeezes—and pushes and squeezes more—until he is finally, completely, emotionally empty. Like a half-frozen icicle, he slithers into his dad’s bodega.

Cage is immediately overpowered by the smell of rotting chunks of barbeque meat, stale alcohol, and urine. Something rustles in the corner. He ducks, just in time, as an empty beer can whistles past his head.

“Get me another Bull!” shouts a surly voice from the

shadows.

Cage calmly retrieves a cold Schlitz Malt Liquor from the fridge and gingerly walks into the blackness. Tripping over crushed cans and week-old pizza boxes, he arrives where his clearly obese, but clearly dangerous and still powerful father is wheelchair bound.

Cage's dad growls, "Where the hell you been, you worthless asshole? I pissed my pants an hour ago."

Cage's dad wasn't always this way. He was once young and full of hope, full of promise. But the First Iraq War, another of America's endless foreign interventions, made him a bitter vet. Crippled after his legs were blown off in a 'friendly fire' incident near the infamous Highway of Death, he's just another forgotten casualty of a society that has no long-term memory of the consequences it rains down on those who choose to serve.

Cage dutifully approaches his dad, wary of his tendency for unprovoked violence.

Guilt drives Cage's blind devotion: guilt that his unplanned birth drove his father to enlist in the Army to support his unwed wife and son, which eventually caused his mother to become terminally addicted to crack. His father came back from the war a broken man, and he has never forgiven Cage, whom he blames for everything. How does anyone make up for causing so much pain?

"You know what, maggot? Changing my pants is the only damn thing you'll ever be good for."

Masking his wounded soul and confused by the desire to love a father figure gone bad, Cage is full of disappointment and fear. He can only mutter, "Yes, sir..." as he stoops in front of his stained and rancid-smelling father.

Wrek makes his final stop: pulling his trophy car over and parking under a grove of leafless, dead trees on the outskirts of town. The only people who inhabit this derelict section are all the abandoned young kids who have no home or no one to even notice they are missing. Now alone, Wrek opens a secret compartment under his chair and fishes out an old Altoids tin.

Wrek doesn't remember his parents. No pictures. Not a single image in his memory. All he knows is what he's been told: that they were hardworking migrants who moved from one backbraking harvest to another just to survive in this country—until the ICE raid. Desperate and poor, and hoping they could give him a better life, his parents left a six-month-old Wrek on the doorstep of a nearby church before they were deported. But the 'better life' of the church wore out for Wrek before he was two years old.

Abused by a priest, who was finally exposed by older children, Wrek grew up in a no-trust zone without a moral compass. He was transferred at age seven to the 'sisters' of the Holy Assured Monastery. But by age ten they realized that Wrek would never trust 'the cloth,' and began searching for a well-meaning, churchgoing, 'legal' immigrant family to take him in.

Several failed foster homes later, where the failure was always clearly his, Wrek bounced back and forth between the monastery and foster care until he turned 16, when he finally split for good and settled into a series of abandoned cars and light trucks thrown away for scrap. Which is how he met Load.

Load has always turned discarded vehicles over to Wrek, knowing he would find a creative way to get them working.

And by never keeping the same vehicle for more than a month, Wrek has never had to register the plates, or get a license, or otherwise become a responsible member of the society that he's mistrusted his entire life.

Cage, Load, Hard Drive, and Kara are the closest thing to *familia* he has ever known. He trusts them, but only to a point. His friends and his machines are all that he has. Only his machines are much more reliable—a machine will never abuse you.

With trembling fingers, he methodically opens the rusted tin to reveal a colorful trove of cranks and downers. These are actually more than friends, because without them he knows, deep in his heart, he cannot face a world in which he does not really belong.

Wrek pops a muscle relaxant and slowly crawls into the back seat. Now calmly sedated and drifting off, Wrek covers himself with his weathered leather jacket and uses a worn parts catalogue as a pillow.

A silhouette of Wrek's tricked Chevy, sitting isolated and alone, shimmers in the moonlight. For Wrek, this is home.

—

Wadd's Escalade pulls up outside a dark and empty TS Reely High School. Boomer and Wadd slither out of the Escalade and dash for a back entrance, where Wadd uses a set of locksmith tools to jimmy the back door.

Inside, Boomer and Wadd use their smartphones to light the way as they quickly scamper down a stairwell and weave through the underbelly of the school's mechanical

rooms.

Checking their surroundings for surveillance cameras, Boomer and Wadd dive into the boiler room. Wadd winks as he digs a large pipe bomb out of his jacket, then the new-skin peel.

“Take your time. We gotta do this right,” cautions Boomer.

He watches Wadd carefully transfer Cage’s fingerprints from the new skin to the pipe. Boomer chuckles to himself. “This will finally fix that asshole for good.”

Wadd’s Escalade rolls through an upscale neighborhood with neatly manicured lawns and perfectly cut topiary trees. It comes to a stop in front of a garishly overbuilt McMansion.

Boomer steps out of the sparkling car and nods confidently to his friend, but as he heads for the door, Boomer’s mood changes dramatically.

Summoning an athlete’s will from within, Boomer consciously puts on his game face. This is not the face of the confident football quarterback leading his Reely High team to victory. No. Boomer must suppress the wave of anxiety and trepidation that overcomes him every time he enters his own home. Fear of embarrassment among his friends has driven Boomer to keep his domestic nightmare a secret—because he never knows in what condition he’ll find his long-divorced, physically enhanced, pill popping mother.

His heart pounding, Boomer opens the front door to survey the entryway and abruptly stops short: a trail of hastily stripped-off clothes and underwear leads straight to the living room. He sighs. “Mom?”

Now wary, he takes the few steps leading to the living

room and is stunned by what he sees. “No...” His mother is naked and spread-eagle on the couch, while her twenty-year-old gym trainer drills her like a piston!

Emotions run like Red Bull through the veins of an angry and freaked-out son trying to protect the flimsy veil of a normal existence. Boomer wails, “Get off her!” as he chases the trainer out.

But the trainer laughs and taunts Boomer as he runs. “Yeah, baby boy. Yo mama’s on fire!”

Boomer wails again, “Get out, you motherfucker!”

He has to contemplate that one for a moment—as his mother casually covers herself and downs a handful of purple capsules with a bottle of Grey Goose. “What’s the matter, sweetie? Jealous?” asks his mother.

Boomer is completely overcome with disgust.

His mother is a classic narcissist who will never be happy: constantly under the surgeon’s knife and burying herself in delusional narcotics. She is a cougar preying on young men half her age for attention and companionship. But even with the amazing package that Boomer is—the looks, the athletic prowess, the local fame—his mother’s behavior has completely warped his emotional perspective: is this the only woman who will ever love him?

Boomer feels nauseous, his head spinning from the twisted reminder that his life is so horribly distorted. He bolts upstairs.

At the top of the hill, Wadd parks his sparkling gold Escalade in the circular drive of an overly ornate, Venetian-style grand estate—an example of palatial ostentatiousness so extreme it would make Donald Trump envious.

Wadd anxiously picks at a festering scab as he passes a

saluting security guard inside the baroque rotunda.

Wadd's life is simple: he buys what he wants, when he wants it, thanks to the seemingly never-empty cash machine provided by his much older, elusive father. In fact, there has never been a single day in his life that Wadd has worried about anything.

Except, of course, his father—who utterly terrifies him. Not for threat of any physical violence. No, Wadd's father treats him like all his possessions: as just another instrument to be used for his many secret, nefarious affairs.

Mysterious and enormously wealthy, Old Man Wadd has never uttered a kind or loving word to his only son since the day his wife was found in a sexually compromising position with his private security chief. They both vanished without a trace—and the younger Wadd is a constant reminder that he never resolved the total failure of his marriage.

Unfortunately for the old man, maintaining the family line is paramount: all his riches and power will need to be transferred to someone. And with the only truth in the house being that money buys everything, including friends, lovers, expensive toys, and global business empires, the old man does have a larger plan for his son. But the naive, infantile Wadd has no clue what that might be; he just loves his ready access to money and the ease with which it gets him whatever he wants.

“Pincus! Get in here!” shouts an angry voice.

An apprehensive Wadd enters a secure, air-locked multimedia room where a bank of floating, 3D glass screens cycle global financial updates, market activity, and breaking international news events on CNN, Al Jazeera, and Russia Today. Here he finds Old Man Wadd, in his eighties and a

bit frail, but alert as a fox.

A megalomaniac from birth, Old Man Wadd still has the blood-splattered ‘dream-list’ he scratched out when he was six. He vividly remembers showing it to his first-grade teacher and telling her, with utmost seriousness, that one day he would conquer the entire world. Her unduly dismissive cackle still echoes in his ear. The unrelenting violence and fury of his response put her in a hospital for a month. She never taught again. But the old man is now closer than ever to accomplishing his prized dream list.

He snaps back to reality. “Where were you?”

Wadd stammers, “Uh, with my friends.”

“They’re not your friends, they just want your money.”

“That’s not true, Dad—”

“You want to run my empire someday?”

Wadd does not hesitate. “Hell, yeah.”

“Then listen!”

The old man motions, like a mythical wizard, to the floating 3D screens. “You see what I see?”

Wadd is puzzled. “Uh.”

“Sheep! All of them. Nothing but sheep. And I am their shepherd, Pincus.” He leans in close. “And all my talking heads are sweet music to their ears.”

“All these news stations work for you?”

The old man nods. “Remember these tenants, they have built my empire... First: invent an enemy. But it must be an enemy so powerful and terrifying, and impossible to ever defeat, that it will paralyze the sheep with constant trepidation and fear. Trepidation and fear are the levers of our media empire. We turn the knobs up and down, but no matter which way they go, we keep the masses equally

mesmerized and traumatized, until they are ultimately addicted to fear like a pathetic heroin junky who always needs a fix... Listen closely, son.”

Wadd is listening now.

“Second: use the talking heads to chant a mantra of hate, drilling into the sheep the horrific acts your enemy will commit on their wives and their children—especially their children. Then spin the stories to ensure the blame falls on both sides to effectively blur the line between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ This will pitch the thoroughly confused sheep into a state of absolute dependency on the stories that only we control. And last: repeat the lies, no matter how outrageous, twenty-four/seven, 365 days a year, until the lies actually become—the truth.”

He concludes, boasting proudly, “My associates and I call it ‘terrortainment.’”

Wadd responds by asking without thinking, “Your associates? I didn’t know you had partners, Dad.”

“All in good time, Pincus. All in good time.”

Wadd smiles as his father wraps his arm around his shoulders and pulls him close. But Wadd doesn’t know what to do. His father has never shown a drop of affection, never hugged him. But now he’s treating Wadd like a true son. A son he might actually care for. Wadd is overcome with conflicting emotions: wanting the trust and affection of his father but scared to death that this moment will not last.

The old man continues, “This is the new world order. And it’s yours for the taking, if you follow my every instruction.”

Wadd watches his father with keen appreciation as he explains, “The new iPhone will be released to the public

next week. But what if an event were to occur that made delivery to every Apple store on the planet impossible?”

Wadd is very curious now. “Like what?”

The old man grins. “Let’s say, a terrorist action at Foxconn in China. There are plenty of disgruntled employees who could be easily organized to create such an event.”

Wadd concludes, “And with no iPhones and the public screaming for delivery...”

“That’s exactly right. I’ll own the news cycle and every advertising dollar for the next month.”

Wadd smiles. “Brilliant.”

“Now get. I’ve got work to do.” The old man shoos the confused Wadd out the door.

Wadd pleads, “But, I thought—”

“Get!”

A dejected Wadd shuffles slowly off, wondering what he did wrong—and how he can recapture his first real, and already precious, connection with his dad.

His mind now spinning, the old man quickly texts the same headline to all of his global media network chiefs: *No matter the cost in young lives, blood, and money, global terrorism must be stopped!* He picks up a secured landline and speaks quietly into the phone, “It’s time.”

A voice on the other end responds, “Consider it done.”

—

Bright rays of morning sun filter through drab, dusty shades as a feisty Cage, Hard Drive, Wrek, and Load march into Principal Winky’s office, obscuring something quite large.

“You’re late,” huffs Mr. Winky without looking up.

A now-roguish-looking Cage & Co form a half-circle in front of the principal’s desk.

Cage tries to look serious. “In a sincere effort to make up for all the trouble we’ve caused to both you and this wonderful institution, we would like to bestow upon you an extra-special gift.”

This gets Winky’s attention. He looks up. “Really? What exactly?”

Cage continues, “Hand delivered to you directly from...”

His crew step aside to reveal: a brand new plastic toilet.

“...the city dump.”

Mr. Winky is not pleased. “Is this a joke?”

Cage shakes his head. “We sincerely apologize for our thoughtless use of fireworks in a public facility and would like to offer this sparkling, new, eco-friendly, waterless receptacle as a replacement.”

They chant together, “Dry dump ’n’ then you pump! Dry dump ’n’ then you pump!”

Load moves in close to draw Mr. Winky’s attention. “I can fill every stall at Reely High with these!”

Using her as cover, Hard Drive discreetly manipulates a tiny USB interface he built to hack into a nearby computer and alter the principal’s student database.

Then Load unceremoniously drops her pants and plops onto the toilet, ready to unload. “Strong enough to pump two tons of freak’n dumps a day!”

Mr. Winky squeals, “Oh, please Lord, no!” and dives across his desk to pull Load off the toilet. “Not in my office!”

Cage & Co nearly bowl over laughing as Mr. Winky

pushes and pulls Load in a comically feeble attempt to dislodge her perched massiveness, but to no effect.

Load grunts, “Leave me be. I’m not finished.”

Blood vessels bursting, Mr. Winky grabs his phone. “I’m calling the police!”

Having had their fun and unwilling to risk jail time, Hard Drive removes the USB while Cage, Kara, and Wrek gather Load, and they quickly depart.

A trembling Mr. Winky calls out, “You’re all going to end up in juvy! I can promise you that!”

Cage ribs Load as they all scamper down the hall. “You weren’t really going to—”

Load boasts, “Hell to the yeah. Can you imagine the tweets? ‘Load lays a royal turd in Winky’s office!’”

In the senior lounge, a scheming Boomer, Face, and The Ox hover over a glove-wearing Wadd while he manipulates a pre-paid cell phone. Closer inspection reveals he is rerouting a text message through a third phone to the local police; it states: *Dog food for lunch, BAD! Bomb @ Reely High, Badass!*

Wadd grins to the others as he disconnects and tosses the phone in the trash. “One and done.”

Cage’s cell phone beeps as he and his crew reach the exit. Wrek peeks over Cage’s shoulder to notice Wadd’s incendiary text. “You sent that to the pigs?”

Cage is stunned. “No way...”

Hard Drive pokes his head in. “Sent what to the police?”

Wrek explains, “A text admitting he planted a...”

The school secretary bursts out of the office. “There’s a bomb in the school!”

Everybody scowls at Cage.

He throws up his hands. “I didn’t do it!”

Wrek points to a quickly approaching Mr. Winky followed by four armed security guards. “Run!”

But the school fire alarm goes off and a swarm of students quickly crowds the hallways. Shouting with a mixture of anxiety and jubilation, they sweep Cage & Co out the door.

An incensed Mr. Winky stammers as he watches Cage & Co get away, “Your judgment day will come! Mark my words.”

Cage and his crew quickly jump into Wrek’s modified convertible as he shouts, “Go go go!”

The Chevy burns black streaks across the pavement as it fishtails out of the parking lot. Inside, they all sit, stone silent, still glaring, still suspicious of Cage’s actions.

Cage eagerly pleads his case. “Come on! Somebody must’ve hacked my phone. It’s the only thing that makes sense, right?”

Hard Drive snatches the phone away from Cage and quickly de-codes the data pathways. “Not hacked. The text was re-routed and tagged with your number.”

“So I didn’t send it!”

“That’s correct.”

Wrek eagerly injects, “So who did?”

Load scoffs, “Who cares, as long as we’re in the clear.” She sets her Hard Drive-modified smartphone playlist to [ManiaX](#). “Turn it up!”

A relieved Wrek streams her tunes via Bluetooth into his car and cranks the volume to ‘Nuclear.’ “Yeah, baby!”

Cage nods to Hard Drive. “Thanks.”

Hard Drive smiles. “No worries. Check this...” He

inserts a micro-disk into his smartphone that is connected to the USB and shows Cage how he can alter all their school statuses to ‘Exchange students in Kabul.’

Cage winks at his longtime friend. “You are a god.”

Wrek toggles on the nitro switch and his tricked Chevy roars off.

—

Deep in the dank, steaming bowels of the school, the graying, barrel-chested Chief of Police ‘Bunky’ Notell watches his bomb expert gingerly fish a cylindrical object out from under the boiler and hold it up to the light—it’s Wadd’s pipe bomb.

The chief looks spooked. “Careful with that thing!” He begins to back-pedal.

“Catch!” shouts the expert as he winds up to toss it.

The terrified chief ducks for cover. Then realizes he’s been had.

“It’s an obvious fake,” sneers the expert.

Chief Notell is not amused. Even if this is a prank, he is fed up with spending his valuable time and departmental resources chasing down juvenile offenders. The chief is going to do everything he can to ensure that the jokers who did this are stopped, here and now. He snatches the pipe away for a closer look. “What’s this?” He points.

“A beautiful set of prints.”

Growing ever more angry, Chief Notell growls, “The punk who did this is gonna fry.”

—

The leader of the Black Mus’Tasche Brigade struggles every day to whip his pathetic band of ‘trained killers’ into shape. Today, his troops are exerting every effort to perfect a comic form of slapstick jujitsu.

“Not like that!” rages the leader. “Like this!” He grabs one of his troops by the throat and traps him in a painful reverse chin lock chokehold. “Now, once you have him like this, all you need to do is this...” The leader scissor locks the hapless trooper, contorting him into an impossible pretzel shape.

“Ahhh!” squeals the agonized trooper.

The leader grunts, “Shut up, you filthy goat!”

He answers his ringing cell phone with one hand while still choking the life out of the bug-eyed trooper with the other.

“Yes, sir, we received the wire transfer, and yes, your instructions are crystal clear. We will not fail you this time, I promise.”

The leader angrily disconnects. Now boiling over with rage, he increases the pressure on the terrified trooper’s neck and splits his fragile spine in half—*CRACK!*

The furious leader leaps to his feet, screaming, “How can I defeat the great Satan with an army of twigs?!”

—

Wrek’s mod convertible rumbles into the trash-strewn parking lot surrounding Beaverview Mall.

‘D’Beav’ is a cramped, 30-year-out-of-date shopping center clad in crumbling stucco, and reeking of mold, stale

beer, and urine. Aside from an electronics store, which the town's kids still support, only crap merchandise can be found in this rundown dump.

Cage & Co are ready to let off some serious steam. They make their grand entrance, announcing, "We are the new rulers of the endless sprawl! We are the Sprawl Lords!" It is only then they notice the only one listening is an old lady struggling with her walker.

Excreting confidence through every pore, they glide up to a line of vidiots standing outside Sal's CyberCity. "And this is our domain."

The vidiots part like the Red Sea upon Hard Drive's arrival. He is the resident tech at Sal's—and their one and true living god.

Hard Drive loves the adulation. He loves being the center of the local geek universe. And Hard Drive's idiot minions are the only ones who truly appreciate his unique gaming genius.

A dirty blonde with streaks of pink in her hair grimaces from the pain of her recent Princess Albertina as she bows. "His HD-ness has arrived."

"That turd?" scoffs another idiot in glasses.

To which the bearded idiot retorts, "How dare you besmirch the creator!"

The vidiots collectively hold their breath as they wait for Hard Drive to plug in his latest augmentation as he boldly announces, "The moment you've all been praying for has finally arrived!"

Not lacking for drama, Hard Drive slowly draws open a long black curtain—to reveal a floor-to-ceiling rack of pulsating hardwired CPUs fused into a stacked array of 35

modified next-gen Xboxs.

The gob smacked vidiots ooh and aah while Cage & Co don the required interface headgear and virtually encode their personality choices.

Load can't wait. "HD is the shit!"

"*Arriba Armageddon!*" shouts a giddy Wrek.

Then a hush falls over the crowd as Hard Drive slips in his earbuds and cranks his modified Samsung phone. "Behold—the end of our planet as you know it!" He slowly inserts the final flashing chipboard into place. "Let there be—Metal 'N' Maniax!"

Cage & Co confidently step across the threshold of the '[Dome of Doom](#)' and enter the cataclysmic landscape of a fractal free fire zone.

Waddling through the food court is a snorting *Biggest Loser* reject. She spies Saanjih's Taco Palace and begins to drool.

A near-lifeless Kara works the counter at Saanjih's. Stuck filling in for a friend, she'd rather be anywhere else on the planet right now. Then she notices the hideous reject approaching and can only groan.

The reject slobbers as she orders, hovering over Kara as she slops near-meat into a stale burrito. "Hey! I said extra near-meat, baby! Supersize me!"

But Kara is now fixated on the flat screens broadcasting the news across the hall.

A local reporter gives a live update. "In several isolated villages in the jungles of South America, hundreds of deaths are being blamed on the latest flu outbreak. With no known cases reported here, doctors say a vaccine for the officially named 'A-Chu Killer Flu' should be available to the public

soon.”

But a stern-faced news anchor interrupts the broadcast. “This just in: an unnamed terrorist group has bombed the main Foxconn electronics factory in China, causing a delay in next week’s long-awaited delivery of the new iPhone.”

Every iPhone owner wannabe in the mall suddenly flies into a panic. “No! Now what?! I’ve waited six months!”

Kara shakes her head until she notices a group of teenagers approaching. “Oh, shit...”

It’s Boomer, Wadd, Face, and The Ox strutting into the Taco Palace as if they own the place. Kara tries to duck behind the counter—too late—Boomer is already there.

He grins diabolically. “You heard about the scare at school, right?”

Kara doesn’t answer.

Boomer moves closer. “Pipe bomb with your loverboy’s prints all over it.”

“Cage is goin’ down, *chica*,” smirks Wadd.

“Better dump the chump,” Face adds eagerly.

They chant in unison, “Dump the chump! Dump the chump!”

Kara has had it. “Enough! What are you? Some kind of ass-clown band?”

Boomer’s anger begins to swell. Then Face points to the commotion over at Sal’s. “Check it.”

Cage & Co are now fully immersed in a constantly transforming, MC Escher-esque virtual world of the dome, appearing to each other as the techno superheroes they always wanted to be:

Cage has assumed a crystalline physique: his dreadlocks are pure white, his pupils pink, and long quartz crystals have

emerged from his arms and fingers, jutting out from his fingers like pointed, faceted ice sculptures. When the crystals are blue, Cage freezes anything and everything he touches.

Hard Drive has turned into a super brain—literally. His now-enormous cerebrum has burst out of the top of his head and it bristles with an electromagnetic aura. He can create powerful force fields of energy and alter physical objects with a mind over matter mental power. Hard Drive is a rad-looking, bigheaded power brain capped on a scrawny teen body.

Load has become a solid wall of Sumo-wrestling power with the world's strongest woman's capabilities. Her bulked-up arms and legs are one thing, but the thing she is most proud of is her hugely monumental ass. Load's nuclear-powered killer farts can jet stream across large swaths of the video game landscape, knocking down everything in their path.

And Wrek has developed a set of double-jointed hands with power tool and blowtorch capabilities that are every mechanic's dream, and large bug eyes that have microscopic focusing abilities. In the game, he designs and builds never-before-seen mechanical inventions at lightning speed.

Together, the Sprawl Lords quickly lay waste to the idiots. Then annihilate the 'Guardian of Sector Seven' in the third quadrant of the fifth construct, where a whirlwind of fractal explosions spins into a vortex of fire and molten radiance.

Just as the Sprawl Lords penetrate the final threshold and confront the 'Black Fire God of Death,' Boomer, Wadd, Face, and The Ox crash into the game.

“Make way for the apocalypse, girls!” cackles Wadd.

“The Terminal Infections are in da’ house!” thunders Boomer.

Boomer’s game avatar is noticeably bulked up, but the real change is in his arm—it has formed into the shape of a massively imposing boomerang that he can detach and throw great distances. Not only does his arm return, but Boomer can use the hand end of the boomerang to retrieve anything he wants.

Face has transformed into a man with two faces, only his other face, now morphed out of his arm, is a teeth-gnashing pit bull that is nasty, gnarly and exploding with rage.

The Ox has become a hulking, brooding War Pig—short on words but long on wholesale destruction.

And Wadd has turned into a wormheaded toxic beast that poisons everything he touches; sometimes slow, sometimes quick, but always lethal. His skin is now covered in oozing boils, while snake-sized translucent worms bore holes into his body.

The Sprawl Lords are stunned by the Terminal Infections’ unexpected invasion and can only watch as Boomer disconnects his boomerang arm and wings it at the ‘Black Fire God’—*SMASH!*—violently dispatching him to the ether... *WHUMPH!*

The two groups of teens stand gazing at each other through the blood in their eyes. Then—

The entire dome explodes—

KA-BOOOOM!

A chain reaction of strange gaseous detonations sets off a series of explosions that march down the entire length of the mall—*BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!* Everything vanishes in

a flash of flames and flying glass. Then the dome comes crashing down.

A microscopic spark from the explosion spins through the air, until it sweeps into the ear of an unsuspecting shopper. “Eeeeeee!” The spark fractures into a series of sub-atomic strings that fuse with the workings of the inner ear, mutating to exponential proportions and creating an aching, high-pitched scream that causes the shopper to contort in terrifying pain.

The smoking wreckage of the mall quickly becomes a madhouse of panic-stricken, shrieking victims, careening into each other as they tear at their agony-filled ears. Some catapult themselves through brick walls, others through concrete pillars, and one through the urinal in the men’s room. All clinch what’s left of their ears, consumed by horrified expressions of torment.

Cage, Hard Drive, Wrek, and Load lie motionless in the rubble of the dome.

Boomer, Face, Wadd, and The Ox also appear lifeless amongst the debris...

CHAPTER 2

Inner Scream

A shrill scream vibrates through the swollen tonsils of the old lady struggling with her walker. But the pain shredding her ears has transformed this feeble elder citizen into an Olympic-caliber athlete who is sprinting insanely through the mall's atrium.

Hurdling a planter, she streaks past an exec in a cheap Wal-Mart suit who spends his days cutting hardworking people's jobs. But today, his cutting is self-induced as he thrashes and squeals in the corner, using a knife to carve off both his ears.

The shoppers and casual consumers who visited Beaverview that day never could have imagined the merciless deaths that awaited them. If they had, they surely would have chosen suicide 'by any means necessary' over a routine trip to the mall.

Unaffected by the madness, Hard Drive unconsciously adjusts the music still cranking on his phone as he slowly rises from the rubble. Surveying the stunning scene of mayhem and destruction, he mutters to himself, "Where are my friends?"

Until the shrieking, sprinting old lady dashes right past him and—*CRASH!*—slingshots herself, walker and all, into the door of a showcase Ford Mustang.

Hard Drive recoils. "Holy shit."

Shocked and disoriented, he stumbles backwards and trips over a steel beam—and an unconscious Cage who is pinned underneath. "Cage!" Hard Drive struggles valiantly to lift the beam, but nearly herniates himself in the process.

“Gaaaak!”

Cage startles awake and quickly realizes he is not only trapped but also incapacitated by the piercing inner scream. Veins popping in his face, Cage yells, “Fuuuuuck!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t lift it!” admits a frantic Hard Drive.

Cage desperately grabs his friend. “My ears are on fire!” In the process, he inadvertently yanks out one of Hard Drive’s ear-buds.

With one ear now exposed, the inner scream instantly impacts Hard Drive. “Ahhhhhhh!”

But the quizzical Hard Drive is perplexed by his lopsided misery. “Why is one ear hemorrhaging, but not the other?” He decides to pull the bud from his other ear, and instantly doubles over in agony. “Shiiiiit!” He quickly reinserts both buds to find immediate relief from the torture. Hard Drive smiles at the Spotify app streaming his personal, ‘[smarter than yo](#)’ playlist, until he is distracted by the piercing screams coming from an emerging Load and Wrek.

Cage is now completely out of his mind. “Kill me! I can’t take this anymore!”

Hard Drive tries to reassure his agonized friends. “Hang on, dudes.” He frantically digs into their pockets and fishes out their smartphones.

Except for Wrek’s: Hard Drive can’t find it and Wrek is too delirious to respond.

“Shit!” Hard Drive darts off.

Desperate to assist his suffering friends, Hard Drive hurtles over mangled bodies and mounds of rubble on his way to the destroyed remnants of an electronics and novelties store. He crashes in and grabs a framed black-light poster of Van Gogh, minus an ear, and uses it to shatter a

glass display case filled with smartphones. Hard Drive quickly snatches up a handful and dashes out.

Boomer, Face, Wadd, and The Ox slowly rise from the destruction covered in dust and debris. They are also overtaken by the paralyzing inner scream.

“A balloon is exploding in my head!” yells Boomer as he watches Wadd and Face tear at their rupturing ears, and The Ox repeatedly bang his head against the concrete floor.

Confused and delirious, Boomer staggers in circles, screaming, until his keen eye catches a glimpse of Hard Drive synchronizing a handful of phones to his modified phone and transferring dozens of songs in seconds.

Boomer struggles to speak. “T-that insect...i-is onto something.”

Hard Drive returns to his distressed friends and hands each a synced phone with the earbuds and headphones he could grab. “Crank ’em!”

But a tortured Cage doesn’t get it. “I’m done. Kill me! Now!”

“This’ll work,” promises Hard Drive. He quickly inserts a set of buds into Cage’s ears and maxes out the volume.

Cage is instantly calmed. “What the—?”

Hard Drive lights up with excitement as he points to his earbud. “It’s the music!”

Nearly hallucinating from the torment, Boomer & Co notice Hard Drive dish out a cure to his friend.

Boomer throttles Wadd and points. “Get over there and find out what they’re doing!”

A severely afflicted Wadd scrambles close enough to Hard Drive and Cage to discover: they are listening to music. He fights through his increasing agony and darts

back to Boomer. “Music is stopping the pain!”

“Music?” moans a skeptical Face.

“[What song is it?](#)!” cries Boomer.

Still baffled, Cage watches Hard Drive insert earbuds into a tormented Wrek and Load. Both are also calmed by the quieting effect the music has on the inner scream.

Hard Drive explains, “The music stops the screaming in your ears.”

“Wow, that’s crazy,” smiles Wrek.

“Where’s Cage?” asks Load.

Hard Drive points. “Help me! He’s trapped!”

With headphones and earbuds secure, Hard Drive, Wrek, and Load rush to Cage. He’s literally turned blue under the crushing weight. “I can’t breathe!”

Hard Drive and Wrek struggle together, straining to lift the heavy steel joist, but fail.

“Step back, girls,” insists Load as she makes room to work. She gathers every bit of strength she has and grabs the beam.

“No way. You can’t lift that thing,” snaps a skeptical Wrek.

But in a stunning exhibition of willpower and world’s-strongest-woman-style strength, Load single-handedly powers the steel joist off Cage. “Gwaaaaar!”

Cage scampers free and Load drops the immense weight—*BOOM!*

Everyone stares at Load in amazement as Cage tries to gather himself.

Wrek glows with pride. “Wonder Woman ain’t got *nada* on our Load-ess! She’s tits, *ése!*”

Load glares at Wrek.

Red-face, he stammers, “I-I mean...”

Then she grabs her tits and laughs. “Right on! This mama’s pack’n monster milk!”

They all laugh, thankful to be free of the excruciating inner scream and happy to be alive.

Always observant, Hard Drive mutters to himself, “That was more than just adrenaline.”

—

The air-locked steel door of the walk-in freezer slowly creaks open at the collapsed Taco Palace, and out peeks a shocked Kara. “What the—?”

Horrified by the death and destruction that greets her, she crosses herself and recites a prayer. “*Dios te salve, Maria...*”

Several years before, Kara was one of the first people to drive through a nearby small town wiped completely off the map by a colossal, EF 5 tornado. Her first reaction was to help anyone she could. The little girl she found wandering lost and crying in the wreckage will always remember Kara for reuniting her with her very grateful parents.

Kara’s first thought today is the same: “Who can I help?” She cautiously steps out of the protection of the walk-in to search for survivors—and directly into the rocket-like path of a screaming victim.

Kara ducks too late and the human projectile collides violently with her head—*THUNK!* She collapses, unconscious, bleeding from the gash in her skull, while the victim grabs a nearby microwave and jams his head inside, shrieking, “I can’t take the scream!”

Outside, a column of smoke rises slowly over Beaverview Mall as Cage & Co speed off in Wrek's mod convertible, still plugged into their phones.

A grateful Cage turns to Load. "Thanks, I owe you."

"And you know that," scowls Load.

Everyone is surprised by her unexpected change in tone. Cage has always been a bit standoffish with Load, actually a bit standoffish with everyone. But something's changed in him. Cage expressing any emotion is a pretty remarkable feat.

Load recognizes the change in Cage and her scowl quickly turns to a smile. "Friends now?"

Cage smiles back. "Forever."

They watch as an armada of flashing lights and sirens streams past them toward the mall.

Every available emergency vehicle screeches to a stop in front of smoldering Beaverview. The door of the SWAT command truck flies open and out steps the Chief Notell, barking at his lowly lieutenant, "Press conference in twenty!"

"But we have no idea what happened," protests the lieutenant.

Chief Notell is not about to let the mayor grab the headlines again. When the chief foiled a 'homegrown' plot to dirty-bomb the sprawl's major employer, a silicon implant factory, the mayor got out in front first and took all the credit. No way in hell the chief is going to let that happen again.

"This is the big one, kid, and I'm gonna own it," snaps Chief Notell.

Nearby, two police officers sit in their car, casually

watching the spectacle of destruction.

The perplexed officer scratches his head. “You ever seen such a mess?”

“Once...” responds the over-fed officer.

“Where? Iraq? The ‘Stan’?”

“Nope...” The overfed officer takes a bite of his dripping burger. “The day my wife found my leather hood and nipple clips. The stupid cow rolled a propane tank into the house and blew our shit to kingdom come.”

He notices someone crossing the parking lot. “Speaking of stupid cows...”

It’s [Vicki Liegain](#), an ambitious buxom reporter for the local television station whose spread eagle legs have propelled her up the media ladder. With Vicki’s eye firmly set on a network anchor chair, her stock has risen rapidly in the local television news market because she is exceedingly successful at getting a rise out of her superiors—and providing them with very happy endings. Her unapologetic motto is, ‘Success is the result of two simple rhyming words: “suck” and...’

Vicki surveys the mad landscape as she curtly instructs her cameraman to frame the thick column of smoke as her background. She wets her candy-apple lips and pushes up her assets. Then she signals to ‘roll camera’ and goes live, speaking into a hand-held mic.

“This is Vicki Liegain reporting at what looks to be the worst disaster in this area since the water supply was spiked with Viagra. But with state and federal authorities already on their way, only one thing is clear...” She motions to the burning mall. “This was no act of male enhancement.”

Vicki notices Chief Notell approaching a podium

stacked with microphones. She grabs her cameraman and elbows her way to the front of the eagerly gathering press.

The chief clears his throat. “Citizens of this great community, I want to reassure each and every one of you that everything is fully under control. And I promise we will commit every resource that is available to find and prosecute the evil, soulless individuals who perpetrated this heinous act.”

“Terrorists?” interrupts Vicki.

“I’m not prepared—”

“So you have no suspects? No one claiming responsibility?” she insists.

Chief Notell reluctantly responds, “As a matter of fact, we’re processing a set of prints right now from the bomb scare at TS Reely High.”

“High school kids?” asks Vicki. “Isn’t that a stretch, Chief?”

—

A silhouetted man watches the press conference on a television in a dimly lit room. He speaks in a Middle-Eastern accent on the phone. “You really don’t know who did this? What exactly do you know? Yes, I understand.”

The sinister man disconnects and rises into the light—it’s the leader of the Black Mus’Tasche. Smiling, he concludes, “If no one is going to claim responsibility for this beautiful act...”

The leader barges into the family room where his troops are huddled around a big screen TV, panting and drooling as they watch free porn on *Redtube*. He pulls a cord on the wall

and a large Black Mus’Tasche Brigade flag unfurls, blocking the troops’ recreational programming. A chorus of boos and extended middle fingers cascade over the leader as he hands out black ski masks and rubber AK-47s. “Shut up and get into position for our first declaration to the infidels!”

Unfortunately, the bumbling trooper assigned to set up the feed from an internet camera mounted on the wall accidentally turns the camera on, which begins streaming the ridiculous scene live on YouTube.

“Faster, you donkeys! The Black Mus’Tasche must get credit before someone else does!” snaps the leader as he clumsily positions his troops in menacing poses. But then the flag falls down to reveal *Redtube* streaming an old, scaggy porn queen eagerly blowing an entire fire department in Tripoli.

The leader explodes. “You stinking sheep! Can’t you do anything right?!” Until he notices the video is streaming live. “Oh, shit...”

The troops watch, bewildered, as their leader quickly scrolls through the hundreds of comments stacking up on their already viral video:

Go Daily Show!

Turd-orrists...Haha

Jihad porn? LOL!

Now ballistic with rage, the leader roars, full-faced, into the camera, “I will behead all of you!”

—

Two EMTs wander through the carnage at the mall, passing the twisted remains of several victims who exhibited

superhuman strength during their tormented suicidal deaths. All are clutching what's left of their ears and are horribly contorted beyond recognition.

The tall EMT stops and sighs. "Hope there aren't any more of these mutants running around."

The other EMT agrees. "If there are, they'd be better off dead..."

They hear a quiet, low moan coming from the rubble and scramble over a collapsed wall. "We got a live one!" shouts the tall EMT.

It's Kara. She's slowly regaining consciousness under the airborne victim whose head is still inside the microwave—if you can call splattered bits of bone and brain a 'head.'

Kara looks up. "*Madre de Dios...*"

The two EMTs gingerly pull Kara free and load her onto a gurney. They rush Kara to the ambulance, to find Vicki and her cameraman waiting.

Vicki pounces, still broadcasting from the scene. "We were told there were no survivors, but this girl looks to be alive."

"She's the only one," offers the tall EMT.

"Who is she?" presses Vicki.

The EMT shakes his head. "Gag order."

Vicki notices the other EMT using Kara's driver's license to take down her info. She motions to her cameraman to get the shot. He indiscreetly zooms in and grabs a close-up.

"Hey!" The tall EMT shoves his hand over the lens. "Turn that off!"

Vicki puts on her 'I'm cute and innocent' face and grabs

her cameraman. They quickly dash around the corner, where she motions for him to continue rolling. “You saw it here first, ladies and gentlemen: Kara Chavez is the only living survivor.”

Old Man Wadd grins as he watches Vicki’s newscast on his bank of flat screens. “Nice get, Vicki...but if there’s only one survivor.” He hits speed-dial on his speakerphone. The call rings several times. Impatient, he shouts, “Pick up, Pincus! You’d better not be anywhere near that damn mall!”

The old man notices the time and suddenly disconnects. Using his middle finger to inscribe an ‘infinity sign’ in the air, Old Man Wadd triggers a secret panel in the desk to slowly open and reveal a curved glass keyboard. He quickly enters a sequence of numbers, and a secured video link pops up on the center flat screen in front of him. The video link flickers for a moment, then a grainy image comes into view: a large, dimly lit room filled with hundreds of programmers hunched over workstations.

The old man grins ominously as he manipulates the keyboard to zoom into the image. The focus slowly adjusts, revealing that the expressionless programmers are all chained together with thick iron shackles—like slaves.

Checking the time again, he shouts into his speakerphone, “Twelve seconds late! Where is it?!”

—

The enslaved programmers don’t dare look up or respond to the old man sneering down at them from the enormous monitor mounted on the wall.

He roars again, “Answer me!”

Still silent and cowering at his workstation is a young student named Raahi. He is fearful, yes, but intense hate for the man on the monitor blazes in his eyes.

Raahi was fortunate enough to break out of the impoverished life that awaited his friends by cultivating a love for mathematics. Top of his class in systems analytics and programming, he graduated from university expecting offers to flood in from Google and Microsoft. Instead, he received only one, from a shady looking on campus recruiter who promised he would ‘make millions.’ Little did he know that ‘making millions’ meant Raahi would be literally chained to a desk writing millions of lines of code.

Next to Raahi is another student named Zhou. Hands trembling, his terrified eyes dart around the room wildly.

Zhou comes from a rural farming family who sent him to school for a better life, which he was on the path to until all the ‘good’ programmer jobs dried up. Promising himself that he would never end up back on the farm, Zhou was desperate for work, any work. But the day he joined the mile-long line of applicants for the job that put him here is a day he will regret for the rest of his life. Now he would kill to be back on the farm, shoveling pig shit from sunrise to sunset.

Next to Zhou is the lovely but frail Xao Li. Her kind eyes are bewildered by the surrounding madness.

A natural with numbers and logic systems, Xao Li was considered a prodigy and won numerous awards before graduating from university with honors. After many interviews, she eagerly anticipated working for the state’s secret Bureau of Data Mining. But when her father was imprisoned for his antigovernment activities, Xao Li was

branded a ‘conspirator,’ stripped of her awards and degree, and banned from ever working for the country she truly loves.

Xao Li whispers, “Don’t do it, Zhou,” as she watches him with concern.

But Zhou panics. “He said we’re late! We can’t be late!”

“Shut up! You’ll call attention to yourself!” warns Raahi.

The enslaved programmers have seen this movie before. They hug their tables and quickly cover their heads as Raahi tries to restrain a struggling Zhou. “Sit down!”

Old Man Wadd impatiently taps his desk as the balding, bifocaled Indian manager pleads on the flat screen. “Very, very sorry, sir.”

“Must I remind you of the consequences?” cautions the old man.

“Please, sir! Just a bit more time,” begs the manager.

Impatient and unimpressed, the old man punches in a series of codes. “Watch and learn.”

Still fighting, Zhou screams at the security camera peering down from above, “Don’t let him do it!”

Old Man Wadd hits ‘return’ and, without warning, a tremendous bolt of electric current arcs out of Zhou’s workstation and into the top of his head—*ZZZZZT!* Now violently contorting like an insane jack-in-a-box, Zhou nearly breaks his restraints, and almost seems to smile. Then his body inflates like a flesh balloon and in a brilliant flash—*BOOM!*—Zhou explodes into a vapor cloud that splatters everyone with globs of sinew and blood.

A distraught Xao Li covers her now-crimson face. “Noooo—!”

Her terrified cry joins a thousand other hopeless programmers screaming, “Help us!”

But their desperate pleas are useless because the programmers are trapped deep inside a huge, rusting, unmarked oil tanker. A slave code ship that is hopelessly adrift in the open sea.

—

Wrek’s tricked Chevy convertible pulls up outside an imposing, abandoned concrete structure. The stark building looms over Cage & Co like a monstrous bunker.

Cage is very skeptical. “What are we doing here?”

“It’s my dad’s old office,” claims Hard Drive.

Wrek nods. “Safe place to get our shit together, *cabrón*.”

Still weary from the mall explosion, they exit Wrek’s car and Hard Drive escorts them through the overgrown, tangled landscape to an obscured side door hanging off its hinges. Cage & Co swipe away the cobwebs and cautiously enter a dingy, cavernous hallway decorated with faded ‘Strike First’ posters and heroic photos of futuristic weapons.

Cage picks up a piece of torn blueprint from the damp floor. “So, your dad—”

“Designed some of the most lethal weapons known to man,” beams Hard Drive.

“Like the JDAM Bunker Buster?” asks Wrek.

Hard Drive shakes his head. “JDAM is a guidance system, not a bomb. My dad specialized in EMP and tactical nukes.”

“Electromagnetic Pulse?” gasps Wrek.

Even Load is impressed. “Whoa.”

But Cage is more concerned about the hypertoxic nature of the work that was done here. “Didn’t he die of cancer?”

Hard Drive nods. “Brain...”

The four friends stare in awe as they enter a gigantic domed room filled with rusting machines and crisscrossed overhead with steel catwalks, dangling cables, and hanging equipment pods.

Letting the bizarre and murky events of the day finally sink in, Cage gets inspired. “Check it: from ‘Most Wanted’ post. To auditory toast. And now to cancer host.”

Everyone laughs nervously, happy to be able to finally relax, safe and sound, in a malignant disease incubator.

Wandering further, Cage & Co discover a huge circular pit that descends at least twenty levels below, cluttered with more catwalks and equipment pods.

Load grins. “Way cool.”

They cross a narrow steel bridge to a platform suspended in the middle of the vast space, which is ringed with large monitors and control consoles.

Wrek grins even bigger. “I’d trade my *cojones* to make all this shit work.” He approaches the center of the platform where four robotic chairs hang suspended in the air by telescoping mechanical arms. Wrek is so excited he can hardly contain himself. He grabs his crotch. “I’m gonna blow a load, *ése!*”

“You gotta find the piston before lubricating it!” teases Load.

“Better start whack’n, Jack, ’cause I’m about to light this shit up,” promises Hard Drive. “Assume your

positions!”

Cage, Hard Drive, and Wrek each jump into a chair—leaving obviously too-big-to-fit Load stranded.

“Hey! Don’t you dare,” she huffs.

The three reluctantly dismount. Then struggle valiantly to get her in a chair, pushing and pulling her prodigious amounts of flesh and ass—until, with one final, desperate effort, they push with all their combined strength and successfully compress every gorgeous fold into the seat.

Load looks uncomfortably scrunched but couldn’t be happier. “Rock da’ house!”

With everybody set in their chairs, Cage and friends start frantically yanking on joysticks and punching buttons. But nothing happens.

Wrek starts turning blue. “*¡Pinche madre con!*”

Then Hard Drive sees something. “Hang on.” He jumps out and pulls a lever under the console marked ‘Auxiliary Power.’ And the chairs lurch into action. *CLUNK!*

Cage & Co manipulate the joysticks to catapult the chairs up, then down, then all around the strange but wondrously vast space, laughing and screaming like kids on a high velocity carnival thrill ride.

—

With headphones affixed to their ears, Boomer & Co wander aimlessly, silhouetted by the gray halo of the setting sun. They pass a towering, leafless oak tree before ascending a ghostly hill cluttered with dilapidated trailer homes.

Boomer & Co have wandered into the town’s no-man’s

land below a giant interstate cloverleaf—the ‘trailer park from hell,’ where pimps, whores, alcoholics, and drug addicts eke out a freakish existence amongst burned-out cars, mounds of trash, and cities of rats.

Still dazed from the events at the mall, Boomer points as he smirks. “Home sweet home...”

The others follow his gaze to what appears to be the best kept unit in a rotting landscape of collapsing and disfigured mobile homes.

“Dude, you’re joking,” scoffs Face.

“I wanna go home,” whines Wadd as he pulls out his phone.

But a disapproving Boomer shakes his head.

Boomer knows his mother will never believe what’s happened. His new hearing affliction will make school and sports impossible, branding Boomer a ‘disgraceful failure’ and causing his mother to disown him. But Boomer is sick of her drug-addicted shit anyway. It’s clear to him that a new beginning awaits them here.

He confiscates everyone’s phone as he lays down the law. “Suck it up, dawgs. Nobody’s go’n nowhere.”

—

Still cranking music in their smartphones, Cage & Co are trying to relax in their weapons factory new digs while discussing what happened at the mall.

“That was fucked up. Who would blow up a rathole like Beaverview?” wonders Wrek.

Load laughs. “Maybe now we’ll finally get a Victoria’s Secret.” Everyone looks at Load incredulously. She just

smiles, “All ’bout big and sexy, boys.”

Cage pipes up, “The only secret, girl, is what comes after XXXL.”

They all laugh, except Hard Drive. “The inner scream—that’s the mystery.”

“And why the music stopped it,” adds Cage.

Wrek looks very concerned. “You think the scream is still there?”

Hard Drive reaches for his earbud. “One way to find out...”

“No! Don’t do it!” plead his friends.

Hard Drive doesn’t heed their warning and he slowly removes his ear-buds to check the effect. Then convulses in shock and lets out a terrifying yell: “Ahhhhhhhh!”

His panicked friends crash into each other rushing to re-insert his buds.

But Hard Drive just smiles. “It’s gone.”

Cage doesn’t buy it. “Bullshit.”

“Believe me, bro.”

Cage slowly pulls his earphones, and breathes a sigh of relief. “Ding dong, da’ agonizing shit is gone!”

Wrek and Load slowly, cautiously, pull their buds.

Load sighs with relief, “Finally.”

Wrek joins her. “Thank the Almighty.”

Exhausted, they all collapse in the irradiated rubble of their new crib.

—

Boomer & Co confidently approach the mobile home they picked out and burst in without knocking. Once inside, the

motley-looking gang quickly searches for inhabitants, only to find a crusty old woman with a crooked smile sitting quietly in a recliner watching TV.

A menacing Boomer grins. “Okay, Grandma, time to meet your date for assisted living.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Get your shit and get out, you old puss!” spews Wadd.

The old woman’s expression does not change.

Face steps up. “Yo, bitch! You deaf?!” He grabs her arm, and she topples out of the chair like a ragdoll. They all back off immediately.

Face kicks her in the butt—still no movement. “She’s dust.”

Wadd begins to freak. “I’m outta here!”

He tries to bolt, but Boomer collars him, laughing. “No one gives a shit about this place. So we rule!” He motions to The Ox. “Ditch the bitch.”

Face takes up the chant and Wadd joins in. “Ditch the bitch! Ditch the bitch!”

The Ox grins as he kicks the door off its hinges, hoists the old woman up by the neck like a javelin, and effortlessly tosses her over the towering oak tree. The crusty old woman sails like a flying mannequin over the tree and crashes through the roof of a dilapidated trailer at the far end of the lot. She lands in the middle of a circle of dazed heroin shooters—and they don’t even look up.

Boomer is clearly impressed. “Nice toss, Oxman.”

“How’d he do that?” wonders Face as he scratches his head.

Boomer looks strangely at Face. “What’s up with your arm?”

Face looks back at Boomer and laughs. “Yo ‘Boomerang.’ You tell me.”

A curiously amused Boomer and Face begin to compare each other’s arms. Boomer’s is slowly transforming into a real-life version of his massively sleek boomerang from the video game, while Face’s arm is mutating into the muscular, gnashing teeth of a snarling pit bull.

“Oh, shit!” they gasp together.

Face smiles as he raises his impressive, new canine arm.

“Looks like half a chubby with fangs!” proclaims Boomer, laughing.

But the pit bull looks extremely displeased, as if it actually understands.

Consoling the mutt, Face pets him with his other hand. “Nobody’s gonna think you’re a half chub when they’re bleeding out between your jaws.”

“That’s ‘Mr.’ Half Chub, motherfuckers,” growls the pit bull.

Stunned silent, Boomer & Co just stare, not knowing how to respond to Face’s new talking dog arm.

“And the chicks are gonna lick me like a lollypop,” continues Mr. Half Chub.

Then it begins to yelp and howl like an alpha wolf in heat. Everyone eagerly joins Mr. Half Chub in creating an unholy chorus of terrifying proportions that reverberates through every trailer in the park.

—

Birds cough up phlegm as grey streaks of sunrise highlight the haze enveloping the weapons factory.



(Note: artwork not yet touched by Bill Sienkiewicz)

Inside, Cage awakes first to notice that his hands are covered in a crystalline sheen. “Huh?” He grabs a chair to stand, but the chair instantly freezes into solid ice. “Whoa! Everybody wake up!”

Startled out of their sleep, his friends quickly rise to discover that they have all noticeably transformed.

Most markedly altered is Hard Drive, whose cranium has begun to enlarge into a weird, distorted shape. He curiously feels the contours of his new head. “Double whoa...”



Load is sporting new girth, only now from a colossal addition of muscle mass.

Even Wrek's eyes are more pronounced. He gets dizzy trying to adjust to the multiple layers of lenses developing in his pupils, while his hands slowly transform into double-jointed tool sets.

Wrek is concerned. "What's happening to us?"

"I don't know, but I like it!" boasts Load as she flexes.

The always-analytical Hard Drive concludes with a smile, "It's a dream come true—we are becoming avatars."



The Infections also continue to transform into their visibly disturbing virtual reality personas. Boomer is now excessively bulked up, his right arm mutating into a massive boomerang.

Mr. Half Chub is even more snarling than the night before. The Ox has nearly completed his war-pig transformation, while teams of worms bore through Wadd's poisonous, lizardlike skin.

Boomer looks oddly at Face and Wadd and cackles with pride. "We're like the characters we imagined in the game...only for real!"



(Note: artwork not yet touched by Bill Sienkiewicz)

Face grins. “I’m love’n me!”

Mr. Half Chub affectionately licks his cheek.

Wadd strikes a slithery pose. “Yeah. I feel perfectly toxic.”

The Ox snorts. “We’re unstoppable!”

Boomer prances around the trailer like a rooster on ‘roids. “True Terminal Infections!”



(Note: artwork not yet touched by Bill Sienkiewicz)

Cage and his friends are now fully in awe of their completed transformations. They wonder aloud how all this will affect their lives.

Wrek smiles. “Think of the sick vehicles I can build.”

“And the impossible mathematical theories I can solve.”
Hard Drive scratches his over-sized, exposed cerebrum.

“Think of the people we could help,” remarks Load.

Cage is the least impressed with his new makeover. Turning everything to ice was perfect for him in the game, but in the real world, it’s a living nightmare. He shakes his head. “I’m not convinced this is a good thing. Somebody tell

me what the hell happened yesterday.”

Hard Drive scrounges through the space until he discovers an old flat screen TV that still works. He turns it on to see Vicki Liegain reporting from the scene.

“With the final death toll from yesterday’s event unknown and still no explanation from the police as to exactly what happened, the one thing we do know is that four students from TS Reely High are missing.”

The yearbook photos of Boomer & Co flash across the screen with their real names: Ira Wainsworth Wadd, Tad Williby Schmel, Heronimus Amherst Lyke, and Windsor Braydon Phish.

Desperate for a little comic relief, Cage & Co nearly fall on the floor laughing.

Cage covers his nose. “Wadd smells like fish!”

Load licks her chops. “Get me a ‘Wadd Phish’ man-wich at Mickey D’s!”

Vicki listens to the feed coming into her earpiece. “We have new information that’s just come in: apparently, the state police have issued a red terror level terrorist alert for the now-notorious gang from TS Reely High known as the ‘Sprawl Lords.’”

Cage & Co look at each other in stunned amazement.

“They’re pin’n that shit on us?” gasps Wrek.

“I’m not the only one who stinks now,” declares Load.

Vicki goes on to claim, “The world is waiting to speak to the only known survivor, Kara Chavez. Who we know, from our exclusive investigation, is the girlfriend of the group’s leader, Cage Panthera.”

Everyone looks at Cage.

“Kara was working yesterday?” screeches Load.

Cage is completely flabbergasted. “Jesus. I thought she took the day off.” He pulls out his smartphone and quickly hammers out a text to Kara: *U OK??* His friends eagerly watch as Cage waits patiently for a response.

But he gets nothing back.

Boomer & Co are also watching Vicki’s report on the old lady’s TV.

Face laughs. “They think the ‘Sprawl Douches’ did it?”

“Not possible. They wouldn’t blow their own shit up,” proclaims Wrek.

Then The Ox grunts out, “Kara...lives.”

Boomer grins as he rotates his newfound boomerang arm. “Forget Kara and her Douche Boys—it’s time to claim the hood.”

A pumped Boomer leads his merry band of mutants out of the trailer, where they are immediately surrounded by the rubble dwellers of the park. These are the misfits, social castoffs, and drug-dealing refugees of the sprawl. They rob and infect the wasteland from here.

The rubble dwellers curiously circle Boomer & Co, snickering as they point.

“What you freaks on?” coughs the smoking dweller.

“Halloweeny smack?” wonders the skanky dweller.

The dwellers all laugh—until the park’s tatted, badass biker leader steps up. “Who the fuck are you dipshits?”

In the past, Boomer’s first response when facing an obviously twisted, ex-con psychopath would have been to hide behind The Ox’s awesome powers of intimidation. But not today—Boomer seems to yawn as he casually responds, “Your imminent doom.”

The biker leader is completely dumbfounded; his eyes

light up as he laughs. And the dwellers eagerly join.

Failing to see what is so funny, Boomer very purposely disconnects his boomerang arm—but the bike leader unexpectedly snatches it away. “Take a look at this shit!” He spins it in the air as a clumsy one-armed Boomer tries to grab it back.

“What does it do?” asks the biker leader.

Boomer grins, suddenly realizing how to resolve the situation. “Give it a toss and find out.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, hell yeah...”

The dwellers scream, “Throw it!”

The now-excited biker leader winds up and heaves Boomer’s boomerang arm into the air as hard as he can.

The dwellers cheer.

The grinning biker leader and rubble dwellers watch in amazement as Boomer’s arm arcs toward a distant high-voltage tower, then rounds the tower for its return.

Boomer begins to tremble and sweat as he concentrates the very essence of his power to willfully control the boomerang’s speed and target. The enormous spinning arm twirls ferociously back toward them blindingly fast and without warning—*SHWICK!*—decapitates the biker leader in a flash, leaving his headless body to drop like a stone.

The blood-splattered dwellers stand utterly speechless.

So does Boomer. What the hell just happened? How could he have controlled such an awesome extension of his own being? Simultaneously confused by the death he’s apparently caused, while also being elated by his new power, a deeply perplexed Boomer steps back to gather his thoughts: He’s just killed someone. Taken a life. Now what?

Wadd gloats, “Meet the new boss, shitheads.”

Still reeling from a flood of emotions, Boomer realizes he’s got to seize the moment or lose everything. He fumbles to reattach his arm, puts his game face back on, and confidently announces to the crowd: “We are the Terminal Infections!”

“Objections?” barks The Ox.

Not a peep.

Then two opportunistic teen runaway girls branding themselves as ‘2-4-1’ push their way through the crowd, shouting, “Right on! We got infections too!” These two girls have tag teamed badass dudes before, but this guy is going to be truly amazing. They trade a gob of spit as they take an enamored Boomer by the arm.

“Partay time,” announces 2-4-1.

A stunned Wadd, Face, and The Ox watch the girls escort Boomer to their trailer.

“What about us?” complains Wadd.

Three other girls sashay up to answer his call. The one in front is a ghostfaced meth casualty known as Goth Girl. The other is the junk-food Hoarding Blob sweating grease. And the third is the huge-boobed Cosmetic Surgery Experiment gone bad.

Hoarding Blob winks. “Can you say crystal orgy?”

Wadd, Face, and The Ox immediately light up and waltz off with the hideous casualties of the sprawl.

—

Vicki Liegain sits in her car outside the local hospital. She is hunched over her mobile, scrolling through Kara’s

Facebook page. “Come on, Kara. Give me something good.” Finally stumbling on some juicy info, she smiles. “FB—a reporter’s dream.”

She quickly packs up and exits. Vicki slinks through an unlocked rear exit and quietly scurries down the hall until she finds a hospital changing room. She emerges dressed in a nurse’s outfit that is more than a few sizes too small, leaving her assets busting out all over. Vicki grabs a diagnostic chart off a nearby patient’s gurney and approaches the nurses’ station, shielding her face.

She addresses the desk nurse. “Bloodwork on Chavez. Room?”

“Thirty-two,” responds the desk nurse without looking.

A smirking Vicki enters room 32 squirming in her too-tight dress. “This is going to be easier than stealing money from the homeless.”

She stops cold: there’s a man in a black suit standing over an unconscious Kara.

Quickly back in character, Vicki taps her watch in impatient nurse mode. “Time’s up. She’s scheduled for—”

The man turns. He is a bald, white-collared minister. He motions for quiet. “I was just saying a prayer.”

Vicki is taken aback. “Oh, excuse me, sorry.”

“Just another minute, please.”

The minister calmly folds his hands, waiting for Vicki to exit.

“Of course...I’ll be just outside.” Vicki heads for the door.

An impatient Vicki scans the hallway, hoping no one will notice her. “Hurry up.”

“Nurse! Give me a hand!” shouts a nearby doctor

hovering over his patient.

Vicki hesitantly approaches the doctor to find his patient face down, holding his groin, suffering from crippling constipation.

“This man needs an emergency colonic!” shouts the doctor.

Vicki cringes. “Colon-o-what?”

The now much more sinister-looking minister keeps one eye on the door as he connects a mini-USB stick to Kara’s phone. He quickly copies the data, then plugs the mini-USB into his smartphone.

Vicki nearly hurls as she rubs her eyes, trying to blot out the disgusting image of the colonic now etched into her retina. Trying to gather herself, she realizes her too-tight dress is splattered brown. “My God! Get your shit together, girl!” Resolved to carry on, she hurries back towards Kara’s room, only to see the bald minister dart down the corridor, rip off his white collar, and dump it in the trash.

Vicki shakes her head. “That’s no minister.”

And then what...?