

AN AWARD-WINNING SHORT STORY BY SANDY BUTCHERS

The background of the cover features a vibrant, orange-hued sunset or sunrise over a futuristic cityscape. The city is filled with tall, dark buildings, some of which are illuminated from within, creating a warm glow. In the foreground, a woman's silhouette is visible on the right side, looking out over the city. The overall atmosphere is one of mystery and high-tech urban life.

***ON BITS
BYTES
& BRAWLERS***

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On Bits, Bytes & Brawlers
By Sandy Butchers

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Cover, Illustrations, Stories & Layout by Sandy Butchers.

1st Edition

FOREWORD



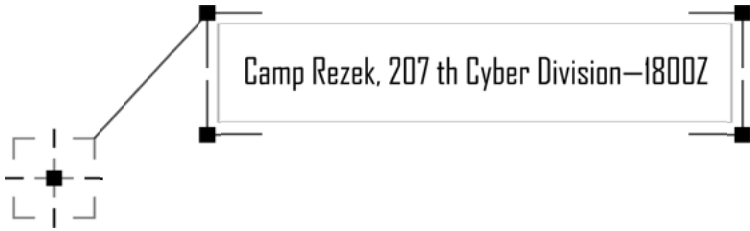
Ever since I started writing and working on The Singularian Grimoire Anthologies, everything about my life got this cyberpunk/weird post-apocalyptic edge ot it. From writing a full series of more than 300 story entries and 200+ illustrations, to stand-alone short stories and cinematic illustrations; the theme has been standing strong for more than three years now. I've met some amazong people on the way and was honored to work on an amazing collaboration project with M.K. Gibson, all with a deep focus on cyberpunk, grit, and grunge.

In July 2022, I wrote a short story called "*On Bits, Bytes & Brawlers*", and submitted it to L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future* contest. I didn't really expect much; I had submitted stories before and never really gotten anything out of it. But this time? Well... this time I actually won a freaking award!

To this day, li struggle to fathom what happened, as winning a prize in *The Writers of the Future* kind of feels like winning an Oscar... or the nearest thing to that. And you know what's even better? I am ready to share it with you all.

Thank you and happy reading!

Sandy Butchers



Her eyes were covered in a silver shimmer as lines of code and passwords scrolled past like data glistening behind tiny computer screens.

“Disgusting.” Major Torres’s voice sounded like a glitched distortion to Jana’s ears.

She found his face even less amiable with his wrinkled nose and his upper lip curled in distaste while he watched her process the string of incoming feeds. The data in her eyes faded when she blinked. “You were saying, Sir?” she asked. She knew her indifference about his opinion of her would piss him off even more. It was her way of reminding him who and what she was; Special Operative Bartíkova of SAD, the Segregated Augmentation Division. To Torres, though, she knew she was little more than a dog with a microchip shoved into her brain.

“Report,” Torres barked. He straightened and folded his hands together behind his back, pushing his chest forward.

Bartíkova stretched, using her thin, pale fingers to massage her neck. “I feel a little strained at the moment, Sir. Could I have some water?” Her face would have made a pretty feature if it hadn’t been framed by thin scars and clusters of tiny LED’s. She smiled as she watched Major

Torres's jaw grind.

The meaning of cyber warfare had changed since the introduction of people like Jana Bartikova. The successful integration of neural implants, data transmitters, and receivers within the human cerebral cortex had led to an entire breed of people who could hack or even blow up computers with the blink of an eye. It had become the reason why people like Torres felt a constant need to remind her she was a disgrace to humanity, a concoction of mad sciences given life by the grace of corporate gods.

Torres clicked his flask from his belt and held it out in front of him. He didn't bother to hold back a wicked smile as he waited for Jana to reach, only to drop it the second before she could take it. "Oops. Sitrep, robocop! Back in the day, my computer wasn't so goddamn demanding. Food, water, what's next? A bed with golden sheets?" His eyes flared up in an outburst of rage. "You don't make demands. You come in, you do your job, and you walk back out, is that clear?"

Despite the anger heating up her cerebral implants, Jana chuckled. The LED's inside her right temple flickered with a rage she failed to conceal, but she maintained her calm to prevent herself from finding the nearest satellite phone and blowing it up in his face. "With all due respect, Sir, next time you call me robocop again to my face, I want you to think about the irony in my ability to blow your head clean off, given that the army has implanted a GPS transmitter in the back of your neck. You call me a dog with a chip, while all I need to do is find the frequency to yours." Her voice was the sound of velvet brushing

against a bed of feathers. She had enough of his constant belittling. As if the anti-augmentation riots outside the base weren't enough yet.

Torres balled his fists and started towards her but before he'd taken two steps, Jana closed her eyes and synced with every chipset she could feel in the room.

Major Torres froze, clutching his hand around his neck. Bartíkova's eyes glitched and for a brief second, she considered doing it; finding that resonance frequency and letting it rip. But she didn't. Instead, she let him go and turned her gaze to the man watching them from the opening of the field tent. He folded his arms in front of his chest.

"General Krizeski," Jana hummed.

"I see my timing is impeccable," the man walking past the flap that separated them from the outside world answered. "Everything alright in here?" His gaze lingered on the side of Bartíkova's face. Shaking his head in a sober, dismissive gesture, he turned to Torres.

Torres's lips twitched. "Everything is just fine, Sir," he grumbled as he came to attention. His fists were clenched and his chin raised high, but his attitude needed no body language to shine through.

"Really?" Krizeski grinned. For a fraction of a second, Jana thought she could see a faint glow emitting from his neural implant, fading in and out through his buzz cut hair. "Because for a moment there, I thought you and Bartíkova were having an argument—again." He sighed deeply and waved his hand dismissively. "At ease."

Torres cleared his throat and loosened his stance. "She

did not obey my order, Sir.”

Krizeski nodded his head gravely as he turned to Jana. “Have you considered asking her nicely?”

“What?” the Major fumed. “If I call for a sitrep, then that’s what she will damn well give me!”

Again, Krizeski nodded.

“What’s your name and rank, soldier?” Krizeski’s eyes flared, shifting into orbs of pale, yellow light, as Jana could feel him sync with the radios around her. He was going to make everyone on the base listen to this, she sensed it. “State your name and rank,” he repeated, the tone of his voice did not broker any room for argument.

Torres straightened up and saluted. “Major William Torres of the 207th Cyber Division, Sir.”

“That’s right,” Krizeski purred, keeping all the frequencies open. “And what’s Ms. Bartíkova’s rank?”

Torres’s shoulders shivered. “Special Operative Jana Bartíkova, specialist data harvester first-class, of the SAD, Sir.”

“Again you are correct. Let me repeat my question, Major Torres,” Krizeski continued, putting a sharp emphasis on his rank. “Have you considered asking Special Operative Bartíkova politely?”

“No, Sir.”

“Well?” The general waved his hand at Jana in a gesture for him to get started. The tension in the room was sharp enough for Jana to cut her finger if she pointed it in the wrong direction.

Torres’s face twisted in anger but he refused to make a fool out of himself on the open radio comms. “Please

tell me what you saw, Special Operative Bartíkova,” he said and Jana smiled. It was enough for Krezeski to feel confident about leaving them alone. He patted his hand against the Major’s chest and flashed him a wicked smirk. The radios died and his transmission ceased. Casting a quick glance over his shoulder back at Jana, he hummed quietly before he left. “Play nice.”

Bartíkova nodded and mirrored Torres’s image by folding her hands behind her back. Something in her right eye shimmered briefly and in response, the screens around the room lit up and flickered to life. Images and data feeds from nearby drones were broadcasted onto the main screen at the center, whereas maps, wireframe replicas of facilities, and mugshots from several notorious hackers were projected on the others. “I discovered an insurgent data farm near the southeast ridge of our basecamp,” she started and turned her gaze to the center. “Mobile server stacks, excessive EMP spikes, radio traffic, you name it. If these guerillas were planning to keep the farm a secret, they’ve been doing a piss-poor job at it, Sir.”

Torres studied the images. “Their objective?” he asked blankly, his voice suddenly rid of emotion as things had turned to pure business now.

Jana flicked through the images in her mind, her neural uplink feeding the data straight onto the screens. Most hackers she had encountered over her years of serving in the SAD had been decent enough to hide their tracks. They had found ways to bypass neural transmitters well enough to at least delay them. But Jana had found a way

around their firewalls, gleaning information from the utter lack of input. Nothing was ever that clean. If something was wiped so thoroughly, the absence of data was, in fact, evidence in itself. She considered those voids scars and she could taste them in the back of her mouth; a metallic tingle prickling her tongue. “I’m not sure. Usually, they are not this obvious.”

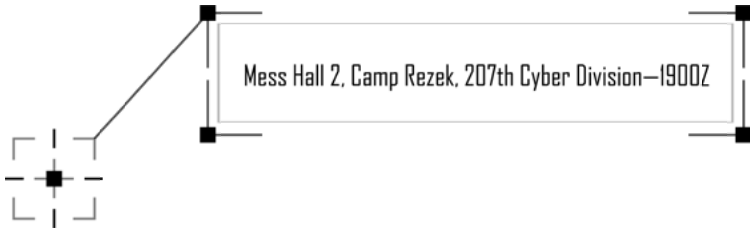
“Any idea who they are?”

Jana shook her head and took a couple of paces toward the screen with the hacker mugshots. “Could be any of the cyber terrorist factions. *Slingshot*, *Earth First*, *Prometheus*, they are all slick enough to tap into emergency broadcast frequencies to propagate the slaughter of anyone with neural implants.”

“What do you suggest?” Only now did Torres turn to look at her, once again frowning at the tiny lights flickering inside her face, indicating she was in full sync with the room.

“We already have enough hatemongers walking around the parameter.” Jana cast a fierce glare at Torres from the corner of her sight. “I suggest you get a team out there to inquire and roundup every idiot stupid enough to work in the open like that, Sir.”

Torres smirked. “Finally something useful coming out of your mouth.” Half-turning, he cast a final glance at the central screen, following the aerial drone feed above the targeted site. “You just gave yourself the order. Prep for breach and clear at first light.”



Jana dunked herself onto the couch in the corner of the rec room and popped the lid of a soda can. The television in the corner flickered at the broadcast of a cyber insurgence claimed by Prometheus in a city nearby. Agitated by the constant feed of hate against the SAD, she snatched the remote from the table and turned it off.

“What are you doing?” one of the men at her side asked, his face wrinkled as though he’d found a big pile of steaming dog shit sticking to his boot.

With a raspy slurp, she emptied the can halfway and suppressed the deep rumble bubbling up her throat. “What does it look like?” she retorted. “I take it you monkeys are the squad I’m deployed with tomorrow, yeah?”

“Well, fuck,” the man answered, “seven years, and I still can’t get used to computers talking back to me.”

“You mean seven years and you still haven’t found the intelligence to understand people like me are not computers?” *Am I seriously explaining how my Division works again?* She mused on the idea of educating them, but then reminded herself it was because of simpletons like them her people were now sold through Private Divisions as ‘*bomb-sniffers*’ and glorified anti-hacker

agents. “Listen. I’m having a soda before I start my prep for the morning. Let me sit here for a while, and I’m sure you’ll be right as rain when I leave.”

“We all heard the trick you pulled on Torres. Do you honestly think there aren’t going to be any consequences?” The woman across from Jana leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She twisted her bowie-knife between her hands, resting the tip of it on one finger as she spun the handle in the other.

“Actually, I had little to do with that. I’m sure you all heard it was General Krizeski.” Another sip sent a slow, cold sensation down her throat, reminding her of how the cooling liquids in her brain sometimes cycled through her head to flush out residual heat. “Speaking of the devil,” she smiled when Krizeski walked in. The whole room jumped to their feet to stand at attention until they were ordered to resume as they were. Jana loved how, as a SAD agent, she was exempt from the ritual and it made her twisted feeling of watching dogs and their masters even stronger.

Krizeski sat down and stretched his arms. Giving the couch a proper man-spread, he allowed himself to sink into the cushions as he dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Ten minutes,” he grunted. “Bring in the entire SAD together, allow them to link their minds into one, long network string, and we’d clear any data farm within ten minutes.”

“That’s unlikely,” Jana answered, ignoring the others, happy to finally land on a subject worthy of her time. “You know the regulations better than I do, Sir; no internal

data linking between field operatives.”

Krizeski raised his head slightly and fixated on her for a brief second as his neural network pinged hers. “That’s a regulation the U.S. Army was too quick to sign. I don’t recall the actual Division to put that pen to paper, though.” When a pale, blue light blinked twice behind his iris and Jana’s internal LED’s reciprocated the command line, the surrounding soldiers burst into curses and complaints.

“That’s just gross,” some muttered.

“Fuckin’ cyborgs,” others commented.

“Dude, it’s like watching robot porn,” a third complained.

The mess hall was quick to empty itself as the malcontent spread like the stink of microwaved fish.

Jana chuckled. A ping was nothing weird. It was a mere gesture SAD operatives had adapted to let each other know they were still active and out there. “You’re right,” she answered. “But if not for the Division, we would have been left in the streets to die. Hell, those anti-augmentation rebellions would’ve gone full, torch-and-pitchfork on us before that.”

“Jesus, Bartikova, what happened to you being the smart-ass and me doing the lecturing?” Krizeski retorted without any real intent to his words. “Be honest with me, though, would you have set off that GPS transmitter if I hadn’t intervened today?”

“Of course not. You know it’s forbidden to use data spikes to harm other humans.” Jana raised an eyebrow.

“Then what’s the point of hiring people like us if we can’t use all of our skills? I mean, what are we, bomb

detectors with a heartbeat? They have rats for that, you know.”

“Well, at least it’s good to know we are worth more than rats,” Jana chuckled. “I get it though, if we’d be allowed to sync with each other, things would be a lot easier. Even twenty of us could take down a city the size of Boston in a matter of minutes. Take out their power grid, turn their own surveillance against them, send in a bunch of stealths, and watch the entire place crawl back into the middle ages. It’s pretty obvious that’s why we’re being feared. I mean, how would you feel about a weapon that doesn’t unquestionably obey commands?”

Krizeski sighed and turned to drape himself over the couch he sat on. “Ten minutes,” he repeated, “ten glorious, fucking minutes.”

Jana chuckled and finished her drink. “I’m gonna go prep for tomorrow and get some sleep before we leave. You running with us?”

“Oh yeah,” Krizeski answered, eyeing her. “You won’t get rid of me that easily.”



About an hour before dawn, Jana found herself walking ahead of the convoy of armored vehicles, following the main road towards the illegal data farm she had located the day before. Most of the houses she passed weren't more than ramshackled rubble, bombed and ravaged in '28, which left the small town as nothing more than a scar on the face of the desert. Using the surveillance cameras to look ahead, Jana tapped into the feed of a nearby drone sent out from enemy territory. Escorting the convoy up to the ridge of the hillside without getting noticed, turned out to be a walk in the park.

About thirty minutes in, she paused; the LED's on the side of her face flashed on and off like traffic lights, trailing up toward her neural implants shooting into overdrive. "Eyes up," she said as she tuned in to her own radiofrequency. "Two o'clock, about half a klick past the concrete ruin on the right. They're using sat-dishes to disorient GPS and neuro-comm systems."

"Perfect," Krizeski, positioned on the last humvee of the convoy, answered over the radio. "Let's make quick work of this."

Jana grunted softly as she felt an EMP-pulse wreak havoc through her internal direction systems. It hit

her like a strike of lightning, deep-frying her chipsets. Disoriented and forcing her internal data streams to bypass affected circuits, the infantry behind her took over. In a wave of clarity, as her system rerouted and cycled through another boot sequence, another signal came in. This one, however, she managed to dodge, shielding herself from the EMP by shutting off all her comms before the hit. “There!” She yelled, pointing. “On the left. They are moving!”

“*Damn it, Bartíkova, are you alright?*” Krizeski crackled over the secured channel in her internal comm. Jana pinged him, for a moment, struggling to hold back the urge to throw out an instant uplink to his neural network and make quick work of the job. But the consequences of facing a disassembly committee—or Division Scrap Maker as it was called in operative language—were enough to stop her from doing it.

The convoy moved fast. The turrets on top of the humvees spat out bullets in streams of white and orange fire, as another EMP wave blasted through all of the open channels. Jana stumbled and fell, and before she knew it, the convoy rushed past her and followed the enemy’s lead over the ridge.

“No, wait!” she yelled, but the roaring engines were too loud. Instinctively, she tried to search for the sat-comms within the vehicles, but the void of data signals reminded her that the 207th had ordered only data-less vehicles for the field, exactly for this reason. “Shit!” Find Krizeski, you moron. She pinged him, but the signal was not reciprocated.

Shifting through the open frequencies, Bartíkova searched for anything that would allow her to get in touch with the convoy. A couple of urgent messages crackled over the radio but it was impossible to make out any words. Gunfire sounded, the thundering of the belt-fed turrets now joined with the clattering of M4 carbines and M17 Sig Sauer sidearms firing at close range. Covered by the morning gloom, the firefight intensified beyond the line of vision. Even the drones in the sky couldn't compute their data into separate images in the growing chaos. Warmth was spreading everywhere. Some of it moved across the field of the data farm, some of it scattered across the ground like yellow paint in the IR-view of the cameras. Jana gasped when she realized the splashes were fresh, warm blood splattering against the hot, rocky soil.

"Krizeski, come in," Jana cried over her comm. The sudden silence ripped a hole in her heart. "Terrance!" A deep resonance pushed against the back of her mind. It was a ping, but different, heavier. This was an instant, neural uplink, a connection that had been forbidden by law. Jana closed her eyes and followed the signal, attuning her own frequencies until she could feel a low voice hum inside her head. Regulations on internal network strings be damned.

"Bartíkova, you there?" Krizeski's voice rang through her synaptic CPU.

"Yes. yes, I'm here," Jana answered.

"Damn, that must have been the first time you called me by name, soldier," he joked.

Asshole, Jana thought. *“Are you alright?”*

“Can’t really talk right now, they’ll find me if I so much as move or make a sound.”

“Where are you?”

“Right where you directed us to go. Jana, this place is a massacre.” Something changed in Krizeski’s tone. His words darkened. *“The good news is, they are making a piss-poor attempt at hacking into the national security mainframes. If you can find a data tap, it won’t take long to tear it down. Their firewall is like cellophane.”*

Jana frowned. If this was the good news, was he suggesting there was bad news, too?

“The bad news is that this is a Prometheus insurgency. They wanted us to come here, they welcomed us with open arms.” The uplink glitched and Jana grabbed her head as the sensation of a hot needle sliding through her brain ran through her implants. Another EMP surge wreaked havoc inside of her. If this was Prometheus, it was only a matter of time before every SAD agent in the region would be rounded up and taken apart to rip their chipsets from their brains.

“They are...”

The transmission died. *“They are what?”* Jana pushed but there was no response. *“Terrance?”* Nothing. Imagining him splayed on a table with a drill in his head tied knots in the pit of her stomach. As if swept up by a storm raging through the center of her being, Bartíkova gathered her wits and ran; not for shelter, nor to get back to base, all she needed was to get close enough to take over the radio signals in and around Rezek. “All ground

units, we need support along the southeast hillside,” she prompted when she could feel the sat-comms fall in line with her receivers.

Within seconds, an incoming beacon crackled in Bartíkova’s ears. “*Are you out of your mind, abusing the radio comms like that?*” The voice was angry.

Jana gritted her teeth, annoyed by how the first thing thrown at her was about her skills rather than the reason behind her contacting the base through emergency channels. “We got a squad under fire, asshole!” she snapped. “Send reinforcements, General Krizeski is out there and he’s trapped inside *Prometheus* territory. We lose him, you lose your job. Hell, you’ll lose a lot more if you don’t send help!” She sent a quick power surge through the radios. The deafening screech she could hear from where she stood about a mile away from the camp, was enough to put some weight into her threat.

A fully armed convoy of humvees pulled up to where she stood in the middle of the road. “Damn you, Bartíkova, if this is some sick joke—” the Commander-of-Convoy answered.

“Pull up your wrist office,” Jana interrupted.

“I swear to God...”

“Pull up your goddamn wrist office!” Jana screamed as she watched the soldier fumble. With a quick blink of her eyes, she transmitted data feeds from the drone over the hill onto the foldable screen in the soldier’s sleeve. “You see that? That’s blood, you son of a bitch.”

The soldier looked at the screen. “Are there any survivors?”

“Krizeski is out there, I haven’t heard back from any of the others.”

“Well, screw this then,” barked the soldier, “we’re not compromising the base for the sake of one SAD freak.”

Jana grabbed the man by his collar and shook him. “To hell with you!” she roared, “if that wasn’t an anti-augmentation insurgence, you’d be rushing that place like a battering ram through glass doors. Get your shit together and do what you’re here for; round up any cyber terrorists, and find the general while you’re at it!” Releasing his collar, convinced her little speech was enough to change his mind, she grasped the rollbar of the pick-up and pulled herself up on the side, slamming the flat of her hand against the door. “Now punch it!”

The humvee’s tires skidded in the dirt, kicking up a cloud of dust as it shot off full throttle. Jana’s hand gripped tight around the frame, the howling wind blowing her hair back and revealing her circuits in full overdrive beneath her skin.

“Christ, Bartíkova, calm down! You look like a Christmas tree on fire!” The soldier in the passenger seat yelled over the rush.

“Shut up, private. We’re dealing with Prometheus, the entire SAD is in danger!”



“Would you have called for aid if Krizeski wasn’t out there?” The private muttered under his breath after several long moments of silence.

The look on Jana’s face was enough to prosecute her for attempted murder. She didn’t answer. Instead, she held onto the vehicle for dear life as she used her focus to search for that same pull on her frequency as before. “*Terrance, are you there?*” she said through her internal comms.

There was no reply, nothing she could use as a marker on his whereabouts anyway. All she received was a low crackling with occasional screams and grunts resonating through the white noise. Jana could feel the heat rising in the back of her head. *Where are those cooling liquids, like that soda, when you need them?* She focused hard to make out anything amidst the frequencies she could find, squinting and straining her mind. A shock jolted through her, sending her into a wild panic when a new voice, rumbling, dark, and distorted, yelled at her from the depths of the incoming transmission.

“*I know you’re listening,*” It said. Jana struggled to make out whether it was a man or a woman’s voice rasping in her mind. Trying to filter out the virtual distortion didn’t

do her any good though. *“Yes you, you filthy machine-breed. Listen carefully, because we have something that might interest you.”*

A scream, long and loud, crackled over the comm. “They have Terrance!” Jana gasped, grabbing the soldier in the driver’s seat by his shoulder and shaking him. “Go faster!”

The voice on Bartíkova’s internal comm continued as she hassled to sync her frequency with the radio of the humvee, broadcasting the next words into the open. “Now that I have your attention. I’m sure you are aware of the *Prometheus* movement, so I’ll make this short...”

The soldiers in the humvee looked at Jana, fixed on the radio transmission, but Bartíkova shrugged.

“Your kind is a sickness,” the transmission continued, *“a cancer on the face of humanity. Prometheus is dedicated to healing mankind of that sickness. If that pisses you off, go ahead, blow up the insurgence, burn us down. Everything you do will be broadcasted on national emergency channels. Show the world what kind of dangerous machines you are. Prove to the world we are right. But you should know that if you run, we will find you, and we will take out what they put in you, cleansing the world piece-by-piece.”* The words came in bits, interrupted by screams in the tone of a voice everyone could recognize as Krizeski’s.

“If you continue torturing him, I swear, I will bury you under what remains of that data farm when I’m done with it,” Jana cursed.

“Before you do, you might want to listen to what we have to offer you.”

Jana's eyes darted between the commander and the soldier sitting next to him. Panic flickered behind her gaze. Her heart hammered in her chest, her blood thundered in her ears. *Hang in there, Krizeski, we're coming for you.*

"You have six hours to gather all nearby SAD agents," the voice continued. "Take them to the south entrance of the farm. In return, we'll leave your human crew alive."

Jana found herself launching forward as the humvee hit the breaks, going from full speed to the tires grinding into the dirt in a single second. With a grunt and a roll, Bartíkova managed to break her fall. "What are you doing?" She yelled, brushing off the dust from her clothes and wiping a thin line of blood from the scratch above her eye.

"We are not sacrificing the compound for the sake of the SAD. We never signed on to protect you," the Commander-of-Convoy answered, putting a hard emphasis on the statement as he shifted the pick-up into reverse and kicked up dust.

Jana reached out her hand. She knew she couldn't control the car but she damn-well could control the people driving it. Shrieking radios, glitching GPS-comms, and satellite connections vibrated, resonating and ringing until blood trickled down their eyes and ears. But her own neural implants were running hot, and Jana figured that if she wanted any chance at saving Krizeski, she'd have to hold back her strength. With an agitated grunt, she released the frequencies and turned on her heel. From where she'd landed, it wouldn't take long before she'd reach the farm.

“Listen to me, you prick,” she called out over her internal comm, reaching for the Prometheus signal and sending an EMP spike through the open line to draw out the hackers. “You have two minutes to release General Krizeski before I tear down your entire facility.”

A dark chuckle answered. “I’ll be seeing you, Agent Bartíkova.”

Jana ran as fast as she could, leaving the retreating convoy behind to get within reach of Krizeski’s comm. *“Krizeski, come in!”* The channel crackled and a quiet groan followed. She knew the line was secure, but perhaps threatening the entirety of Prometheus wasn’t such a good idea, after all. She swallowed hard.

“Bartíkova, they found me,” the general grunted through their internal comm. “They’ve hooked me up to their server stacks. Goddamnit, Jana, they are using me to hack the SAD mainframe. If they break through my firewalls, they’ll send out a virus that will take out every single one of us.”

“Shut up and save your strength!” Jana barked over the comm. “Your men left you to die, so it’s up to us now. Do you remember what you said about the SAD not signing the treaty on the forbiddance of internal network strings among our agents?”

“Where the hell are you going with this, Bartíkova?” Another cry of pain and agony followed the sound of his internal voice.

“I don’t have the clearance to connect our minds through the uplink, Sir, but you do,” Jana answered.

“Jesus, you know I was kidding, right?”

Jana moved slowly and low to the ground, belly down

as she crawled through the sand and over the ridge of the hill to enter the illegal facility. “*Oh, I know you were, Sir,*” she answered, “*but I’m not. We’ll tear this place down or we’ll die trying. I’m done with this Prometheus bullshit. They’ve done enough to make our people suffer. Enough with the segregation of our kind. Enough with the purist propaganda. People like us are here to stay. Send me the uplink.*”

It remained quiet for several seconds before Jana felt the heavy ping at the back of her head. An ironic smile curled the corners of her lips as she accepted it. The uplink spread, their comms and minds syncing, their heartbeats falling into rhythm with each other.

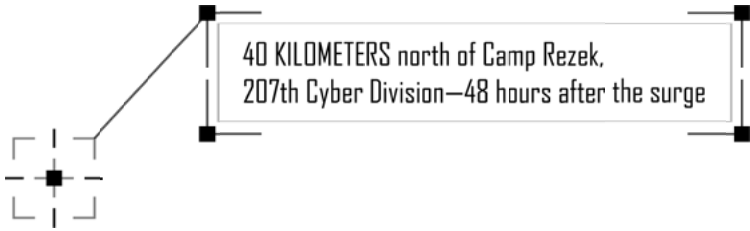
Bartíkova could feel her eyes shift, scanning the server stacks for anything that would give away Krizeski’s position. The heat in her head was searing, but she pushed it aside. With Krizeski’s chipset linked to hers, she couldn’t just sense the network around her; she had become a part of it. Leafing through hashes of data, bypassing codes and firewalls thrown up and attacking her, she dug; deeper and deeper into the stacks until she found the surveillance camera hovering over the general’s body. He was tied to an operating table at the center of the farm. Thick cables ran down his skull and into the mainframe behind him, blinking and beeping as the *Prometheus* crew harvested anything they could find, crashing through Krizeski’s firewalls as they rushed to infect him with a neural virus. She could feel its presence burn inside of her.

“I can’t hold this much longer, Jana. What’s your plan?” Krizeski grunted, discharging a massive EMP surge that snuffed out the lights around him into the network.

“The plan?” Jana asked, panting for air in exertion. *“Let’s fry this place. Don’t hold back, Terrance, we’ll give them everything.”* She followed the lead from his uplink straight into his brain as if she ran into a warm embrace. Even though all she saw now was data; they were now bruisers and brawlers, culled from the bits and bytes, the ones and zeroes, flashing through the sparks that shot from the server stacks. With the first punch thrown, the total collapse of the insurgence was now imminent.

“You can’t win, Bartíkova! This act will only prove how dangerous your people are!” the distorted *Prometheus* voice resounded through the hall.

“I am done wearing humanity’s leash,” Jana answered, nestling herself into the virtual embrace around her mind, clinging onto Krizeski’s mind for dear life while they obliterated the data farm.



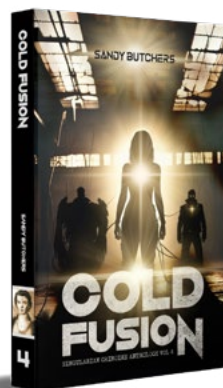
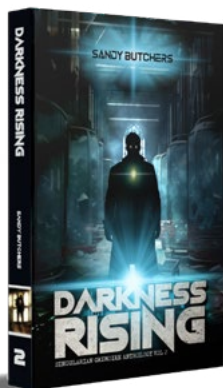
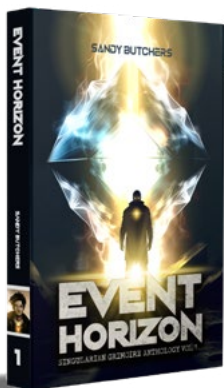
Jana Bartíkova looked out across the river at the plume of smoke that had been rising from beyond the hills since the moment she left the compound. Her feet were bare as they dangled in the water, bathing in a thin layer of ancient history’s sediment. Tiny bits of scattered metal tapped against her skin as they drifted by. In one hand she held her resignation papers and her report on what had happened, along with a picture of her with Krizeski and a short letter to his family. In the other, she clutched a bundle of thin wires bustling from a series of chipsets. “Don’t worry,” she whispered, her voice sailing on the gentle wind. “I don’t care what they say about our kind anymore. I’ll find a way to get you back online.”

THE END

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