

Rhest and the Trip Out East, part 1

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

I don't usually take away trips. Oh sure, occasionally I'll do some work down in Los Angeles or one of the other metropolises (metropoles? metropoleis?), but for the most part, I don't like to leave Sacramento if I can help it. And I never leave California unless I absolutely have to. Or it's really, really lucrative. I know there's plenty of work beyond the Golden State, but you have to stay close to home base. If you do, you risk coming home to a town you don't recognize because the balance of power has changed between local street gangs, political groups, or even monolithic corporations. Believe me, I've seen what can happen during a long weekend. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

This job I'm looking into is different. It doesn't come from a corporate office (of which Sacramento has a metric buttload) or some local entrepreneur. Businesses are the driving employer of mercenaries, street mercs, street samurai, and hired goons. So when something comes down the pipe that's anything else, it always catches quite a few people's interest, myself included.

I actually bid on this case. Been a while since I've done that. With my success rate and satisfaction rating at the agency – along with my sterling-ish reputation – I tend to either be contacted directly or requested specifically. Or if I express interest in a job, it tends to go to me immediately. That gets into the politics of assigning...assignments at the agency and that's neither here nor there. And besides, the bid I put in was simply to hear out the proposal. It's a big commitment to come all the way out here, to hear a proposal for a trip that will take me to another state.

Where's 'way out here'? Lincoln California, just west of the Endurance Capital of the World, Auburn California. I worked a race in Auburn. You'd think marathons are boring, and they are, until you add snipers. You ever run a 26-mile escort mission? No, of course you haven't because it's stupid and nobody in their right mind would do that. Nobody. That said, it did pay well and I got a participation trophy so that's nice.

Anyway, Lincoln California. Lincoln has become one giant retirement home for the pseudo-wealthy. I say pseudo-wealthy because we're probably talking people worth middle to upper eight digits. Considering I know at least two execs who make eight digits annually and they're upper-middle tier in the corporate hierarchy, it's hard to consider these people truly 'wealthy'. More money than me, though. By a mile.

I arrive at a very nice development property that I think takes up an entire set of hills. There are a lot of houses in this walled-off area but

they're very far apart. Plenty of space with lots of exceptionally green grass. The roads are super-nice, without the usual curb or anything. The air is strangely silent, devoid of the buzz of electricity, processed air, and wi-fi signals that I'm used to in the city. I hear a bird chirping, which honestly kind of unnerves me.

I approach the security monitor at the gate. He's an older gent, though he's clearly still got himself together. He's sitting in a wooden chair, his feet up on the counter of his little checkpoint hut. He's reading a medical thriller novel, chuckling to himself as he licks his finger to turn a page. I approach and he looks up at me. He's got some swagger and gives me a look of confidence like he not only knew I was there the whole time, but he's probably got a gun ready to use if it's necessary. He's also got a smile that tells me he'll feel real bad if he has to shoot me. I like him.

"Hey, what's up?" I call ahead of my approach. "I'm here to see..." I have to find the email thread I exchanged with this guy's valet. My Heads-Up Display superimposes over my vision in a transparent blue box. "Charles Eubanks."

The guard sits forward and picks up a clipboard with some pages on it. "You got any documentation?" He begins to consult the pages.

Further consulting the email thread in my HUD. "I got an admission barcode?" I offer, not sure if that's how things work around her or not.

"Rhest?" he asks, pronouncing it 're-est'.

"Rhest, like to take a nap," I correct him casually. I see an email address on a placard. "Want me to send the barcode?"

"Please," said the guard, reading something of note on the pages.

Using my HUD, I go through the menus and forward one of the messages to the email address on the placard. The guard turns his head suddenly, the telltale sign of him accessing an email system in his HUD as well. He nods with increasing approval. On the road between us, an SUV begins to approach. It's a newer model and has the silence of a solar engine. A pair of kids have their faces pressed against the tinted windows, staring at me in awe as they drive into the estate. As they pass, the guy points through the still-open security gate. "Head down to the intersection. First right, first left, first right. House 113."

"Cool, thanks," I tell him. We fist-bump and I start the minor hike. There's probably two or three city blocks of distance between each house so it takes me about fifteen minutes to finally arrive at a relatively simple but very nice house on the side of a Rockwellian hill. Sprinklers are wetting the lawn and the trunk of the single tree before the house disrupts the anime-

like front lawn. There's a semi-circle driveway that leads to the main door at its zenith.

As I near, the door opens and a white guy in a butler's uniform comes out. Dude's got spats and white gloves and everything. It's strange because the left side of his head is shaved and the right side is a cascade of blonde hair down to his ear. He's wearing earrings too, but otherwise looks every bit the part of a butler from the silver screen. "Mr. Rhest?" he inquires as I start up the driveway. "Had I known you were arriving on foot, I would have sent a car around."

"Don't sweat it," I tell him as we shake hands. "I don't get to take walks that much, especially in air this clean."

"This way, sir," he says. I enter the incredibly processed air, cooled to clearly a very specific temperature. "May I take your..." The butler pauses when he realizes I'm not wearing a jacket but a combat harness, mid-grade body armor, and six pistols. "...guns, sir?"

"I'm good," I tell him.

I expect him to insist, so I'm surprised when he says, "Very good, sir." He's a young dude. Not high school young but like he should be just starting his career in a corporate office. His old-style demeanor and flawless attire perfectly match his role, which is surprising. Like a parody so well done you can't tell if maybe it's genuine. Is this dude going the extra mile for a role, or is he one of those rare people that's committed to his job? I can't decide, nor can I decide if it's cool or weird. Maybe both. He gestures for me to follow him.

The butler leads me through a silent house of smooth floors polished to a shine, chandeliers of a bygone era, and extremely nice paintings. I spot one or two I recognize and it occurs to me only as I pass that they might not be reproductions. We pass through a kitchen that's better than some high-end restaurants. "A refreshment, sir?" asks the butler, looking back at me but not stopping. I just shake my head.

He guides me to two glass doors that are frosted. He opens them and a wall of moist heat hits me like a thunderclap. I start sweating instantly. "Mr. Eubanks is waiting for you, sir." The way he stands at the door suggests he expects me to go first. That gives me some pause but inside I go.

I step into a conservatory, my hands hanging loose, each ready to go for a gun. Equal parts sunroom and green house, the air is absolutely saturated with humidity. It's shockingly rich with the scent of soil that clings to me. My armor, designed to whisk away sweat, gives up and I can feel the swamp ass developing already.

Charles Eubanks has his back to me. He's in a wheelchair and facing out, looking into his yard. I near, about to cough politely, when the butler announces me. "Mr. Rhest, from the agency, sir."

Eubanks half-jumps in surprise and looks back at me. He's an ancient black man with some white stubble where hair used to be. One eye is glassed over, so I'm guessing cataracts. Not sure why he wouldn't get that fixed. "Hello, sir," he says in that tone only generous old man can speak. He wheels around, using a manual chair, not one with machinery. I guess maybe the humidity would be bad for the machinery. It sure isn't doing my cybernetics any favors, that's for damn sure. "Want a drink?"

"No, I'm good," I tell him.

"Nonsense, son, have some water at least," says Eubanks. He turns to the butler. "Bring him a pitcher of—"

"No," I say politely but emphatically. "Thank you," I add. I look at the old man with a very sincere smile, that I'm not being rude but professional.

He develops a shrewd, proud look. "You'll forgive me. That was a test." I don't follow. "People tend not to say no to rich old men." He has a slight southern accent. He folds long fingers with knobby joints in his lap. "I'm glad to find someone who still knows how."

"I'm very good at saying no," I assure him. Water is now dripping off my brow. Holy hell, how high is the humidity? And this old dude's under a blanket. How can he stand it?!

"Well I won't waste your time, Mr. Rhest," says Eubanks as the butler leaves us. "So I'll get right down to it. I want you to travel to Alabama and find an object of some value to me. Me, and no one else." I suddenly have more questions than I know how to count. "I want you to go to Birmingham specifically. There, I want you to find a CD and bring it to me."

My brow furrows (which causes more water to stream down my face). "A Certificate of Deposit."

He shakes his head. "Compact Disc."

I do a double-take. "You want me to go across the country for a computer disc?"

"A music disc," he specifies. I see his one eye glaze over a bit. I'm about to get a doozy of a story. "When I was a boy, growing up in Birmingham, I purchased a CD at a music store from a mall. It was a toss-away CD, barely three or four bucks. Back then, most CDs cost eighteen or twenty dollars. It was the first CD I ever bought with my own money. That should tell you how old I was." He smiles and nods his head, remembering days when life was defined by school and conquering the night meant

staying up after 1am. I can't imagine how many memories – good and bad – roll through his mind. His smile tells me it's more good than bad.

"This CD," he tells me, "was rain. It was a recording of rain falling. There was this..." His eyes close as he remembers it vividly. "This slight instrumentation added. Some strings, I think. Maybe a flute? I'm not much of a musician. Piano mostly, and not very good." He wrings his calloused hands. It's been awhile since those long fingers have touched ivory, I'm guessing. "I'd fall asleep listening to that CD," he continues to recall, unable to keep from smiling at the serenity he remembers. "I'd gotten a CD player for Christmas. I was so excited. It was such new, exciting technology. A boombox with a CD player. Curved sides, and a tape deck too." He laughs. "So exciting." He opens his eyes and his trance is broken. He looks at me. "I don't know what happened to that CD. And the memory of it has haunted me. Before I die, I want to hear it again."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't touched. Sadly, a touching story doesn't pay the bills.

"What you're asking..." I begin to say.

"Travel expenses won't be a problem," he tells me straight up front. "Of course I'll pay for the travel to and from. Business expenses too."

I nod. That's not a bad start. "Yeah, okay, but even at my base hourly rate, you're still talking about a considerable amount of money." Eubanks just looks at me, his old mouth melting into a smile. "Which I'm guessing isn't an issue for you." The smile widens, sympathetically. He looks like he both appreciates and feels bad for my tact.

"What would you like?" he asks. I hate when they just come out and ask. I wish he'd given me a number and we could go from there.

"I don't want to gouge you, but what you're asking...that's a serious operation." I start doing numbers in my head.

In the intervening silence, as plants respire around us, his gaze drifts down to my guns. They settle specifically on Affinity and Alternative, my backup pistols that hang under my armpits. He starts to reach towards Affinity, then asks, "May I?"

I remove the gun without hesitation and hand it over. Barely bigger than my hand and made entirely out of plastic, Affinity is a stealth weapon. Most scanners won't notice it but it still packs a punch. He takes the gun and seems surprised by its slight weight. It's sturdy but light. He pulls back the slide with more experience than training and looks down the barrel with his one good eye. He discharges the magazine, again like someone who wishes he didn't know what he was doing. He hands the gun back to me

and says nothing. He looks at the other guns, Reason and Respect, Vicious and Victory. A new smile creeps onto his kindly face.

"How about instead of money," he offers, "I give you a supply account at one of my companies. I own two companies that make bullets. Say, a year's access?"

I swallow tightly. Old man, don't be playing with my heart. That's not a king's ransom. That makes a king's ransom look like a middle school allowance. A merc with an unlimited ammo account? Even for one year, that's...insane. My jaw just dangles.

Eubanks smiles, big white teeth. "I guess we have a deal then?" He extends a hand.

I shake it gently but enthusiastically. "Yeah, we got a deal."

I'm going to Alabama.

Whenever you embark on an operation like this, you need to confirm as many details as possible. Even in the age of anti-Alzheimer's treatments and memory reinforcement, you'd be surprised what details an old survivor can forget or transpose. A CD Eubanks may remember purchasing at a mall music store may have actually happened at a flea market. Or he may have bought a different CD from the counter. Little details can make all the difference. But first, I have to confirm that stuff like this even happened.

First step in a long trip is research. Lots and lots of research. In the old days, this meant hitting up the library or going to the local university to get some first-hand knowledge. Then came the Internet and search engines replaced a lot of that effort. A fool, however, would think everything there is to be found is on the web.

The apartment door opens in front of me. Gladys Offerman is staring at me. A wiry woman, she's still got the slight bulge of her most recent baby. She's also got the diesel arms of a street merc who, in her off time, competes in every athletic competition she can find. No cybernetics but 'roided out her eyeballs, she's might be the most intense person I know. And boy, is that saying something.

"Yeah?" she barks at me. Before I can answer, she turns back into the apartment and yells, "Boy, don't make me tell you again to turn off that music and get your homework done!" What music? "Yeah?" she asks me again, like I better have a damn good reason for disturbing her.

"Can I talk to your grandmother?"

"The hell you want with her?" Gladys says, letting me into the apartment. It's not messy per say but it's got stains everywhere. There's

plenty of clutter, but it's stacked well enough. The wrap-around kitchen is to my right and the first bedroom's wall is to the left. Gladys leads the way into the living room where two kids, one baby and one infant, are somehow asleep in a playpen.

"I've got a job in her neck of the woods," I tell Gladys as I check out some of the bodybuilding and endurance running magazines on her kitchen island.

Gladys is suddenly very interested. Street mercs are like sharks, only instead of blood, once we catch a whiff of money, we're there. "The money's not great," I mention casually. "Hour for hour, it's...he's barely paying more than travel."

Yeah, like she's gonna buy that. She asks, "Then why do it?"

I shrug, trying to play up some professional boredom. "I don't have too many interesting gigs lined up. Macee's trying to get some people to take up that highway case." Gladys rolls her eyes, agreeing that job's a hard sale. "There's the usual bodyguard stuff. There's that one hit, but come on."

"Yeah," she agrees.

"This sounds interesting, even if it's not lucrative. And it sure sounds easy." I hope she buys that.

Based off the way she nods, I think she did. "Grandma!" she yells suddenly towards the back of apartment. Geez, the two kids sleep right through it. I guess it doesn't take long to get used to shouting.

"Yes?" yells another woman.

"One of my work friends wants to talk to you!"

I look at Gladys. "Work friends?" I smirk.

"What? We work together."

"Yeah, but you make it sound like we work an office job," I chuckle. "Last job we did together was that school one. Remember? We were raiding a school for evidence that lunch ladies were stealing food and replacing it with rabbit kibble. Dave fell into that den of brown recluse spiders." She nods, remembering with sadistic fondness. "He really likes his new face," I share off-handedly. "His lungs aren't quite calibrated yet, but they work and they play music."

"That's a plus," agrees Gladys.

From down the hall comes Grandma Offerman. An ancient Korean woman, she's wearing sweats and a bandana. Her legs hiss slightly, the telltale noise of old and cheap cybernetics. I don't know if she can't afford

to get them replaced or doesn't want to, but it's an irritating sound. "Hello there," says the kindly old woman.

"Hey there," I tell her. We're suddenly hit with an awful smell. I glance at the babies and hope it's one of them. Gladys scoops up the infant and takes him to the kitchen to start the necessary proceedings. I focus my attention on Grandma Offerman. "Um, Gladys told me a while back that you lived in Alabama as a kid."

"Oh, that was a long time ago," says an accent that is strangely Asian and southern at the same time. She shuffles to the couch and sits. Both she and her cheap hydraulics groan. She pats the adjacent recliner. "What about it?"

"I've got a job down there," I say as I sit. The recliner groans loudly. Guess it's not meant for somebody with as much cybernetic weight as me. "Just trying to get the lay of the land."

Grandman Offerman shakes her head. "I moved away from there when I was a teen. My dad ran from my mom. She was a devil woman, to be sure. Beat him and me." Domestic violence against the guy. Don't hear it every day but you do hear it. "Before that, I tried to avoid going home as much as possible. That's how I got addicted to tobacco. Lung cancer's what took my legs." She rolls up her sweats to show the mechanical ankles inside her sneakers.

"What did you do?" I ask the old woman.

"We had to have them amputated," she begins.

"No, when you were avoiding going home, in Alabama," I clarify. I deliberately avoid looking at Gladys. The smell's gotten worse. I'm not afraid of babies or diapers or anything, but this smell is so bad, it could be weaponized (and I've seen that done!).

"Well, malls were still around back then," she says. "Me and my girlfriends – we had a little click, us and some Mexican girls – we'd go hang out at the mall. We had to stick together. Mostly there were white girls and a few black girls. Latinas and Yobos, we had to stick together. Because we got lumped in together a lot of the time." That doesn't make sense to me, but it doesn't matter if it does.

"Was this...did you ever have any CDs? Compact Discs? They were a music medium."

"Oh no," she says. "That was before my time. They still were around, sure, but music players were the big thing. MP3 players. I had some friends, one girl Maria, she had a mini-disc player. But CDs were on their way out."

"But they were still around," I reason.

"There were still music stores," she nods. "There were even video rental stores, if you can believe that. Streaming hadn't taken off yet, so you had to go to places and actually borrow videos and bring them back."

"That's been making a comeback," I tangent on her. "We've got some of those here in Sacramento."

Grandma Offerman looks surprised and a little impressed. "Hear that Gladys? We should make a run to Blockbuster." Gladys scowls at me, like she blames me for giving her grandmother ideas.

"Where were the music stores?" I ask her, getting back on the task.

"Mostly inside the malls themselves," she tells me. "I don't think I ever saw one that wasn't in a mall. As malls declined, you started seeing more CDs in big retailers but that didn't last long either."

"How many music stores were there in a mall?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Two or three? They were like shoe shops. You might have a specialty shop, that just had women's shoes or just had sneakers. But otherwise you had maybe two or so generic shoe places."

"You may not know, or remember, but did you ever see CDs for sale at the counter? Like when you went to checkout, they'd have cheap CDs for sale? Like instrumental music?"

Grandma Offerman strains for a second. "Yeah," she decides. "Yeah, I think so. I never bought any of them, but I remember seeing them once or twice."

Not exactly a solid confirmation, but it's good enough for me.

I'm interested to see the mall in question. Malls were a fascinating phenomena. Gigantic enclosed shopping centers with a vast array of often-niche specialty shops. They were a staple of the United States for just under half a century, thanks to some dodgy tax loopholes. Nowadays, they're giant wastelands of rot and abandonment. We have shopping centers not unlike malls, but they're more small cloisters of shops, nestled into the empty spaces in and around corporate megaliths. The first two floors of a biodome might be shopping, which could debatably be considered a mall, but the idea of a free-standing structure of nothing but small shops is a thing of the past.

It takes me another day to get a connection with the Alabama state government. Alabama doesn't like California and, to be honest, California doesn't like Alabama. But pay some fees, and overpay one or two of them, and you get the cooperation you need. It's a game of trial and error, all

done via email and requests submitted through decade-old websites. Get the names of all the malls in Birmingham Alabama (and surrounding areas, just in case). Maybe whittle that list down to malls that would have been open during Eubanks' time there. Get a list of all the music shops. Again, narrow that list some with music shops that would have come later or be gone by his time.

This leaves me with a list of fourteen different stores and chains, spread across fifty-six possible locations. Getting a list of every promotional or discount CD sold at the register isn't something that can be done online. That, I'll have to suss out on-site. Not a hundred percent sure how, either.

I push through the door of the staffing agency to find Psychic Steve and Antonio the Great playing chess with their minds. There's a small crowd and money in two stacks on the table, which is about par for the course with street mercs.

I bypass the telekinetic spectacle and head to the counter. Macee is back there, an older white (I think?) woman built like a burnt-out refrigerator and with the manners to match. She's flipping through a men's fashion magazine to ogle the guys. "Hey, what's up?" I begin. "Look, I'm taking the Eubanks job." Macee just nods, not looking up from a rather dapper-looking trench coat and suit. "I'm probably going to be out of town for a week or two." Now she looks up. "Yeah," I confirm.

"What's the job?" Macee asks me.

"It's..." I glance back at the chess game. Everybody, including Steve and Antonio, are staring at me. "I signed an NDA," I lie. "I need to arrange somebody to check on my apartment twice a day."

"Patrol duty? Really, Rhest?" chides Domink from Antonio's side of the folding table somebody got out of a dumpster two decades ago. A street samurai, she's got cutting edge ninja armor and two vibroblades that look cool and are about as useful in a fight as harsh language. So is she.

"Half rate for ten minutes work total," I offer to anybody in the room. I start to lean on the counter and it groans, nixing that idea. "Just swing by morning and again at night to make sure nobody in the building has broken in. Maybe give some of the strays some tuna. Except the tabby. That ass can go hungry." I turn back to Macee. "Bastard bit me yesterday."

"Maybe he thought you tasted yummy," Macee teases. I hold up my finger that's got two puncture marks through the nail. "Damn."

"Yeah, he doesn't get fed again until he apologizes. I don't need him to bring me a rat but it'd go a long way to making me feel appreciated," I tell her. Back to the task, I say, "I don't care who does the job. Adelphus?"

Somebody who's got some subtly." I almost hear Psychic Steve and Antonio's hands going up. "None of the psychics, though. They'll eat everything in the kitchen." I hear both hands going back down.

"I'll take care of it," Macee tells me. "You just be safe."

"If I was safe, I wouldn't be doing my job," I quip to her as I start to leave. I tap the counter twice before departing. I've got a plane to catch.

I'm dozing at the front of the commercial plane. Facing into the crowd, it's obvious who I am (aside from the guy with the guns). Because air traffic has gotten increasingly dangerous (and expensive), air marshals are needed to police the skies. Only problem is there's, like, eleven of them in the whole nation and sixty-three gazillion planes. So how to airlines handle the gap? Why, they do what everybody else does: they hire mercenaries.

I got my airfare comped by playing air marshal. Well, half-comped if there's no incident, but fully comped if somebody gets uppity. This would lead many mercs to make sure there's an incident. I'm not planning to do that, but it's a long flight. Let's see if anybody pisses me off.

We're somewhere over Texas, which is not a place anybody wants to be. Fortunately, we haven't had any 'turbulence' yet, so maybe we'll get lucky. We're in a larger plane, with three seats down the middle, and two sets on either side. It's a double-winged plane, so there's a bit more stability than usual. It's kind of ugly on the inside, like the taupe-colored cabin is to remind the passengers they paid for a flight, not a stylish flight. Since the cabin is awash with the glow of the screens of digital devices, it doesn't seem to matter.

From my vantage, I see mostly dim faces lit brightly from behind the headrests. It'd be creepy if I was paying attention, but I'm barely aware of anything. An insulated, contained space with giant motors just outside makes for a lot of white noise and very little stimulation. As such, it's easy for me to hear the spritz of somebody opening a soda can. Oh boy. That's a no-no on a flight. You aren't allowed to bring any food or drinks. You have to buy a soda from the airline for 1000% markup.

One of the attendants practically sprints down the aisle passed me (they get paid on commission). I'm not sure how she moves so fast in the knee-length skirt but she moves like a cheetah. "Sir," the woman snaps, harsh but still professional, "I'm afraid I must confiscate your illegal beverage."

Dude looks like an orthodontist on his way to visit his mom at Disney World (if Disney World was still around). "But it's just a soda," he practically whimpers.

"The airline will be happy to provide you a soda," she insists, reaching for his drink. He yanks it out of reach, across the lap of the guy sitting next to him.

"Yeah, but they cost ten dollars for a six-ounce can," he argues.

"Sir, I must insist, give me the—" She lunges and the drink gets dropped. Soda goes dribbling all over the floor, immediately soaked up by the same ugly-ass, super-absorbent carpeting all planes use. The attendant scowls down at the man like mother-superior at a sinful child. "I'm going to have to write up a report on this. Authorities will be waiting at the gate."

The guy stands up. His knees are shaking. "Y-you can't be serious."

"Sir, stand down or I will defend myself!" the woman shrieks, escalating this way too quickly. People are watching. Cell phones are out, recording this.

"You'll what?!" the guy panics. The woman draws back a fist and the guy starts to cover up.

"Sit down!" I bellow like a hibernating bear. They both look up at me, both knowing they done messed up.

The guy starts to meekly protest. "But she—"

"Not you," I assure him caustically. I stare at the attendant to almost challenge her to defy me. She looks irritated that I either cost her a sale or cost her the chance to punch a passenger. I just look at her indifferently, daring her to have security waiting at the gate. I don't know what kind of mercs they've got in Alabama, but I know what airline security is. Unless everybody at the airport is going to back them up, they ain't gonna mess with me. Not if they're smart.

The flight continues uneventfully.

Disembarking from a plane is always a hopeful experience. That moment of walking up the gangway and exiting into the terminal is almost like being born. You've been cooped up for hours and then to finally have the world open up before you is incredible. Recycled air can't compare to fresh air (or even semi-fresh air). Florescent lights can't compare to daylight streaming in through windows (even filthy windows). A metal tube flying through the air can't compare to a new city. No matter how cynical or how jaded I may become, I don't think disembarking from a plane ride will ever cease to give me at least a single moment of hope.

So. Birmingham Alabama. Birmingham is the largest city in the state of Alabama, one of the southern-most states behind Texas and what used to be Florida. This is of course not including Puerto Rico and the Caribbean states. They're south of the equator (I think?), so they don't count. Sort of like how California is the western-most state because Alaska and Hawaii are cheaters. But I digress.

Alabama is famous for industry, college sports, and overt racism. A state proud of its seditious heritage, little in the last hundred years has done anything to change the locals' minds that the Union started it. These days, Alabama is mostly known for their two-tiered social strata. You have the impoverished lower- and middle-class people who make up the majority of the state. Aggressively proud of their ignorance and lack of education, they cling to their poverty like it's a badge of honor. They consider their often-self-made struggle to be a sign that they're real, genuine people. Which, by default suggests that the rest of the country is made up of fake people...which, having been to Los Angeles, I can't 100% argue with.

Atop them, you have the educated elite. While most of Alabama is dirt poor, racist, and proud of it, it also boasts some of the best colleges and thinktanks in the country. Maybe the world. California loves to brag about all its corporate technological innovations, but lots of cutting-edge work is done at the University of Alabama-Birmingham and other colleges. Unlike most other places in the country (and the world), where the polarized social strata is caused by money, in Alabama, it's caused by education.

All of this, I reflect on as I ride the cab into town. Rundown shopping centers dot the landscape. Buildings are overgrown and falling in, some of which are still open for business. The road is in terrible disrepair and more than one stoplight we pass through doesn't work. The car is a gasoline engine with electric emergency chargers. The windows are armored and there's glass between me and the driver (I'm betting it's armored as well). I have no contact with the driver (his door doesn't even have a handle, neither does the passenger-side door). I had to input my destination on a keypad when I got in. There's a monitor showing my route, as well as local authorities nearby. Is that to let me know where to run for safety, or from what direction danger will come?

The taxi comes to a stop before a four-story hotel. The car door swings open after I pay and I disembark with little more than a 'thanks' back to the driver. The trunk is opening as I get out. I grab my backpack and two bags and the car takes off before I've even stepped away. Is he in a rush? Given the unsavory fellows I spot out of the corner of my eye as I head into the hotel, I'm guessing he wants to avoid the mugging about to take place.

I spot two guys at the far end of the hotel, one near the door, and one guy across the street (at least one guy, I didn't get a good look). At the far end are two good ol' boys who look like they could audition for a country music video. Cowboy hats and boots and belt buckles bit enough to be pro-wrestling championships. Across the street is a dude wearing a UAB jersey and jeans so paint-stained, I could have mistaken them for camo pants. By the door is the most stylish of the guys, in jeans and cowboy boots, a blazer paired (sort of) with a bolo tie. He's got a mullet and a mustache so porno, it probably has an STD named after it. I chuckle as pass them all, well aware they're watching me.

Through a revolving door and inside the hotel lobby, I'm greeted by a giant chandelier over an imitation marble floor. There are rich wooden counters on either side with well-dressed and well-groomed attendants at the terminals. A grand staircase is opposite the entrance, leading to the second floor. There's a steak house to the left and a hallway to the modest convention center to the right. Given the flickering light I spot down the hall, I'm guessing it doesn't see too much use.

I approach the desk to my left to see a young man with a cybernetic eye and an artificial hand. He smiles at me and asks, "How was your trip?"

"Good," I tell him, handing over two forms of ID. I glance out the window of the lobby to see a guy walking passed. He's looking right at me, his hands hanging into his jacket pockets. I make eye-contact, which sends him on by all the quicker. I glance at the security cameras in the corners of the lobby. I'm not entirely confident that they're working.

"And how will we be paying?" asks the attendant. He accepts my credit stick with a white hand that harshly contrasts his black skin. Man, even the cyber-docs are racist down here. That said, the fingers move with agility comparable to his real hand, so maybe he chose quality over aesthetics.

"Room three-sixteen," he says, handing me my keycard.

"Thanks," I tell him and I start up the grand staircase. I don't bother going to the third floor. On the second, I walk all the way to the far end of the hotel and take the auxiliary stairs down to the first floor and slip out the side.

The two cowboy cosplayers I spotted before are still there at the corner of the building, watching the front. They are completely oblivious to the worker's door opening behind them. I contemplate drawing a gun on them but decide against it. If they're focused on this hotel, maybe they'll leave me alone. I just walk off, leaving them to figure out how they're going to mug the new arrival.

Stuff like this used to worry me. The first few times I encountered these types of muggers or kidnapers or whatever the modern term is for highwaymen, I thought 'oh crap, what have I gotten into'. If dudes were waiting for me at the hotel, then that meant whatever job I was on was bigger than I thought. I had stumbled into something BIG! What hubris.

These are hoods. This is what they do. They jump ANY traveler. Either to get their belongings or hold them for ransom, whichever looks more lucrative (or easier). It's just a business. It's just a job in a place where jobs are scarce. They've got about as much to do with why I'm here as the cloudy sky overhead.

I hoof it about half a mile down the road. Alabama is surprisingly hilly, or at least Birmingham is. I'm not sure if that's due to the natural topography or the mining history. Birmingham was SERIOUS in the iron and steel industry. Still is, judging by the pollution in the sky.

I decide to go sliding down the side of the hill I'm walking along. Given how rocky the broken sidewalk is, I don't expect it could be much worse. Combat boots kick up serious dirt and a cybernetic body made for battle knocks free still more. I almost lose my balance a couple of times, but I finally come trotting down into somebody's backyard. A boy and a girl are playing on a swing set that's more rust than metal. They stare at me with hollow, vacant expressions of people who have seen their government-assisted home invaded so many times, it barely registers as a big deal anymore. "Sup," I toss them as I walk right by. The boy just nods back at me.

I'm in a small cul de sac neighborhood of tiny brick houses that all look the same except for the graffiti. A street light flickers as I walk underneath it. There's a smell of smog even though it's not immediately visible. There's also a smell of mold and it's hard to tell what's mold, what's stain, and what's just dead dirt. Two guys sit on a stoop up ahead. One's got a pistol sticking out of his waistband. It's a modified machine pistol, old and probably a good chance it will blow up in his hand. But I'll wager until it does, it can probably throw lead like a politician can throw lies.

As I stride passed their house, the two stand up like I'm prey. I draw Respect without even slowing a step. I don't want to shoot him with both bags slung over my shoulder but I don't let on. Dude grabs his gun even after I've drawn and he returns the favor. We've both got guns for killing aimed at each other, but I'm walking and he isn't. When he saw me just strolling through his neighborhood, he thought I was an easy mark. My gun showed otherwise. I think he's content to leave it be. His second friend isn't.

The slap of bargain basement sneakers gives away the steps of the third guy coming up behind me. I keep watching boss man and his buddy on the stoop that I'm passing and whip Respect under my arm. Activating the laser sight as I do, I point the giant pistol in my right hand at the blind-sider trying to come up on my five o'clock. His steps stop cold as he realizes the element of surprise isn't his.

All three are still, watching me as I walk right out of their neighborhood.

It takes me about four hours, but I finally find a motel to crash in. I don't like nice hotels, but I also don't like dive motels that have more roaches than beds. The motel I find is okay. It's not bad but I sure as hell am not using that shower. I pay an extra bit for them to check me in as Bear Bryant, which makes the dude behind the counter chuckle.

Once I'm in my room, I set about my chores. First up, scan for surveillance devices. This is a dive so I don't expect much and I find nothing. Not even a mic or a hidden web cam. Sweet. This place just got an additional star for their online review.

Secondly, security. I secure the door with a standard doorjamb/crossbar rig, and make sure the window is secured as well. I have this nifty little suction-cup doohickey that I put in the corner of the window. It uses electrical pulses to magnetize the glass. It won't make it unbreakable but it turns ordinary glass in security glass. Unless they're shooting a cannon, it'll hold for a minute. Lastly, I check the drywall situation itself. The walls are made of shoddy wood but it's in a grid formation without any holes too wide. This is important if you're dealing with cyborgs as street mercs have a tendency to be, because they might just burst through the drywall. Hell, I've done it once or twice and I'm not even built for strength.

Third, time to make contact.

I get out my laptop and start searching for the local mercenary groups. Merc agencies are a dime a dozen in every town, but the poorer the population, the more agencies there are. Mercs are a way for street toughs to get paid while still having some air of legitimacy. Most groups in California evolved out of old staffing and placement agencies. Once the economy starts to tank, hiring temps for clerical work and construction slides into assassination and high-conflict theft quicker than you'd think. In other towns, the mercenary groups form differently. Sometimes they're just gangs that increasingly formalized their rates and procedures. Sometimes it's unions for a totally unrelated industry that just found themselves lending out their muscle. I heard of one union in Wisconsin I think that was made

up of teachers, and they got into mercenary work. Those have got to be some hardcore teachers.

It doesn't take long to find a dozen agencies – groups, teams, whatever they call themselves in Birmingham – within the city limits. They've got decent websites, so I put in a few bids. The way most mercenary groups work is you submit a job and a proposed bid (how much you'll pay for the job). Either the group's main person will assign somebody to the job, or the local workers will bid on it. They'll offer to do it for less money, or with more skill, or other reasons; Teresa and Dale both get work all the time just by doing the jobs while wearing thongs. If the merc accepts the bid, you come in and handle the details, or just confirm acceptance. I'm posting about wanting an escort to and from a local mall. I'm contracting out for two reasons: one) they know the area and I don't and two) it's a professional courtesy.

Professional courtesy or no, I still spend the rest of the night hacking into their websites. The code is pretty good but it's still commercial-grade security. It's not hard to get into; it just takes some time. I review their staff listings to get an idea of who might work great, who might be great to work with, and who is going to jump me if they decide to revoke all professional courtesy. Ours is not a profession of rules in the truest sense.

I also hack into Birmingham's municipal system. They've got an amazing encryption system, but unfortunately, they let their employees set their own password. Any town with a decent college team is going to have at least one idiot who uses their version of 'RollTide' as their password. I embed some programs in the local municipal code, just in case. If I don't need a Hail Mary, the codes will self-terminate at the end of the next pay cycle. If push comes to shove, though, I have more than one ace up my sleeve.

Nighttime in Birmingham is surprisingly lovely. The college and the downtown areas illuminate the sky. Expanses of learned campuses glow with hopeful light. Monolithic corporate towers rise into the smoky heavens, the tops disappearing into the celestial darkness. Beyond the sky, the stars must be imagined because they can't be seen. On the ground, among the mundane, there are two drive-bys that wake me up during the night. Modern society is nothing but dichotomy.

Chesterfield Security is run out of what used to be a fast food joint in the middle of a shopping center that's more empty than full. I have to step around a pothole so deep, it's gone down to the soil. The security firm has a big neon yellow sign with hand-written letters in the window. '20% off through the end of the month'. Twenty-percent off what? Anything?

Inside is a positively intense bout of air conditioning that chills even me. I look up at the vents over the door that are blasting arctic wind on my head. Sheesh, my eyebrows are going to start frosting over! There's a wooden desk that is way too nice for an otherwise empty room and its academic style clashes with the 'out of business' décor. There's a water cooler at the back of the room, next to a door leading into I guess the storage. The whole thing looks like the world's least capable tax office.

A man with a shaved head and a gray suit is behind the desk, scribbling a notepad. Dude doesn't even have a computer, just a legal pad and an HB pencil. Where the hell am I? "Hey, what's up?" I say as I approach the desk. "I'm Rhest. I posted a bid for an escort job last night."

"Yeah, hey there," says the guy with the most intense southern accent I've ever heard. Geez, that might legitimately be another language. "I'm Matt. This here's my place." He shakes my hand, a grip that feels devoid of any cybernetics. "I've put together a list of guys who will be happy to escort you." He walks back from the desk, heading for the door. "You said you aren't expecting any kind of action or difficulties?"

"Yeah, this should be an extremely boring job," I tell him. "Boy do I hope it is, too."

Matt looks at my guns as he reaches one arm inside the door, pulling out a clipboard. "Well, I think Mel may be your best option then." He brings the clipboard to me and hands over a dossier. Mel's face – and that's got to be a mug shot – is in the left-hand corner while his vitals and credentials are listed below.

"Huh, right tackle," I confirm with some minor approval. Yeah, most of his accolades are connected to high school sports. Everybody pads their resume. You think I leave my high school D&D nights off my resume? Those were some intense, late-night strategy meetings with a creative and diverse set of problem-solvers.

I checked out Mel's record last night. He's a lower-tier threat. He's got more than a few arrests, but only one case that was documented of him flipping on his client. It didn't say what for, but most mercs have at least a couple of black marks where they switched sides. Mel's mostly a bruiser, but he's got some speed. He usually carries a sawed-off shotgun because this is the south. It's practically standard issue. He also packs some kind of high-end fistloads; that usually means brass knuckles mixed with a taser.

"Looks good," I say, handing the clipboard back to Mel. "When can we leave?"

"I'll give Mel a call. Unless he's got something happening, he should be able to be here in a few minutes."

A few minutes means different things in different parts of the world. In the south, a few minutes means roughly half an hour. Any vague amount of time is rounded up to the next half hour. Specific expressions of time like 'forty-five minutes', '12:30', and the like are given a nine-minute standard deviation. If somebody says 'I'll be there in forty-five minutes', you can expect them to arrive anywhere between thirty-six and fifty-four minutes. So yeah, a few minutes.

Mel is a big dude. He's got beefy arms and a neck so thick, it's basically just traps that meet his chin. He's got thick tufts of blonde hair on his shoulders as he walks in wearing a sleeveless armor vest and black-and-white camouflage military pants. Not sure what environment that kind of camo is for, but whatever. He's got a tactical belt and that shotgun draped over his back in a nice-ish harness. He gives me an upward tip of the head, then asks Matt, "Yeah?"

"Mel, this is Rhest," Matt introduces me as I lean on the front lip of his desk. "He put in a bid for a simple escort mission." Did Matt not tell Mel about the job?

"Sure, whatchyu need?" Mel asks a little condescendingly, like he's doing me a favor.

I tell him, "I need to do some local investigating. I'm trying to find a pretty obscure antique that was sold at a mall quite a few years ago." Yes, I'm being vague.

"Whatchyu looking for?" Mel asks.

"A CD," I say. "A compact disc. Music. It's not valuable at all; only to my client."

Mel puckers his lips and nods in growing approval, an act that makes his chin look like a walnut. "Okay, when you wanna go?"

I stand up right then and there. "Let's do it."

Mel's got a supped-up nightmare of a car. It's a red Firebird-looking thing with a huge engine sticking out the front of the hood and giant off-roading tires. Not quite monster truck giant, but they come up to my waist. The thing has two exhaust pipes that run along the chassis, just behind the doors. The rear window is covered in a sunshade colored to look like the Confederate Flag. Like I said, Alabama loves their seditious past. We hop in and I expect the stereo to be blasting country but I'm greeted to 1990s gangsta rap. Huh.

"Where to first, boss?" Mel asks me as he fires up an engine that's way too loud.

"You got a vinyl or record store nearby?" I ask him.

"Dave 'n Berry," he suggests, like that means anything to me. It doesn't but I point forward all the same. This going to be fun or a disaster. Not that the two are mutually exclusive.

...to be continued next month...

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