

Rhest and the Trip Out East, part 2

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

(continued from [last month's adventure...](#))

Dave 'n Berry is not a store. It's two guys who run a stall at a flea market. They've got a folding table and two collapsible chairs and a dog that looks like the brains of the operation. They've got milk crates, liquor boxes, all sorts of containers that are meant for anything but music. But they've got music. Records. Cassettes. CDs. It's all stacked and packed tight, organized very loosely by genre.

As I approach, I'm guessing Dave (simply because he speaks first) says, "Well hello there, Mr Mel. Who's your friend?" 'Mr' Mel? What is this fascination to call people by an honorific, and then their first name?

"This here's Rhest," Mel tells the two men in plaid shirts and jeans so old, I'm not sure they even make that cut anymore. "He's looking for a CD." Berry spits in a soda can and gestures a touch sarcastically at the collection before them.

"It's a specific CD," I tell the prunes. They both smirk at my lack of a southern accent. I half expect dust to fall off them when they do. "It was sold at the counter in one of the malls near here."

"What was it called?" asks Dave, the one not wearing glasses. I have to just shake my head. "Who did it?"

"It was an instrumental CD," I explain, with hand gestures, though I'm not sure why or what the gestures are meant to convey. "Mostly it was rain with some instrumentation added."

"Well boy, if you don't got a title, that's a problem," Berry says in a voice too high for a body with a gut that pronounced.

"Do you know of anywhere I can get a list of all the CDs sold?" I ask them. "I've got a range of years to work with."

"Son, there ain't no way," Dave laughs.

Berry, however, has a thought. Given the pained expression, I'm worried it's the first one he's had in quite a while. "Well, what about that colored fella?"

'Colored fella'?

"Oh!" Dave says with partial recognition. "Uh...yeah." He strains to think. "Jimmy?"

"Timmy!" Berry corrects.

"Timmy!" Dave agrees. "Yeah, you need to go see Timmy. He was a manager or something at one of them music stores. Took it real serious, too. Tried to make it a career. Thought he was gonna go places if he managed a music store." They laugh at his foolishness from behind their flea market stall. "But he got a good memory for the little stuff. He knew every last thing he sold. Knew what the competition sold too." He pronounces it 'com-po-teh-sun'. "Without a title, he's your only hope."

I check with Mel. "You know Timmy?" He shakes his head. "Where can I find Timmy?"

"Down at the old folks' home," say the two octogenarians. Their confidence seems to chiefly come from their mutual recollection.

I check again with Mel to see if he knows where that is. To my relief, he nods and says, "Come on."

Sarah Lee Nichols Sunset Community is the kind of place most people have nightmares about when they contemplate their mortality. It's less a retirement home and more a vast array of death wards. A pre-casket waiting room. I don't look forward to dying – which in my line of work is a statistical certainty to happen sooner rather than later – but I'm grateful that whenever or however it happens, it won't be in one of these places.

It clearly used to be a school or a daycare, based off the once-bright exterior and the once-vibrant rooftop. Now it looks abandoned. The paint on the exterior isn't just peeling; it's taking some of the exterior with it. Spots are cracked, in some places so much that the insulation can be seen sticking out. A few windows are patched with plywood and I see spiderwebs between the tiny air conditioning units and the building itself. The grass is mostly dead, but it's mowed short, so hey, that's something.

Me and Mel pass right by two guys in scrubs who are smoking. One guy has a joint, the other guy has an e-cigarette. I guess they work here, but hell if I know what they do. Given the way they are indifferent to me and Mel, I'm not sure they know. Through the vapor and weak smell of pine cones, the smell of death is obvious before the sliding doors even open. The floor tiles are faded and warped, a few even missing. Gurneys that smell like urine are stashed right by the entrance.

I see a nurse's station on the other side of the main intersection. It's unattended. I approach and glance around the chipped light blue counter, not quite sure what to do. Mel just reaches right over and gets a medical chart. The way he tosses it back, it clearly wasn't of any use. He starts for another.

I spot an old geezer on a bench beyond the station. I pat Mel's shoulder and start towards the guy, only for something to upset me. I slow, Mel does as well. It takes us a moment to realize the guy's dead. He's leaned back against the wall and has passed. I touch his neck and feel nothing. Hand to his nose and feel nothing. I switch my vision to thermograph and can see the body heat has long since passed.

"Boss?" asks Mel, like he's reminding me of why we're here. Like I'm distracted.

I don't know if he's callous because he's young or because he's a street merc. A lot of mercs don't have high regard for life. Once you've killed more people than you are years old, you tend not to be phased by death. And to be fair, most deaths don't get to me, but I'm not so callous as to not occasionally be affected. I hope I never get that callous.

I don't argue or protest or anything. I only nod and turn, Mel and I departing from this man. We leave him to find his way to whatever afterlife he wants.

We're just turning when a nurse appears at the nursing station. Given the way the older Asian lady is glaring, I'm guessing she actually cares about her job and the people she's in charge of. Given the way other nurses are walking very slowly about, I'm also guessing she's one of the only nurses here who does. "What are you two doing here?" she snaps at us. Before I can answer, she snaps at Mel, "I told your boss that he can't send thugs to just hire themselves out to our residents."

"These people got rights and they got money," Mel asserts.

"These people are on hospice care!" she argues. Wow, a southern accent is terrifying at high volumes.

I slip between the two. I don't have the patience, the interest, or the time for this. Mostly the interest. "Hi, my name's Rhest and I'm looking for a guy named Timothy?" I say it like I expect her to automatically know who I mean. She leans in a bit with a sway of her black bob cut and a sarcastic look, like she knows I'm an idiot for just such an assumption. "Timmy?" I clarify. The look in her eyes suggests she has an idea who I mean. "Used to run a music store at the mall?"

The woman straightens up. "Yeah, I know him."

"He ain't dead yet, is he?" Mel asks.

The nurse glares at him. "What do you want with him?" It's not a question, it's an accusation.

"He's got some intelligence I need for an operation," I tell her. People like it when you get all military-like. "Just a couple of questions. You're welcome to join us. Supervise." Mel scoffs.

Something is announced over the intercom overhead, but hell if I can make out what the garbled speech conveyed. The nurse could, however, because she takes her stethoscope off her neck. "Straight down, then left at the T-intersection," she tells me and Mel, gesturing with her hand. She's already turning to go the opposite direction. "He should be all the way at the end." She doesn't run but she walks as briskly as a person can. I can tell it's a life-or-death emergency; just not the first one of her shift. Nor will it be the last one.

Timothy 'Timmy' Halston is sitting on a bench in a medical gown, holding his cane as he watches people (nurses) go by. He's just people watching (checking out their butts) and nothing else. He sees me and Mel approach and he snickers. He's an ancient man, so old it's almost stunning. We get near and he says angrily, "What you want?" His voice is a rasp. It exhausted him just to shout.

"Mr Halston, I—"

"Don't you come no closer!" he tries and fails to bellow. He points his convenience store cane at us like it's a gun.

"Don't you talk like that, boy," Mel tells him.

I hold out a hand to subtly remind Mel that I'll take the lead. "Mr Halston," I repeat a little slower and slightly less racist than Mel's 'boy'. I approach very slowly. "My name's Rhest." I speak loudly. Not slowly, but clearly and deliberately. "I was hoping you could help me."

"Help you?" The old man laughs. It's a pained laugh. He might just keel over right now, this is so taxing on him. He's smiling, too, so at least it's entertaining him. "Help you what, son? I ain't got nothing. My grandson stuck me in here a hundred years ago. I ain't seen nobody or nothing since then. Ain't nobody know I exist no more. I don't know nothing and nobody."

"I just need some information," I ask. Several nurses walk by us, clearly indifferent to the heavily armed men in the nursing home. I see Timmy's eyes follow the nurses' behinds and I smirk. "Help me out and I'll buy you a nudey mag."

"You trying to give an old man a heart attack?" Halston coughs. "Cause I had three already. Stroke too." He pauses for only a second. "You get me something with some Asian girls?"

I am extremely uncomfortable right now. "No problem," I tell him with faux certainty. "You want full figure?"

"Of course," he shouts, I'm not sure why.

"I'm going to go get your magazine," I promise him. "First, I need to know about when you worked at the music store."

There's a twinkle in his eye when he hears that. He looks up at me and his brow furrows. He looks confused. "The music store? Hollys?" He speaks just a touch more clearly. He laughs and a tear rolls down his cheek. "Son, that was forever ago."

I nod. "Maybe, but you managed it. I need your knowledge. I need your help."

As long as I live, I will never forget his expression. He hasn't been of any help or any use to anyone in years. Decades. Hell, he's so old, maybe that crack about a hundred years ago wasn't a joke, you never know. To be asked to help, to be asked for knowledge that he has, to be needed, is more than he thought he'd ever experience again. "How can I help you?" he asks me with long-forgotten but deeply ingrained confidence. It's like he's at the front of the store, greeting a walk-in.

As nursing codes are called over the intercomm, I kneel down before him. His eyes are distant and he looks passed me. It's like he's in a trance. "There was a CD," I say slowly and clearly. "It played rain with just a little bit of music. It was sold at the counter of one of the music stores here in town." I see the wheels turn in his mind. He nods slowly. "I am looking for one of those CDs."

His eyes turn to me and I'm not speaking to an old man in a nursing home, running out the clock until he dies. I'm speaking with a young man with his whole life in front of him, who is going to make his fortune running the best music store in the county, in the state, in the world. "We don't carry that here, I'm afraid," he says with a young man's manners and an old man's voice. "You want to check out ELP. They carry CDs like that."

"ELP?" I whisper back at Mel. He's at a loss.

"Yessir," he says, the trance fading. He taps his cane twice. "ELP was one of them other stores. Don't know too much, but I know they were the only ones that had them CDs at the register. At least that kind." I stand and thank him. We head out for the nearest gas station where I can get him his magazine.

"ELP was a store, a smaller chain," I review off my HUD of my pre-mission notes as Mel revs the engine. I don't know if that's needed when he

cranks it, or if he just likes doing it. To be fair, if I had a car with this kind of muscle, I'd want to let the neighbors know. "They only had a few stores. They didn't operate for long before they got absorbed." Mel waits patiently as I think. "We need to find a shipping manifest," I realize.

I run a quick search and find there's wi-fi at this retirement home. Its password protected, which means it takes me less time to hack than for me to tell Mel, "Hold on a second." I bring up my HUD's browser and start an internet search, checking sites. "I can't figure out what happened to them, if they were bought out or..." I report, more speaking aloud than sharing pertinent information. "If their office is still there..." I look through my HUD at Mel. "You know where Rosemary street is?"

ELP's main office was on the second floor of an office building downtown. Judging by the cardboard over the first floor's windows and the broken neon light outside the tailor's office just below it, nobody has legally been here in a while.

I ascend the cement steps to the front door. Heavy chains are wrapped over the handles. I'm about to break out my trusty-ish lock pick set but just touching the door causes the hinges give. The heavy door leans forward, the chains all that keeps it from falling on me. I check with Mel if this sort of thing happens regularly. He seems unimpressed so I guess so. We head inside.

The smell of urine and mold greets us for a second time today. The office space has been turned into a shanty town by the homeless. I smell fire and see burn marks on the roof. Trash is everywhere. Little forts and other structures have been erected in corners. The place is clogged with cheap tents and other housing options that should have been temporary years ago.

There are stairs to immediately greet us, the third stair rotted out. When I step on the first stair, the whole structure groans angrily. I check back with Mel who seems amazed at my weight. I guess it didn't occur to me, or maybe he doesn't even realize, how cybered I am. Funny, I tend to assume that's a job requirement. Maybe in Alabama, it's not as common.

We very carefully ascend the steps. More homeless people are up here, but they keep mostly out of sight. At the head of the steps, I see a 2nd Floor Directory and, sure enough, there's ELP's main office to our right. The door's been kicked in and been re-attached very flimsily. I push with minimal effort and it swings in.

To greet us are two naked women in a carnal embrace, their hands between each other's legs, and a much younger woman filming them. Both sapphic performers shriek while the camerawoman grabs up a pistol and turns it on us. Mel freaks out and grabs for his shotgun way too slowly. I just hold out a calming hand at the camerawoman. "Chill, lady." I say it with just a touch of condescension, like it should be obvious we're not here for her or her starlets.

The two nude ladies scamper behind a tent and hide jiggly bits and scars. I can see hollow eyes and sunken cheeks as well as spindly fingers. One woman looks anorexic, and chemically so. The other has limbs just as skinny but a rubbery midsection that has tattoos that have been warped by age and wear. The camerawoman looks a bit healthier, though I suspect it's only from shorter exposure to this lifestyle. Her jacket is more than a hand-me-down and her men's pants are a few sizes too big. As the performers hurriedly unstrip into sweatpants and multiple shirts, I address the camerawoman. "What are you doing?"

"Filming a porno," the woman/girl says with hatred. Fingers retighten on the handle of the pistol. "We got to do SOMETHING to eat." She speaks like she blames me for her plight. Not just me, anyone. Everyone. Her left eye is red and blood-shot, and patches of dull blonde hair are missing from her scalp. I can't tell if they fell out or were pulled out. Her skin along her hair is irritated and breaking out.

Poverty versus porno is an age-old debate and I'm not getting in the middle of it. "Look, we need some records from out of this place," I tell her with a look at the office. It's still full of filing cabinets and other storage bins. "You want to help us out?" She scoffs. "Make some money?"

Camerawoman looks uncertain. The thinner of her stars, however, shouts, "You got it!"

Mercenary work can be full of action. It can be glamorous and delightful, full of thrills and adventure. Or it can be stressful and terrifying. For every hot tub of grateful models, there's a shootout in some alley where you're sure you're going to be left for dead, alone and forgotten. For every rooftop chase, there's sewer diving. For every easy fight, there's a brutal brawl that leaves you shaken from your soul to your bicuspid. Those are the extremes though. Because a lot of the time, mercenary work is just tedious and boring.

People think street mercs know guns forwards and backwards. People think we're combat experts, trained in every form of martial arts and warfare. And, let's be honest, we are and that's true. But you want to know what serious mercs are also trained in: the Dewey Decimal System. The

BISAC system. NLM Classification. The Library of Congress system. Hell, I even took a class with a rogue librarian (boy, there's a tragic line of work these days) on the Ranganathan's system.

You learn filing systems. Whether it's paper files or digital files, you learn how to navigate all the ways people organize their information. Why? Because we get hired a lot to deal with information. Always to find it, and then to conceal it, destroy it, ship it, send it, share it, something. Every job is different but I'm confident at least half of our jobs involve information. And information is always categorized. Always.

See, in the day of corporations, information and the ability to get it is tantamount to gold (definitely worth more these days, too). If you're smart, you learn every system of organization there is and you learn it fast. When you've snuck passed the cameras and you've got three minutes before security figures out you're in their system, you have GOT to find the targeted data. Every second you can shave off a search is that much better a chance you have to see tomorrow.

I say this because A) I once located a lost kid using just the spine of her favorite book and figuring out which library she frequented because of their filing system, so you best believe I work that into every conversation I can and B) because I probably clear 60% of the ELP office in the time it takes both performers, the camera girl, and Mel, to get through one shelf each. If you know what you're looking for, you can quickly discount whole racks of papers. If you don't know what you're looking for, you just flip through each sheet until you find something that looks promising. Still, even if they can clear one metal filing cabinet, that's a help.

"Hey, is this important?" asks one of the performers. Me and Mel turn as she holds up a manila folder with a hand that is solid black from so many tattoos. The pages inside the folder slip and they spill out onto the floor. She curses, but I start to pick up the sheets. "Sorry," she says.

"No, it's fine," I tell her as I look over the pages. "Actually, you may have found something."

"Do I get a bonus?" she asks. I can't fault someone trying to hustle me for every dime when she's resorted to doing porn for food.

"What is it?" asks Mel so I don't have to answer her.

"Terms of sale," I say as I begin scanning the page. Both visually and literally. My eyes make a line-by-line record of the document, just in case I need it later. "Looks like ELP was bought out, by Termagant Enterprises." I lower the page. I think this through for a moment. "Makes sense. Once Termagant became the cornerstone of all shopping on the internet, they started buying up the local retailers left and right. Usually after driving them

out of business.” Really, it’s a standard practice these days. I check the net and confirm several wi-fi networks available. I start to hop online.

A quick search and I practically exclaim, “There’s a Termagant warehouse outside of town?” I look at Mel. “Geez, no wonder your local economy sucks.”

“Hey, them people gotta work,” Mel argues.

“Exploiting temporary employment laws isn’t work,” I dismiss. I get some more files from the ground and read over them. “Termagant bought ELP’s excess inventory, so if the CD’s anywhere, it’ll be at that warehouse.” I look to the girl and women and sigh. “I don’t have cash.” The three look furious, but don’t say anything. I think real quick and then suggest, “Do you like O’Tolley’s?”

Under the bright lights of the garish fast food restraint, the three-woman porn team take their overloaded trays from the counter. “Can I get three fifty-dollar gift cards too?” I ask the woman behind the register. As she rings me up, I look to Mel who’s sucking down a milkshake. “Do you know where the Termagant warehouse is?”

He shakes his head. “I can call Matt, though. He probably does. It’s always out of town, I can tell you that.”

“What are your highways like?”

Mel scoffs. “I ain’t gonna risk the highway patrol.”

“Backroads?” I ask instead.

He gives it some thought. “Depending on where it is, we should be fine. Most of them are still paved, if cracked to hell. Definitely overgrown. `Course, if it’s it not in a civilized part of the state...” He cocks his head to the side, as if marveling at the danger. I’ve heard horror stories, but in my experience, they’re usually watered down.

Cards bought and distributed, we leave for the darkness of rural Alabama. With a quick detour to the autoshop.

Pell City Alabama is a straight shot east from Birmingham. The Termagant warehouse opened up there in the first decade of the new millennium and promptly took over the local economy. It employed all the workers at stellar rates...until the local businesses started going out of business. Termagant offered great benefits, on-site resources, and early

access to hot products. And like all corporations, once competition dwindled and regulation was loosened, those benefits began to fade. Quickly.

By the end of the second decade, the Pell City Distribution Center was little more than a slave farm. Everybody was making pennies on the dollar of minimum wage, without any benefits or job security. Exploiting temp-worker laws, Termagant would fire an employee just before 90 days, only to rehire them the next day, all to avoid hiring full-time workers. Underpaying the workforce allowed Termagant to create an entirely dependent community. They sold healthcare and food and housing, but at marked-up prices, requiring the workers to take out loans from the corporate bank. All at rates that seemed good unless they read the fine print, and even then, it's not like there was much choice. At the same time, Termagant kept up a vicious disinformation campaign to convince the workers that it was the union's fault, or migrant workers, or whoever the scapegoat du jour happened to be. Anybody but Termagant itself. And the corporation made money hand over fist all the while. I'd be more disgusted but, like I said, this is the go-to business model for most corporations these days.

The result is that the lands between Birmingham and Pell City are less country rural and more hellish landscape of redneck dystopia. Those who couldn't or wouldn't work for Termagant tried to live off the land, which turned them into little more than primitives. They took to feudalism and setting up stone-age forts with satellite TVs and trampolines in the backyards. So long as they didn't cause the corporations too much headache, the corps didn't hire mercs to deal with the problem or lobby the state government to do something about it. That means the locals prey on one another, or the rare traveler driving through their territory.

This is relevant the first time we come to a blockade.

A bridge crossing the Cahaba River is blocked with busted up, rusted vehicles. I'm pretty sure Mel's car-truck hybrid could either slam through them or just ride over them, but he slows, his great engine still growling under idle. "I don't think the bridge is going to hold the truck's weight," he tells me.

"Yeah, not with all those guys on it," I agree.

There's about ten deer hunters dressed up in militia costumes. They've got hunting rifles and revolvers, although one dude is sporting a machinegun that I'm pretty sure can't fire. "I'll handle this," I tell Mel before slipping out of his car. I glance behind us and confirm there are some more guys in the bushes a few paces behind the bridge. Pretty poor flanking, but it probably works most days.

I approach the main crowd ahead of us with my hands very casually up and away from my guns. "Sup," I call to the leader. He's a bearded

older dude in a ducking-hunting jacket and camo pants. He looks like the type with more cars that don't run than do, and a penchant for girls younger than his daughters. "I need to get passed. How can we make that happen?" Just come right out and ask the toll.

"Depends on what you got," the guy tells me. "That car sure looks nice."

I feign considering it. "I dunno. Dude behind the wheel's pretty attached to it. And his guns." I give the leader a 'it ain't worth it' look. I look passed him at the blockade. "Those the best cars you got?"

Duck Dynasty looks back at the cars and laughs. "Not a chance."

"You know the roads out here are pretty rough," I tell him, just as an observation. "I bet their hell on your tires." The man looks at me with willingness. I look back at Mel and nod. The trunk pops and he gets out, his shotgun real obvious, as are his oh-so-impressive muscles. Sheesh, way to be subtle. Anyway, he goes around back and takes from the trunk a big truck tire. With some serious strength, he hoists it into the air and the tire slams onto the edge of the bridge, bouncing a few times before it comes to a stop a few feet from me and Phil Robertson. I look at the tire, at Redneck Prime, and back at the tire. "How about this and three more, for safe passage through your territory?" He gives the tire some serious consideration. "Common size, so they'll definitely fit one of your cars," I sweeten the pot. "100,000-mile warranty if you trust that sort of thing. I even kept the receipt."

The man nods slow. "You got a deal." I shake hands with a devil and count myself fortunate. I'll count myself legitimately lucky if he upholds his end of the bargain.

"That tire move was slick," Mel says as we rumble through backwoods Alabama. We've got no radio reception so the stereo's playing something from his phone. I can't tell what it is and I'm not paying close enough attention.

"Thanks," I accept, looking out the window. I see a cluster of trailers down a small ravine. One trailer's roof caved in. I'm not sure that's stopped anyone from living in it. I see kids playing in the dirt near the river.

"Those were nice tires, too," says Mel.

"It's not a bribe if it doesn't cost a lot," I observe. He's feeling me out. He's going to cross me. The only question is if he'll do it before, at, or after the warehouse.

I'm not sure monolith is the correct term for the Termagant Warehouse. I associate monolith with tall and while the warehouse is definitely that, it's bigger than that. In the neighborhood of four stories tall, it's probably two or three times as wide. Not sure how deep it is, but I'm guessing miles wouldn't be the worst measurement.

There's a cement wall with a metal gate that rolls into place. Not sure if they're trying to keep out cannibals or the state militia. Not sure which would surprise me more. There's a guard station but nobody there. My guess is the entire facility is automated at this point. I have Mel pull up to the gate and keep the motor primed.

I slip down out of Mel's car and approach the guard station. The (armored) glass of the door is cracked, a spindle web coursing through the material. I tap at it with my knuckle and pop out a few fragments. It takes some muscle but I'm able to knock in the glass enough to get at the door handle on the inside. The smell of refuse and death wafts through the hole.

Inside is a corpse. More skeleton than body, he's been dead a long time. There's food packaging around him, all of it junk food, the kind you'd get in the warehouse. He's bundled up tight. I'm guessing he didn't have anywhere else to live. I check the gate controls and try a few of them but get only declined responses. Easy enough to remedy.

I could hack the system. It wouldn't be that hard, but giant corporations pay a lot for top-of-the-line security systems. It would take a minute to be sure. Fortunately, corporations often can't allow for the human element, so it only takes a minute of digging through the corpse's pockets to find his phone. It's still got enough juice to turn on, so I check the signal settings and get the password. From there, it's a simple act of ordering the gate to open. It's rumbling back before I turn away. "Thanks, buddy," I tell the corpse, leaving him in his final resting place.

I climb back into Mel's car and he shifts it into gear. "You know this place has security systems, right?"

"I do," I tell him.

"What do we do when we have to deal with them?" he pushes.

I leave it at, "We deal with them." With a double-point of my finger, I urge him on. With only a bit of reticence, we start forward.

Greeting us through the gate is a massive parking lot full of abandoned cars. Some of them were clearly turned into homes at one point, too. Like with the security guard at the gate, I feel confident in assuming they're now caskets. There's a part of me that wants to go digging through the cars and see if there's anybody left, but another part of me – the part

that's seen this sort of thing before – knows the ferality of any who might remain. Rather than look to help, I check all six of my guns to make sure they're loaded. Before today's done, there's going to be shooting.

The Termagant warehouse has a main gate at the front that looks big enough to house a space shuttle. The heavy metal doors part down the middle but forcing them open would be impossible. Next to the giant doors, however, are smaller human doors on either side. Both require keycard access, or wi-fi and a quick sixteen-digit hacking program. I run it as Mel and me walk to the door. As I reach for the handle, the door pops open in compliance.

Inside, we find signs of a riot. The initial room is cement with nothing but benches. No lockers or cabinets or anything. There's blood in a few corners, stains that have festered into mold. It's been a while but I'm guessing this was a serious brawl. You might think this was some inhuman horror from the eldritch depths, but it was probably just the last day workers were employed here. When even slave labor gets laid off, there are some sore feelings.

Through the foyer is another security lock (yay, hacking!) and we get a gauntlet of scanners. Metal detectors. X-ray devices (...aren't those illegal?). A bio-scanner (yep, those are WAY illegal). Even a cybernetic code sequencer (those are too esoteric to even have laws governing them). Geez, I've seen military facilities less secure. Black box military facilities at that.

There are cameras in every corner of the room, and a few in the middle. There are no blind spots, and no corner that doesn't have at least two vantages. Even more, some of the cameras move. I know because they move when we come in. "Mel," I say and nod at the camera that looks at us. He cocks his shotgun. "Sup," I tell the camera before he can poke the bear with a stick. "We're here to get an item. We'll place an order and pay."

The camera just stares.

"Why are you talking to it?" Mel whispers.

"Because it pays to be nice to machines," I assure him.

"It's a camera," says Mel.

"It's not alone," I warn him. I lead Mel through the gauntlet of scanners, ignoring them when they make noises. Lots of bells and whistles and buzzers and alarms. I almost feel like a contestant on one of those kids' obstacle course shows. Only, like one of the kids that sucks and he does absolutely everything wrong.

We get to the next door: a metal door with security bolts, two of which have to be manually opened. The latches are loose. I'm guessing the result of fighting and damage. I'm just not sure on which side of the door the fights took place. I start to undo the locks but when I go to open the door, I discover its locked on the other side too. What the hell? Talk about fire hazard. Although, come on, this place has the best anti-fire system in existence. It's just not for the employees' benefit.

I juggle the handle for a second before Mel says, "Come on, man, pull."

"I am pulling," I insist.

"Let me," condescends captain muscle. He grabs the handle and yanks, then stops when he realizes just how sturdy this is. I see him check on me out of the corner of his eye and then he pulls again. He strains for a second, then he steps on the wall, trying to pull the door. Nada. "Damn," he curses, giving up without acknowledging his equal inability. "Well, want to find another entrance?"

"They'll all gonna be the same," I surmise.

"Can you hack it?" he asks.

I shake my head. "These are the manual locks."

"I don't see how we're going to get through," he says. "Shoot it?"

"That's 32-gauge steel, man." When he readies his shotgun, I go hide behind an X-ray scanner. Given there was a riot and these scanners are not just standing but in working order, I'm guessing they can take the ricochet of a shotgun blast. And they do! Click, bang, boom, ricochet. I peek out from behind the scanner and look at Mel. He glares at me like it's my fault, the door sporting nothing more than a scratch.

I check the roof. No tiles; just concrete. Concrete we might be able to shoot through since ceiling materials almost always need to be a bit porous, but I'd rather not waste the rounds or the time. We might be able to go back outside and climb the wall, but I doubt Mel's much of a climber. Whelp, only one thing to do. When hacking and brute force won't work, go to science.

"Come here," I tell Mel and we go to the X-ray scanner. I kick the machine and it doesn't budge. Oh, I'm going to enjoy this. "This is your fault," I yell to the camera that's been watching us this whole time. I punch the scanner's inner window, cracking the glass. "If you worked with us, we wouldn't be doing this." I reach inside and grab a whole bunch of wires.

"What are you doing?" asks Mel.

"We're going to polarize the door," I explain as I yank the wires towards the door. "If I'm right – and what are the chances of that happening? – we'll magnetize the door and it will repel the locks."

Mel stares with a dumb look. "We're going to what?"

I'm spending way too much effort tugging these wires. "Just...give me some muscle here."

It takes us almost ten minutes. The wires I'm pulling on eventually tear, so we have to start over. Once we've broken inside the X-ray machine, we basically have to dismantle it. That takes a hot minute, but it usually does when you're trying to take something apart rather than break it. The whole machine is eventually gutted and I'm able to plug the wires into the door like we're trying to jump a car battery.

"Here we go," I warn Mel before we touch the door with the wires. We heard a bang. "Cool," I say with pride. I try the handle and it doesn't open. "Crap, we just secured them further. And then I get to say the sentence hadn't realize I'd lived my whole life to say: "Let's reverse the polarity."

Mel stares blankly. "Let's what?"

"Reverse the...the polarity?" I repeat, less confident. "Go from positive to nega...nevermind." We switch out the wires and the flow of electrons. There's a slick unsheathing sound and the door half-pops inward. I grin like a fool. 3rd grade science and too many Star Trek reruns have finally paid off.

Of course, when we open the door I was so proud of unlocking, a team of security robots are waiting for us.

"Go left!" I yell immediately, strafing to the right. Reason and Respect, my two primary pistols, begin to unload on the primary two robots. They're big gray domes with red eye slits, looking like the portly cousins of Maximillian from the Black Hole. Mel goes left, pegging the two machines at the back that look like skeletons on treads. One of each turns to go after us.

Pre-weight-loss Max comes at me, shooting a current of electricity at where I was a second ago. I blast its projector with a shot from Respect, blowing the gun off and blowing a hole in its torso. I follow it with a shot from Reason, a precision weapon with more accuracy than a laser. The bullet goes right through the damage hole before Max can turn. I hear the ricochet inside and Max starts to fidget and spin before he falls over.

The Terminator Tank starts to rumble towards me, two giant hands reaching out. He may not have guns but he's all armor. I have to empty both clips into his torso before finally bringing him to a halt. People wonder why robots have heads and faces? It's so humans will shoot them there and not in their torsos where their actual processors are. Going for the head on a robot is dumb.

As I change out my magazines, I see a headless Max and a headless Terminator going after Mel as he retreats. I start to peg Terminator from behind. He's got thicker armor on the back (in case of a riot), so I don't score a full hit until I change out magazines again. He sputters and dies like his brother.

Rubenesque Max doesn't deviate from his target and chases after Mel as he retreats behind a shelf. I'm not getting through his armor unless he comes at me with a weapon out, and he's going to keep on his primary target, however arbitrarily selected he is.

It dawns on me to adjust his selection. I shout "Hey, robo...mall cop!" (look, they can't all be winners) and I start shooting at the shelves. Just firing indiscriminately at the merchandise. If I shoot up the box with the CDs, I'm going to be sooooo pissed.

It works because Maxi-weighs-a-million turns and comes right at me. Taser out, I rinse and repeat one shot from Respect and one shot from Reason. Down he goes, collapsing to the ground like a dropped brick. No shower of sparks or crash; just suddenly inert. "You okay?" I call to Mel as he comes out from hiding, sporting a few nasty electrical burns. He nods, out of breath and rolling his shoulder like he's trying to walk off the bad shock. "Okay, we got to move fast. More of them are on their way."

"How we going to find it in here?" he asks, looking at the warehouse.

This thing is all one BIG room. Giant. Colossal. Huge. Absolutely massive shelves are packed to the definition of dense, with almost no room between them. Little elevated retrieval bots zip on tracks connecting the shelves, removing objects at breakneck speeds and depositing them into waiting trucks that then take said products to be wrapped for shipment. Nothing has an interface. I could hack them but it would take time, and my attention, and the air is alight with the hum of robots approaching. The smooth cement floor is positively vibrating with the rolling treads.

I look behind us and see a few additional doors. "Come on," I say before dashing for the next door. I yank the handle and it's locked. It's also wood so screw that. I kick it twice and it breaks enough to force open. We slip inside before we see any other robots. We're in an office, so jackpot. "Secure the door," I tell Mel. I run to the nearest computer. I put my hand right on the computer terminal so I can expedite the connection.

I dive into the computer and find myself in a corporate office. That's just a visual representation, though. What's happening in reality is my brain is processing all the 0s and 1s and displaying it in a format my mind can process. I rush up to the main desk where a lovely woman with jerky, inhuman movements smiles with the uncanny-est valley smile ever. "How can I...you?" she asks.

"I'm looking for a discount CD sold at ELP music stores," I tell her. I quickly add, "I want all of them. All the CDs, all copies."

The woman smiles wider (which is so damn creepy) and starts to simulate typing. "We have no such CDs labeled like that. Can I interest you in—"

"Do you have a list of all unlisted acquisitions? Unlisted on the Termagant website?" I ask quickly. Having dived into a computer, I can't tell what's going on outside of me. The robots may have already overwhelmed Mel. This has got to happen quick.

"I do," says the woman with a smile that's fake even for a faux computer program. "I am afraid you don't have authorization to see that list."

I dive back out real quick to check on Mel. He's got the door blocked with a heavy desk and he's sitting on the desk, adding his weight to it. He seems fine otherwise. "Just a minute," I tell him and I dive back in. I'm back in front of the woman in the nice corporate foyer. I step back out of myself, like a ghost leaving a body. I see the world of code, halfway between the reality of computer hacking and the Hollywood version that makes it more dramatic, and thus more fun.

I review the drives and executable files in the code and look for opening keys. I change out some code using a fake diagnostic software, which is kind of like using modified RNA to change the DNA of a cell. I slip back into my simulated body and the woman smiles again. "Got that list of unlisted stuff?" I ask her.

"It's available right here," she says, handing me a tablet computer.

I take the tablet and see a list. Crap, it's long. Twenty-nine pages of just the products starting with the letter A, long. Okay, discard all the compilations. Discard the indie artists. Discard discounted versions of more popular collections. Slammin' Wrestling Hits? Who would buy this stuff?

I purge the list of like 90% of the titles. Anything that couldn't possibly be Eubanks' album, I purge. "Okay, pull all of this," I tell the woman and hand her back the tablet with the remaining titles. "I want every copy of every album on this list. Ready for shipment. Pickup on-site."

"Yes sir," she says with a voice that sounds way too enthusiastic. "How would you like to make your payment?" I suppose I could just hack this part too, but you think a corporation will kill you for breaking and entering? Imagine what they'll do to you for stiffing them on payment. I extend a credit card for Eubanks account (which is actually just auto-filling out the billing information in their system). "No problem, sir, this will take just a second," she assures me. The bill is a surprisingly small number.

Given I'm buying a bunch of CDs, I'm worried the one I want isn't amongst them, but no time to worry about that now. Giant, armored, killer robots are on their way, if they're not here already.

"Order has been filled," she informs me. "The package is awaiting you at our facility. Go to the—" I dive out. We got killing to do.

I turn to Mel as he bangs in a bit from the robots on the other side of the door. "Ready?" I call.

"Whenever you are, boss," he says through the strain of holding the door.

I step back from the desk and hop once. "On three," I tell him.

"You mean," he asks suddenly, stopping my energy. "Like one, two, THREE, or one, two, three, then..."

"It's musical!" I yell at him. I count as I tap a pretend cymbal with one of my guns. "One, two, three, go!"

"Okay!" he yells back at me.

"One, two, three!" I yell and hop into a sprint. Mel rolls off the desk as I leap at the door and dropkick it. Sturdy wood goes spraying out as the door is knocked into Bloated Maximillian. There are six Tank Terminators this time and four Maximillians. We ain't winning this fight, and I bet there's still an order of magnitude more of them on the way. I backpedal out of the crowd, firing shots with Reason and Respect just to keep their attention. I manage to do that and ten robots turn to me like a crowd of hobos wanting your meatball sub.

Mel slips out and I keep backing up. The robots are quickly approaching, but I back into one of the order robots. I glance back and see a big-ish brown box with my name on it and Eubanks' mailing address. "Son of a bitch," I both say and think. I slip my guns into their thigh holsters, grab the box, and sprint for the door. "Cheese it!" I yell to Mel as we both start to run.

Tank Terminator gets in my way, so I hoist the box into the air. It sails in a tight arc (no spiral, though) and Mel catches it. He spins around another Tank Terminator and leaps ahead. He falls back as a Maximillian closes in, then goes for a lateral pass to me. I catch it and stiff-arm a Terminator before rushing around to the outside. We both run and make it to the door we came through, sliding inside as the robots rush to catch up. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't an urge to spike the box.

We don't stop in the security room, we run straight through. The far door is swinging closed but Mel grabs up a piece of the X-ray machine and throws it at the doors. It doesn't exactly block them from closing, but it

slows them down enough for us to both dive through like we're trying to escape an explosion out of an action movie. The box gets caught though.

On the other side of the door, Mel and I blanch at the box caught between the closing doors. Thinking quickly, Captain Redneck grabs out a giant knife and slashes the cardboard shipping box. CDs spray out and I grab up all of them that I can. Mel does the same and we manage to get the majority of the discs. Our arms absolutely full of old-style jewel cases, we go racing out of the building.

Running like the most unambitious looters in the world, we make it to the car as we hear the whirr of drones from the rooftop of the facility. The drones are slim and sleek, but wide, like surfboards flying sideways. They're also armed with enough firepower to take out a municipal skyscraper. We don't have long before they start shooting, so we toss all the CDs into the floorboard of my side of the truck and Mel shifts into gear. I check the side mirror just before seeing the Vulcan cannon of a drone shoot off said mirror. Somebody screams "Holy hell!" and I'm pretty sure it was me.

Mel roars out from the space and races down the main thoroughfare of the parking lot. Two drones zip after us, raining down fire all around us, but fortunately scoring few hits. The roof has some tiny sunroofs in it now and we lose a couple of copies of 'Romantic Sea Ballads', but whatever. As Mel drives, swerving this way and that to avoid rapid gunfire like a water hose of death as well as plenty of grenade-quality missiles, I open the door and take out Victory. A small shotgun of a pistol, Victory's firepower isn't measured in kilotons but only because then it would be classified as a war crime to carry it. I pull the trigger and the drone explodes hard enough to ignite some of the nearby trees.

I think the other drone got scared, I really do, because when the smoking fire of its partner subsides, I don't see it anywhere. The corpse of Robbie the Robot crashes into the road behind us and Mel begins to slow down. I look at him, he looks at me, and we both laugh.

Few joys in this life can match surviving when it all goes to hell. As mercenaries – whether you're talking about street mercs, professional mercs, or just hired thugs – the thrill of making it out of a dead-end situation like that is simply indescribable. We all have our own way of celebrating but it's usually something along the lines of a cold beer and a warm body.

As we drive back through rural Alabama, I go sorting through the CDs on the floorboard. I discard quite a few that turn out not to be viable candidates (who names their punk album 'Sounds of Rain?'). I organize the rest into groups. There's not a single CD I don't have multiple redundant

copies of, so assuming it was in the warehouse, we've got it here in my hands.

"You got it?" asks Mel as I sit back.

I just sigh. "I damn sure hope so."

As we drive, the afternoon settles into dusk. Fireflies begin to appear in the night, a multitude of them illuminating the dark patches of the trees. Leaves light up under their surprising numbers, making the night twinkle. Amidst gossamer draped from branches and the trees swaying in the cooling night breeze, the beauty of Alabama reveals itself. For a moment I forget about the poverty and harsh practices that have become so common, they're the culture. Instead, I see a natural beauty I'm not used to seeing in Sacramento. The sky is a rich color I don't know the name of and the air has a sweetness to it like a memory.

We return to urban life and civilization, such that it is. Mel takes me straight to the merc office, which is fine with me. I've packed some of the CDs into some of the pockets of my combat harness and I carry the rest. We go strolling inside to find Mat still behind the desk, filling out forms. He looks up and smiles. "How'd it go?"

"Well," I say, knowing full well how bad me and Mel look. "I'd like to settle up, please."

Mat looks more than a little delighted. I'm worried how many paying customers they get. He tallies things up quickly and hands over a legal pad with the numbers jotted all over. The final total is circled at the bottom. Of course, it's about fifteen percent more than I was quoted. I don't bother asking about the different charges. Whether they're made up or legit, I have to pay them or shoot both these guys. I don't want to do that. I pay. I even tip Mel 10%. Not quite fair but maybe it'll leave them with a good impression of out-of-town work.

"Thanks for your help, guys," I tell them both, shaking their hands and smiling. I collect my CDs and get on my way. I push through the glass door into the dilapidated parking lot of the shopping center forgotten by time, and definitely forgotten by customers.

There are six armed men waiting in the parking lot.

I sigh, still kind of smiling at the inevitability of it all. I notice the door doesn't shut behind me and I turn back to see Mel and Mat walking a few steps behind me. I just ask, "Really?"

Mat justifies his pending inaction with, "You're off the company's time now."

I've got my hands full of CDs (which, even seeing this coming, I should have known not to do) so I can't quick-draw on these guys. They've all got long guns (four shotguns and two rifles), so I bet I could drop four of them before they even started shooting. However, Mel is behind me. Even if I'm as good as I think I am and they're as bad as I think they are, this is a bad spot to be in.

"What do you want?" I ask, bored.

"The discs," says Mel. "And who you were selling them to."

Again, I sigh. "Okay," I surrender. I turn around to Mel and hold out the CDs. "His name is Adelphus Masters. He lives in Portland Oregon." I put the CDs in Mel's hands, switch on dark vision, and activate my virus sitting in the utility company's code.

Every light in the shopping center flashes bright and then goes dark. It's like a dozen lightning flashes all at once then total black. My dark vision buffers for the flash and then I'm the only one who can see. I whirl around with Reason and Respect, three shots with each and all of Mel's dudes are dead. After tipping this ass 10% on top of them already price gauging me? Yeah, I'm not shooting to wound.

Mel's dropped the CDs and is grabbing his shotgun when I shove him against the store front and put Respect to his chin. I slam his head hard into the glass hard enough for the chaotic pattern of cracks to reach the frame, then I get real close. I'm pissed. I saw this coming but it still pisses me off. "You're going to betray a fellow merc?" I accuse him. Actually, that's probably a poor stance to take. Mercs betray one another all the goddamn time. "You're going to betray a paying customer after the king's ransom I just paid you? What the hell's wrong with you, fool?"

Mat's fumbles out a pistol of his own and is putting it to my head. "Quit it," I just tell him, sparing him a glance and nothing more. When the pistol isn't removed, I slap it away and then punch Mel in the side of the neck when he tries to get his shotgun ready. I yank the gun out of Mel's hand and field strip it (not an easy thing to do when you've got a pistol in your hand). As I dismantle it, I toss parts and shells in all directions. I stand over him, Respect still in my hand. "The only reason I'm not shooting you - either of you," I make clear to Mat, "is because my bullets are worth more than your lives."

I collect as many of the CDs as I can in one scoop. I get at least three of each CD. "I'm putting a stop payment on that charge," I tell Mat. He drops his hands like that's just mean of me. I backpedal a good distance to make sure Mel isn't going to cobble together his shotgun or draw a backup

weapon, but he looks like he's accepted defeat. Once I'm most of the way out of the parking lot, then I risk turning and walking (briskly) into the night.

Back in the hotel, I grab up my stuff and pack quickly. One set of CDs goes in my bags. One set stays in my harness. The remaining sets, I package for mail. One goes to Eubanks directly, overnighted. One goes to Macee's agency. Redundancy is your friend when it comes to transporting valuable goods.

Next, I call the airport and book the next flight to Sacramento. No, I don't care what airline. No, I don't care about layovers. No, I don't care about drink service. No, I don't care about anything except getting off the ground as fast as possible. I'm not even going to bother with trying to arrange an air marshal situation. I gotta go.

Lastly, I call a transport. They're like a taxi but where you don't run the risk of being dropped off at an alley to get jumped by a whole squad of junkies. Once that's confirmed, I grab my bags and make for the front desk. I check out (and buy some snack crackers because they've got nekot & peanutbutter). The transport is pulling up as I'm on cracker four of six.

Dude's car has flames on the side, which is kind of awesome. He pops the trunk and I throw my stuff in the back. When the door doesn't open though, I freeze. "No eating," he yells through the window. I scowl at him and shove the last of the crackers in my mouth. They're harder to savor but I manage. Off to the airport we go!

The door opens and the suspiciously young butler is there. "Mr. Rhest," he says with professional aloofness. He bows his head a bit and steps back to open the door wider for me. "Please, come in."

I'm straight from the airport. I got a bit of sleep on the flight, but not much because we had to fly over Texas. "Mission was a success...I think." I take out the CDs from my harness, having to dig through multiple different pockets. As I take them out, I push them into the butler's arm, quickly overwhelming him with the juggling act. "If any of them are scratched or won't play, I've got redundants that I mailed from the airport in Alabama. One grouping is coming straight here."

"Very good, sir," says the butler, still struggling to keep from dropping even a single CD. He manages with surprising grace. "Mr. Eubanks will be delighted, sir." His words are ecstatic but his tone is placid and even flat.

The blonde babyface butler leads me into a different room this time, a study. Giant walls of books head up to an abnormally tall ceiling painted to look like a cheerful blue sky. A giant window looks out over the side yard and Eubanks is staring into the distance. "Mr. Rhest, sir," says the butler as he enters the study. He walks with an awkward tilt to keep control of the CDs.

Eubanks wheels around in his manual wheelchair, the left wheel squeaking on the soft gray carpet. "Quick work, sir," says the old man, delighted. His voice is raspy. Next to him, he has two glasses. One's of orange juice, the other is of chlorophyll. Quite the odd combination of smells.

"It turned out to be relatively straightforward," I report to him. "I, uh, I hope I got it."

Eubanks develops a bit of a light in his expression as he wheels over towards the serving table. The butler is laying out the CDs for his consideration, setting out each jewel case like it's a priceless treasure. To Eubanks, one of them is. He only needs to glance at them before his eyes light up like a child on Christmas morning. His voice doesn't shake but his finger does. "That one," he says, pointing at one CD on the back row. The cover is a fairly affair with purple clouds of a thunderstorm and some generic font. Layout is like what a middle school student would throw together the day before a design assignment is due. "I remember it," he tells me with a smile. That time, his words tremble. He swallows tightly as his eyes tear up. "Won't you..." He gestures very generally at the butler.

"Of course, sir," says his man. The butler takes the CD with surprising care and, wearing white gloves as befitting his role, approaches a shelf of books. He lays down a very convincing masquerade to reveal a really nice sound system. When he turns it on, the room takes on a hum. Really, really nice sound system. Out slides a CD tray which I can't see but hear, the room is so quiet. I'm not sure Eubanks is breathing, he's so excited. The butler starts the CD with a beep.

"I hope this is it," says the old man, wringing his hands in his lap. He's quiet now. Humbled before the possibility he had thought impossible. I'm humbled by his eagerness.

In short order, rain begins to drift through the room. It's an elegant, delightful shower, like I can almost see the drops hitting forest leaves and dribbling onto the ground. It sounds like a soothing, gentle rain, dense and saturating. The kind of rain that makes you feel safe, not threatened. The kind of rain that all but requires inactivity and surcease. This is aural serenity.

Eubanks leans back in his wheelchair and smiles with a relief I don't think I'll ever know. Tears of quiet, gentle joy drip from the corners of his eyes. He's lost in happy thoughts, remembering every good thing that ever happened in his childhood. The CD takes him back to a time when the world made sense and he felt safe. I'm honestly envious.

Distant rumbles of harmless thunder echo in the rain while very subtle, minimalist tones of flute and violin play to accentuate the natural melody, to complement it. I look at the butler who has a pleased look on his face. He shifts towards the door. "Some water, sir?" he asks very quietly to me.

"That'd be great," I whisper back.

He departs and I share in the music with Eubanks. It's quite an experience to watch someone else reconnect with such a lost treasure. A flash of light gets my attention as a neighbor pulls in to their distant driveway. The sunlight contrasts with the music, so I silently cross the study and lower the blinds. I do it very slowly so as not to disturb the experience for Eubanks. The room is now in deep shade and thanks to the stellar sound system, it sounds like it could really be raining outside.

I walk back towards my place by the door, glancing at Eubanks again and that joyous, contented smile. It takes me a few seconds to realize that he's dead.

I approach him slowly and very gently touch his skin. With no response, I check his pulse, then feel for his breath. I'm feeling his heart when the butler returns, a frosty glass of water on a silver serving tray. He pauses at the door when he sees me over Eubanks.

"He's gone," I tell the butler, just over the sound of the rain. There's a very genuine sorrow in the young man's eyes as he places the tray to the side and joins me with Eubanks. With surprising medical skill, he confirms what I've said and seems resigned. "I'm sorry," I tell him.

He shakes his head. "It's fine." He doesn't speak like a butler, but a normal human. He cracks a smile, which is odd to see on a face I've only seen as professionally impassive. "This is, undoubtedly, the best way he could have gone." He sounds grateful as he looks down on Eubanks' smile. The old man is content in a way only sleeping children ever know.

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