

Rhest and the Polar Bear

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FROM THE MIND OF

RV A

The future is built on the corpses of the past.

Now, don't get me wrong: I love living in the future. All-night television. Instant food. Drinkable water. Guns for sale in vending machines. Cell phone video games. And I've never once gotten polio, which is so lit. The future is great, but the future exists by steamrolling over the world that was. And if there is one casualty of humanity's war against antiquity, it's the animal world. I don't deal with animals a lot, but those jobs do come at me sometimes. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

The Sunny Palms Community Commerce Estate – or the S-Palms CCE because the local radio station sucks at coming up with acronyms – is the local economic powerhouse. There are three corporate offices in the area, but nothing too significant. There's a computer manufacturing plant, a tire plant, and the usual service offerings, but most of the economic wheelin'-and-dealin' in this suburb of Sacramento California is the CCE. It's a massive, six-story commerce bonanza. A shopper's dream. A service worker's hell. Whatever term you prefer, it boils down to being just a big-ass shopping mall.

It's got eleven shoe shops, sixteen book stores, and every possible service imaginable. More than one person has moved into the mall and just lived there, thanks to the adjacent hotel and convention space. Not to mention the overnight coffins for business travelers (which you usually only see at airports). Now, everybody knows retail outlets have to offer more than just retail to win over the shoppers. There's got to be something to have them come to this physical location and buy what they could get off the internet a lot more conveniently. And this is where the mall amenities come in.

The CCE has three food courts and two cafeterias. It's got a video arcade, a garden, two pools, a gymnasium, and it even has an indoor rollercoaster. And I mean a real rollercoaster, not one of those crap-tastic corporate coasters with a spotless safety record. Nuh-uh, the CCE's coaster has at least one confirmed fatality. That's how you KNOW it's a good roller coaster. The CCE also has a modest little zoo.

Some of you can probably already tell where this is going.

I've been to a few community zoos that were...well, not good but they were okay. They tried to give the animals a good life, as best they could. They had as big of spaces as they could provide. Cycled them out with an off-site location that allowed them plenty of time outside. Tried to simulate their actual native environment. That sort of thing. And it's not like these things don't serve a purpose. Something like 7% of the animals in the zoos of the world are effectively extinct, with zoos being the only place these things not only can be seen but can survive. So, you know, the zoos try.

Their hearts are in the right place, even if their know-how (or budget) isn't always. But the S-Palms CCE? Yeah, this isn't one of those good zoos.

I reflect on that as I watch a spray-painted polar bear stomp back and forth in a cage the size of a small apartment. The bear is like an SUV on legs, pacing back and forth in a space roughly four times the size of your standard parking space. The cage is just barely tall enough for the bear to stand up in. It's about as tall as it is deep too. The room is painted white, with one corner formed into a pool that's about as big as your average kiddie pool.

The bear itself looks like a college freshman after they go on a Spring Break bender with a class of seniors. His hair is raggedy and his teeth are all discolored. His claws are chipped badly and his eyes are dull. He keeps swinging his head back and forth as he paces, over and over, back and forth, like the pendulum on some antique clock.

The zoo – such as it is – looks like a converted arcade. The carpet looks like a garish confetti-like design. It's very dark blue with assorted vibrant neon shapes splashed randomly. The walls are lined with other enclosures. Most aren't too bad in the animal-rights' sense. The beaver habitat looks a bit small, but there's only two of them. Some of the bird spaces seem sparse, like they could use some more structures and playthings. Honestly, most of this 'zoo' is made up of domesticated animals that have grown rare in an age with digital pets and animal simulators. And these are kind of decent situations, living in what amounts to a small apartment each. The cats and dogs are in groups of three and four. The other animals, the fish and the reptiles, are in terrariums that seem adequate to someone like me. None of the animals look to be in a 'good' place, but they're mostly on the 'wow, that sucks' side of the morality scale, not the 'this is a crime' side. That's where this bear resides. Firmly.

"What do you think?" asks Debbie Rudolph. She's my employer on this particular little gig. She contracted me through my staffing agency, but the details of the job were slim. If it hadn't been a slow week, I probably would have passed. As I stand here in the middle of the CCE, watching this poor behemoth pace, I'm still not sure if I made the right call accepting the job.

I remark, "I thought these things were illegal." I see the zoo's keeper-on-duty. He's got a nice uniform, reminiscent of old-world police. White shirt, gray pants with the stripe down the side, beer gut that screams the hair under his cap is a comb-over. "I thought you couldn't have any wild animals larger than, like, fifty pounds or something."

"Tornassk was born in captivity," Debbie says, sitting next to me on the bench before the polar bear. "He was born and raised at an endangered

species preserve not far from the old Redwood National Forest.” Her name may be Debbie but she’s clearly a Karen. She wears high fashion styled to look working class. Her fuzzy boots have fur trim. Name brands are prominent. Her hair looks like she gets it touched up at least one every other week.

“Thus, he’s not classified as a wild animal,” I realize. Debbie nods. She’s shorter than me by a lot, barely coming up to my armpit. She’s got that Vegan look, with thin joints and really pale skin. Stringy hair and a lack of makeup and cybernetics makes her seem especially fragile. But that look of determination in her eyes tells me she’s probably broken at least one guy who thought she was an easy mark.

I can’t watch this poor animal any longer. I turn and start to leave. We’re at the base of the CCE, Subterranean Level One. It’s just a short walk to the mall’s center, which is an open-air space that rises up at the heart of all the floors. From here, you can look up and see into the rest of the CCE. A few dozen people are walking around near us but the lowest level is mostly the attractions. Thus the shoppers – IE the people with any business to do – are elsewhere. “What’s Nanuk’s deal?” I ask about the bear.

“His name is Tornassk,” Debbie says as we walk. “It’s Greenlandic for Master of the Helping Spirits.”

“Torn-as-suk? Greenlandic? Is that really a language?” I shake my head, really not caring.

“He was in a respectable animal sanctuary that got bought by the Sunny Palms Executive Board,” she says, like he’s a person. Pretty sure his name is Growl or Grrr or whatever polar bears speak. “I’ve had his movements evaluated by two different veterinarian psychologists,” she tells me as we pass a cookie store. Fudge-chip cookies are on sale. “Both of them were certain, saying he’s suffering severe and lasting harm in this environment.”

“Yeah, who wouldn’t?” I joke. I think I’m joking. As I look at the unfettered capitalism before me, I have to wonder if I’m not seeing greed incarnate. The shops around us come in every variety. Shoe stores and print-while-you-wait t-shirt shops. High-end fashion designers and low-stake outlet dealers. Import/exporters and local crafts people. Mostly though, it’s the usual junk and pseudo-skilled services you find in any mall. Every retailer leans on their neighbor for survival. They seem to exist not on their own merit but the virtue of their collective. No single store is unique enough, cheap enough, interesting enough to bring in a customer, but their collection as a whole might just be enough to get someone to get up off their couch.

"I've petitioned the board multiple times," Debbie keeps going in that manner that only fanatics can do. "They refuse to even hear of re-homing Tornassk." She nods at a poster, faded and graffitied, that pronounces Tornassk as their newest attraction. "They're going to keep him on display until he dies, and then they'll do it again. They'll find some preserve, buy it out, and ravage it for their endangered animals."

"Oh yeah," I say as I take in the garish mall advertising, watching the shoppers who pass us. Ads play on the screens built into the walls. "They're one of those investment groups that buy thriving companies, only to run them into the ground so they can liquidate it's resources."

"Precisely," Debbie says, clearly irritated that I'm not paying attention but grateful I'm at least somewhere nearby mentally. "They did the same thing with three different toy chains. It's like they hate anything and everything that brings joy to the world."

"Well, that isn't narcotic," I say. Debbie's reaching her saturation point with my flippancy. Her 'woke white girl' glare is transcending into irritation. "What's the plan?"

Debbie's team of animal rights ne'er-do-wells is based out of the storage closet of one of the CCE's three cyber-shops. This shop specializes in internal work, meaning that they don't do a lot of business, but when business comes, it's almost always an emergency. So we're in the back room and I'm sitting on a crate of artificial lungs. Debbie is referencing a map of the CCE that they clearly stole from one of the mall kiosks. The map shows all the levels in multichromatic ink. When it was set up, you would push a button – or maybe just lean to a different angle – and the different floors would illuminate. As it lays now, it looks like a black page with blacklight ink splashed across it in a very confusing arrangement.

"We have a plan to air-lift Tornassk and get him out of Sacramento Airspace," she explains, spinning a red laser point over the top level of the CCE. There are three others in here with us. One's the receptionist for the cyber-doc office. I say receptionist, but secretary is probably more apt. Frankly, between the mini-skirt, lab coat, fake glasses, and lipstick that says sex more than her high heels, office bimbo doesn't seem out of the question. The other two on this team are guys. One's a husky-looking dude who might have played defense for his middle school football team. That or he might have spent the last four years straight-veining sodas while he played video games. I could see it going either way. Last guy has all the look of a dude who is only here because he wants to shag Debbie but doesn't have the courage to tell her straight-up so he's feigning matching idealism. I hate it when guys girlfriend-zone women.

"So what we need to do," Debbie finishes up, "is we need to get Tornassk out of his cage, into the main area, and then we will use a pulley system to lift him up onto the roof. We'll load him onto the chopper and away we go." She makes a happy little fly-away motion.

"What kind of chopper?" I ask, interjecting myself into the presentation.

Debbie looks at the other three, surprised by the question. "It's a...a helicopter. Our friend—"

"Model," I ask. I'm looking at the floor, trying to count all the ways their plan is dumb. I'm into double digits already. "What model is it?"

Debbie looks at Hurion, one of the other guys on this job. "It's uh..."

"A Sprestler?" he guesses. The way he moves his neck shows that he's got some athlete in him, underneath the excessive pasty cushioning. That or he ate an athlete once. He says 'Sprestler' with a tiny lisp, which tells me he hasn't had enough oral surgery. He phrases it like it's a question but he knows it's the correct model, so he's just insecure. Guess it's obvious why he played middle school football but didn't even make JV in high school.

"Two door, four door, or sliding door?" I push. Arms still crossed. Still staring at the floor. I'm getting into the triple digits now.

"What's it matter?" asks Davie, the other guy on the job. I'm all the more sure he's only here because he wants to bed Debbie. He sits like somebody who's seen too many samurai movies or, worse, too many samurai anime. He looks like the kind of guy who thinks swearing fealty to a woman is the most romantic thing imaginable. He probably bows to women when he's done talking to them.

"Because Sprestler have about two thousand pounds of thrust," I say.

The four eco-terrorist-wannabes look at one another, sure they missed something but not sure what. "So?" asks Hurion.

"How much do you weigh?" I ask him rhetorically, but he seems to take it like some kind of commentary on his present lack of physical shape. "That's a polar bear," I say, gesturing at the purpose of this whole operation. "Even malnourished, it still probably weighs half a ton. At least. At the very least." I look at Davie. "You think a two-person weekend chopper meant for flying to and from your mid-sized yacht is going to lift that thing? You guys think you're going to have maneuverability to handle the Sacramento PD's anti-air defenses? Because they will shoot your asses down, and the Sunny Palms Executive Board will sue your next of kin for loss of revenue connected to the death of the bear."

Kara, the cyber-doc receptionist, looks across Hurion at Debbie. "Really?" she asks. "That's so mean!" I know it's sexist but I'm sure her resume includes her bust measurements. Worse is I suspect they're bigger than her IQ.

"This is the plan," Davie informs me. Oh son, you really do not want to have an alpha-male-off with me. I've been in more fights than video games you lie about having beaten.

"It won't work," I declare apathetically. To Debbie, I say, "You can go ahead and cut my check now."

Kara asks me, "Are you really paid by check?" I don't even dignify that with a response.

"Then what will work?" Davie challenges.

I slap my thighs with both hands, a loud clap echoing through the backroom. I do this to signify that I'm shifting into serious mode, but I think it came across more like some kind of weird Polynesian Haka. I don't let embarrassment stall me (a critical lesson for any mercenary to learn early in their career). I announce, "Let's get a couple of things straight, okay? I have been hired to execute a singular operation. I will not, however, commit to an operation that will objectively fail. So right now, all you are paying is for the initial consultation fee. If you want me to plan a wildlife heist, we are in an entirely different pay bracket."

Before Davie can be an ass, or Kara or Hurion can say something stupid, Debbie asks, "Do you have any experience with wildlife liberation?"

I have to admit, I pause. Working Sacramento, I don't have too much contact with wildlife outside of coyotes, birds of prey, and the occasional Raiders fan. "Less than I should for an operation like this," I tell her. "You're dealing with an apex predator. A bear is a monster and this thing will turn on us the moment it has the chance. It doesn't know that you're trying to help us. All it knows is humans put it in there and humans have been keeping it in there. The instant it sees a human, any human, it will understandably murder them."

"Animals aren't capable of murder," Hurion says academically.

Really, hippie? I scowl. "Under normal circumstances, maybe not," I allow him. "But this bear has been stuck in a closet for god knows how long. That thing will be murder incarnate the instant it gets let out."

"Rhest," says Debbie. I look across at her. She's clearly trying to be profound, trying to bridge a personal connection, when she asks me, "What's your real name?"

"Rhest," I tell her with a genuine nod.

She wasn't expecting that. "That's your real name? It's really Rhest, with an H?" I nod. "Oh," she says and she begins to blush, her eyes wide with embarrassed shock.

I almost admire her honesty. She's really trying. And the rest of dorks wouldn't be here if they weren't trying either. Even Davie is going through with this. Usually the pining-after-the-girl-loser would have backed out by now. And this isn't like the usual kidnapping operation because there's no ransom. There's no financial support here. Nobody's going to say 'good job' and cut them a funding check. These people are here solely because they feel a need to be. And that's admirable. But admirable doesn't pay the bills. And while everything a street merc's world doesn't come down to money, you learn to walk away from jobs that don't have a paycheck attached to them.

"Look, walk me through the liabilities," I tell them. I sit forward, elbows on legs, hands between my knees, like a coach listening to his team's fears before the big game. "Then maybe I can recommend a team or something for you to hire instead."

"I don't think we'd have a team for a full bu—a budget for a full team," Hurion says.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to think of a reason not to walk right now. I really should. But I think about that bear swinging its head as it walked around in that tiny-ass space. Hell, I can't stand riding the metro rail for too many stops and I've got four different video subscription services on my phone to keep me entertained.

"Walk me through the liabilities," I ask them.

Situations like this are rife for over-complication. Those new to thievery and related acts of the larcenial arts always try to innovate new and clever ways to steal a thing. At the end of the day, though, you're stealing a thing. So just steal the thing. You don't need to re-invent the wheel. A smash-and-grab job will work just fine. So that's what we end up settling on. And by 'we settle', I mean I tell them my plan and the discussion is at an end.

In ages past, smash-and-grab jobs required a lot of surveillance and a lot of leg work. You had to stakeout the location for weeks to figure out when the shift changes occurred, since that's the best time to pull a job. Nowadays, I just have to hack the system and upload their feed to an online surveillance algorithm. It'll process ten gazillion hours of video and tell me

how many times a guard is seen at a specific location. Space this out and you get an idea of not only when the shift changes occur, but also who gets scheduled at what time. Heck, sometimes you even find out if some guards avoid each other.

So, it only takes a couple of hours to put all of that together.

That handles the security rotations, but there's a lot more to theft than merely where the guards are standing at any given moment.

We're outside, in the thoroughfare of the second level. I can see the central opening that passes through all six levels and the skylight at the apex. We're leaning on the simulated brass railing that looks down on the level below us. There's a deep green, semi-transparent pane above us along the center of the walkway. It's supposed to give the place a futuristic feel but the colors make it feel dated. Some kids are jumping around on the pane above us, enjoying the slight discoloration that follows each footfall. Most people avoid walking on the transparency due to the upskirt factor at play but that doesn't stop a few soles from being seen.

There's a plastic breeze that blows through here. It's partly the air circulation system, but also the result of being a six-story, indoor space. The chatter travels through the air like dust, echoing and rebounding off the walls until there's a constant, inoffensive din coming from all directions. It means we have to lean close to be heard, but we can also trust that only the most dedicated eavesdropping might compromise us.

"The CCE is open twenty-four hours a day," Debbie tells me as we look around at the people walking by. "They've got an internal security camera system with sensors. It's not too advanced, though. It's mostly motion sensors."

"Easily handled," I say to myself.

"The real problem is their security team," Debbie says. "CCE somehow, some way, has Asherton Corporate Security on their payroll."

I scoff. "Asherton's not that big of a deal," I tell her. I'm lying. They're a big deal.

"Really?" says Debbie, doing a double-take. "I mean, I know they're not the biggest name in corporate security but they're a lot better than a glorified shopping mall deserves."

"Yeah, but that's because there's something here," I say about the CCE around us. "Money laundering. Drug distribution. Maybe this place is just a good old-fashioned training camp. Asherton's security is in places like

nuclear silos and lower-end corporate spaces but they're guards got to cut their teeth somewhere."

"Really?" Debbie repeats, almost disappointed.

I nod. "Yeah. I don't know what's going on here that's illegal, but nobody drops that kind of cash on corporate security JUST for a mall. Hell, nobody owns a mall anymore unless they're human traffickers or bootleggers or something."

She doesn't seem too satisfied with my response. She gives me a wary side-eye. "Well, whatever the case, they've got big guns and scary armor and they shoot quick," she sums up.

I just nod. She's not wrong and I know the type. Hell, I am the type.

Hurion climbs down off the rig and gestures at it with a 'ta-da' expression. It's a flatbed truck, used for towing small commuter cars and large motorcycles. It's got a front cab that was red at one time before it became the color of fender-benders. One of the flashing lights on the roof doesn't work. It looks like Hurion, which means it was reliable and sturdy at one point, but now? Kind of a gamble.

I step up to the side of the truck in the mall parking deck. We're so far back, I'm not even sure we're on CCE property. I push down on the truck and it doesn't budge. Between my strength and my weight, that's saying something. Hurion tells me, "My dad and me, we tow cars and stuff off the freeways. Lot of work these days."

"Yeah, planned obsolescence is fun in driverless cars," I remark absently, my mind on the inevitable shooting that's about to happen. I check the front of the rig and see that it's manual transmission. This thing's old. And it still runs? That's promising.

"I've been working animal liberations for a while now," says Davie, like he's hinting at the time he spent behind enemy lines in 'Nam. We're in the food court, in line to get smoothies. When you've got as much cybernetics as I do, you need a lot of calories and smoothies are a good way to get them. "I usually provide logistical support but Debbie's operation necessitated that I take a hands-on role."

"Yeah, right," I tell him. I can't tell if his ego's going to be a liability or just an irritation. As I order, I glance across the bottom floor of the CCE, towards the zoo. I watch as the caretakers roll down the grid so they can go and get lunch. The zoo is twenty-four hours, with a few half-hour periods of

inactivity. I'm about to propose we hit it during one of those times when four of the Asherton Security Detail arrive. They take intimidating positions, in black combat riot armor and gray uniforms. I scowl and ask for extra protein in my Berry-Berry-Blast smoothie.

"How long you been a street samurai?" Davie asks me, in a rare display of congeniality. 'Street Samurai' is a term I don't hear too often, but I always dug it. Using it is definitely a point in Davie's favor, but that point will hardly offset the deficit coming from the 'this-guy's-a-dick' category.

"My entire adult life. A good chunk of my childhood," I tell him as we speak up to be heard over the food processors blending our smoothies. I'm usually a strawberry purist, but I do blueberries on occasion. Mixed berry is usually a gamble – anybody who likes raspberry is automatically not to be trusted – but the picture on the menu looks too appealing to not at least give it a try.

"Odd thing to want to be," Davie says distantly.

"Well, I wanted to be a programmer when I was a kid," I tell him. "I am, really. Most of my gigs are...a good chunk of my...some of my gigs are coding work and hacking."

"Really?" he exclaims, brightening a tiny bit. "I do freelance coding and abstracting. I got my CLT Cert last year."

"Hot damn," I beam. "What's your rig like?" I ask as we tumble down the rabbit hole of talking shop, computer-nerd style.

I'm sitting behind Neuveux-Neuro's reception counter, looking at the CCE's security system. Each store is plugged into their intra-web, allowing them to use the proprietary software that runs all transactions in the CCE. What, you thought a store could operate on its own software system? Not in this century, sister.

They've got a really tight system, but it gives me an idea of what kind of codes we're going to be looking at. Really long, really complicated cyphers are at play. This reeks of the work of consultants. High-priced geniuses get brought in to get everything working at supreme competency, and then it's all maintained by a desperate workforce working at sub-minimum wage.

Kara comes in, her heels clacking. She sets down a tray with some tea on it. "There you go, Mr. Rhest," she says with a smile. "Do you need anything else?"

"Nah, I'm good," I tell her. I'm about to ask for access to their record database when Dr Hasbrook leans out. Dr Hasbrook is in her sixties, looks like she's in her forties, dresses like she's in her twenties, and it is now very clear to me why Kara has a job. Sweet mercy, doc, even guys don't leer that much.

"Kara, when you're done harassing the IT staff," she says in a strong Seattle accent, about me and my extremely flimsy cover, "I need help in stall two."

"Yes ma'am," says Kara, bouncing off around the divider to head towards the back. I turn and watch the two of them go. There isn't a patient in stall...oh. I turn back around and start working again. I guess Kara is sleeping her way to the middle. Who am I to judge?

I sit in the food court nearest to the zoo. I'm getting another smoothie because it's hard to beat a snack with 3000 calories that also tastes like ice cream. This is the same food court where I've been staking out the zoo periodically for the past three days. It's on the far side of first floor, perfectly opposite the zoo, but the view is blocked thanks to a seasonal display. I guess when you celebrate Arbor Day, you do it in style. I connect to our VPN and address the others using our collective earpieces/audio channels. "It's 6:30. Everybody, check in."

Debbie buzzes in first. She's in the zoo itself, sitting across from the polar bear's cage. "I'm in-place," she says, whispering but playing it off.

We hear a really strong buzzing and the weak signal of somebody well out of range. "This is Hurion. I'm pulling into the CCE's parking lot now."

"This is Davie," he says, sounding like he's playing ninja. "I've got eyes on the two mall cops."

"Sweet," I say. I wait half a beat and then ask, "Hey, uh, Kara?"

"Yeah," she chimes in.

"Whatchya doing?"

"Nothing," she says casually.

"Kara, honey," says Davie, "you're at work, right?"

"Yeah," she acknowledges.

"Okay, cool," Davie says.

I'm going to pretend this okay. "Alright, when Hurion arrives, we get to the cage. We input the program, the security locks release, and we will use the forklift to push the cage right onto the truck. Easy-peasy."

"Pulling into the loading dock," Hurion announces, that much clearer.

"Alright," I say as I stand up. Everything is going according to plan. We'll be done in five minutes. "Let's get ready for—"

Two Asherton Security Guards are right in front of me.

"Hey, what's up guys?" I say to both of them, both vocally and over our internal comms so the others can know I've been engaged.

Asherton Security Guards are crisp. They wear gray suits with black highlights, nice patrolman-like hats, big shiny badges, and they tend to have mid-range cybernetics that can pass as natural if you aren't awake. The guy on the left has a glowing eye while the guy on the right has a chrome plate on the left side of his head (I'm guessing correcting a long-standing issue from childhood). Glowy says, "Sir, will you come with us?"

"No."

My answer clearly throws them because neither one is sure what to say after that. Chromedome grabs my shoulder. "You're coming with us."

I inform him politely, "You need to get your hand off of me or I'm going to take it from you at the elbow."

Glowy tells me, "That was a threat."

I correct him. "No." I whip out Reason, one of my two primary pistols, and put it to his face. "This is a threat: back the hell up or I'm going to ventilate your medulla oblongata." I pause, then explain, "That's a part of the brain." I pause for a second more. "The brain is the thing in your skull that tells you to breathe." I look at Chromedome. "The skull is the bone in your head."

Chromedome tries to pull me off-balance but I go with him and spin around. His hand still on my shoulder, I loop my arm around his and apply downward pressure, threatening to break his arm. With my gun hand, I punch him in the face with the hard metal barrel of the gun and then throw him into the wall. I keep spinning and kick Glowy in the midsection and send him flying. "I got made," I inform the rest of the team. "Stick to the plan; just be a hell of a lot faster with it."

I slide Reason back into my hip holster and start to run for the zoo. I see Debbie ahead, waiting for me to arrive. We run into the zoo and come to the cage and the big-ass polar bear is pacing. He can't see us too well,

which is probably good. Davie arrives a second later and he and I begin unlatching the cell from the floor. The polar bear's cage is mobile, so that it can be moved in case of fire or earthquake or civic unrest or any other of a few dozen natural disasters that hit Sacramento with regularity.

There are dozens of locks though, one every meter, securing it to the floor. They're D-ring locks, which means you have to pull down the handle, rotate it 180 degrees, and then push it back into the floor around the cage. The first ones are fine but they get successively more difficult. That's both a security precaution and also just the increasing pressure as we undo the cage. Me and Davie work through them quickly, both of us going counterclockwise around the cage until we get the entire base released.

Debbie ran ahead of us and is trying to get control of the movement system. There's a track system on the roof. It looks like a lightning rig from the stage of some high school that actually has a well-funded arts department, but it's actually a set of cranes. They'll lift the little display rooms and move them towards the back. The problem? The box to get at the controls is locked, the controls themselves are password-protected, and the Asherton security forces are responding.

As Davie and me finish, both of us exclaim in agony. I get a roaring headache as my cyber-systems pick up the dampening field dropping around us. By the look on his face, I'm guessing Davie's internal systems are in a similar mood. Boy said he was a hacker; susceptibility to cyber-jamming and the headache – literal and proverbial – that goes along with it is all part and parcel.

Anyway, it's a common practice by security forces that anytime troops are deployed on-site, they drop a dampening field. It scrambles recording devices and anything else that might compromise the totality of their accounting of the events about to transpire. Don't want any of those police brutality videos getting out into the public, now do we?

As soon as my systems calibrate and get use to the digital noise, me and Davie hear the stomp of Gestapo-wannabes. Three more guards come running down the partial-hall to the mouth of the zoo, machineguns brandished. They cross the entryway and the center guard (complete with combat filtration mask that's totally not meant to look like a skull or anything) drops to one knee as the other two fan out to the sides. "Freeze!" they yell, barely able to be heard over the sounds of my gunshots. I shoot with two pistols, firing shots around them. I'm not shooting to kill them because, frankly, I get paid to kill people. If these eco-terrorists want me to kill somebody, I need to see some more dollar signs.

The Asherton security force, thankfully, doesn't do anything stupid and they dive for cover. The dude in the center goes rolling to my right. Before

they can return fire, I grab Davie and swing him around behind the polar bear exhibit. The security force then decides to up the ante in a way I didn't expect.

See, one of the things that makes for a good security force isn't so much the training or the technology – although that definitely is a factor – but the will to do stuff nobody would instinctively do. This can mean they'll racially profile, or they'll draw weapons faster than might normally be necessary or even advisable. Or, in this specific instance, they realize that we're trying to capture the animal and thus will hold the animal hostage. How do they illustrate this point? By shooting the polar bear.

Death Mask, the guy had originally been at the center of the zoo's entrance, fires with his assault rifle. He pegs Tornassk right in the head. Or he would have if the security glass wasn't impact-resistant. The glass cracks heavily from the triple-burst that the dude fired into the cage. He probably knew that would happen; he's making his point.

"Stop!" Debbie shrieks. She runs to get between us, but Davie intercepts her and keeps her from getting turned into well-meaning swiss cheese. They know what we want and if they can't safe-guard their investment, they'll make sure we don't take it. Or maybe they're proving that they won't be screwed with, no matter the loss. That kind of thinking isn't unheard of among security forces.

"Alright, we're surrendering," I yell back at them. I give them a beat to register what I yelled, then I call almost sarcastically to Debbie and Davie, "Guys, give up." Behind the cage, I don't bother hiding that I'm shaking my head at them. This is a trap.

Sadly, that doesn't seem obvious to the two of them because they're a little confused. Davie is astonished that I'm giving up, like I'm a coward and that validates everything he's ever said and Debbie should totally put-out extra-hard now. Debbie seems to have picked up that what I'm saying and what I'm planning aren't the same thing, but she hasn't figured out the plan. It's times like this you find yourself wishing everybody had been in at least a few gunfights before they graduated high school.

"Come out with your hands up," says Death Mask guy, his voice projected through a speaker on his mask.

"Okay," I yell and then spin around the side and shoot him in the face. I know what I said about shooting these guys but you don't shoot a bear in a cage. Man, that's just mean. The other two fall back and they start shooting at me. Which is good, except I'm hiding behind the cage, which is bad. I swing around the other side and, in the process, change from my primary guns to my backup guns.

Reason and Respect are my two primary weapons. I carry them on my thighs. They're general, all-purpose weapons. They shoot straight, hit hard, and generally take care of business. My backup weapons, Vicious and Victory, aren't all-purpose. They're bunker-busters, tank-killers, giant-slayers. Whatever word you want to use, it's probably inadequate. So when I shoot at the remaining guards, I don't waste time waiting for them to lean out around the entrance of the zoo. I just shoot through the reinforced brick walls they're hiding behind. The spray of brick vapor and aerosol blood tells me the hits were good.

I slide Vicious and Victory back into their shoulder holsters as I turn back around to Debbie and Davie. "Get this thing moving," I call to them, gesturing at the cage. While they both jump into action, I swing back around to check on the polar bear. I didn't hear the glass shatter but I can't rule out something bad happening. It's a day ending in Y after all.

Thankfully, the front of the cage is still solid and the bear is still alive. It's pretty motionless, it's ears up. It can tell something is happening but thanks to the tinted windows or whatever it is, it can't see what is going on around it. Probably for the best. Last thing we need is a spooked apex predator. I turn around and I can see people in the halls of the CCE. There's a lot of pointing and shouting and even some cell phones coming out. Fortunately, that dampening field goes two ways and I don't have to worry about getting filmed. Shame. It's fun ending up on the news feeds.

There's a squad of Asherton security coming down the hallway as well. They're not in uniforms but response tactical gear. Not quite SWAT gear but close (but then SWAT uses mecha these days). Bigger machineguns and badder body armor. All black with gray highlights now. They're after intimidation but they aren't handling those guns like they're at the range. I'm betting they can use them.

Fortunately, we have a contingency. With Reason and Respect drawn, I begin shooting at the entrance of the zoo. I'm shooting along the roof, which knocks the security guards away from the rolling gate. The armored defense comes cascading down and slams shut. And because I mechanically dropped it rather than using the controls, it's going to take a hot second for them to get it open again.

I run around the cage and yell at Debbie, "That cage ain't moving!"

She yells back at me, "I'm working on it." Davie's eyes are glowing, showing that he's hacked into the system.

I run to the back of the zoo and kick open the door. Inside is the storage area where they keep the cleaning supplies, food, etc. There are also two zoo workers mid-coitus. "What the hell?!" I exclaim. The two zoo

workers jump up and cover their naughty bits, wisely not yelling at the maniac in body armor and holding pistols. "Did you two lovebirds not hear the shooting?!"

"He was moaning," says one of the guys.

"Get in the goddamn corner!" I yell at them. Debbie comes running in and sees the two guys. I look at her and demand, "I thought you said nobody was on duty right now."

"They disappear off the floor at this time every day!" she exclaims. "We thought they were on break."

One of the guys smacks his lover's hand. "I told you we were getting predictable."

"I'm not doing polyarmory," the other guy says in a catty tone.

"No!" I yell at them both, waving a gun at them. "You are not solving your relationship issues right now. This isn't a bonding experience!"

"Are you going to kill us?" asks the little spoon.

"No," Debbie says before I can be vague about it.

"Are we in danger?" asks the other one.

Before Debbie can be a liability, I tell them, "Depends on how the next few minutes go."

I leave Debbie to guard them. She's not armed but I'm confident they'll behave with little more than a stern look. Back out in the zoo proper, Davie is STILL working on the crane system and the front gate is starting to make weird noises on the other end. Asherton Security is doing something screwy and that means they're going to be in here in any minute and boy do I not like that. I check the reinforced security door as I yell back at Davie, "Move it!"

"I'm trying!" he yells back. "This thing's got an AES-65k encryption system."

"A what?!" I gawk. An AES-65k – as in 65,000, as in the square of 256 – is one of those system security programs people with way too much money get. It's not bad at all, but it's so overpriced, only the super-wealthy get it. So why does this glorified mall have one, and for a zoo control panel no less? That's past unheard of and into true paranoia territory. When this is all over, I'm really going to have to dig into this. They are doing something shady as hell 'round here.

I run over to Davie and active my Heads-Up Display. I link using the local VPN and I find him. The AES he's struggling with is no joke but it's hardly impregnable (no security system is). I could get around it, but that would take time and there're a bunch of armed men on the other side of a jury-rigged barricade that are strong incentive for us to keep our timetable.

Time to think creatively. No crane system to move this big-ass cage so we need to do something else. I run back through the storage room, passed the two zoo keepers, and find nothing larger than a crate dolly to work with. I run through to the exit out into the loading docks and throw open the door. There's a flatbed truck and a very anxious Hurion hanging out the driver's side door. "What's going on?" he calls up to me.

"We've got a scheduling conflict," I inform him. I do a quick scan of the back lot of the parking deck. It's mostly empty except a few neglected commuter vehicles, a couple of company trucks, and a bunch of dumpsters. Lots of places where I could hide if I were Asherton Security. I look at the flatbed, pulled up right to the loading dock, the metal bed itself practically flush with the cement lip of the loading bay. The bed is scraped and stained metal with some rusted spots, but its genuinely flat. I give myself that nod that you give yourself whenever you realize you're going to do something dumb.

"What's going on?" Hurion asks just before a loud gunshot rings through the air. It came from the front of the zoo.

"Nothing unexpected," I assure him as I turn to head back inside. "Keep the motor running!" I yell at him as I run back through the door.

"What's happening?" asks Debbie as I dash by.

"We're improvising," I yell.

"Is that safe?" she yells after me.

"No!" I yell, right as I open the door to the bear's cage.

The door slides to the side and I'm standing face-to-face with a polar bear that really wants to know what the hell is going on. It lifts its head up, two dark eyes looking at me like a big goofy puppy dog. I tell it, "Hey there, little fella." It stands up on its hind legs, my head craning up as it does. "...big fella," I amend. I feel – not hear, feel – a rumbling from the very bowels of Hell. Yes, Hell with a capital H. It takes me a second to process because this bear is growling at a level only perceptible to psychic animals and older ranges of mountains. The creature I had taken such pity on is now staring at me like I'm all that stands between it and the ice ranges it wants to be traversing. "I did not think this through," I realize.

I don't get the chance to fully regret this decision before I get shot in the back. It's a glancing blow, thankfully, and from a pistol I'm pretty sure. A small caliber round I'd guess because, well, frankly, I'm still alive. My combat harness has some nice armor but for the sake of mobility, you got to make some cuts. I figured if I'm dumb enough to get shot in the back, I probably deserve it. I got shot through the zoo by one of the Asherton Security guys out in the loading deck. Remember all those places I said I could hide? Turns out I'm not the only one who thought of that.

I'm sent flying off my feet because my armor stops penetration, not actual force. I slam face-first into the polar bear like the world's dumbest glomp (which is redundant). Me and Tornassk go flying into the opposite wall and the door accidentally shuts because I decided to do a good deed and this is what happens to you when you do good deeds.

I fall off Tornassk and the first thing I do is cough because I just got a nose full of paint fumes. Christ, what kind of paint were they using on this bear, spray-paint? Some of it even came off on me! I stumble back and fall on my ass. Tornassk stands up and howls. It sounds like the absolute biggest bell in Notre Dame tolling at my funeral. An animal – no matter how goddamn big – absolutely should not be able to make a noise that loud and that deep!

Tornassk takes a big-ass swing at me with claws that haven't moved in ages. Those tiger's-teeth-like daggers don't make contact thank goodness but the meat of his paw still smacks me in the head. I'm thrown into the transparent wall. My internal systems go absolutely nuts. My Heads-Up Display lights up with more warnings than I knew it could register. Apparently, Tornassk nearly took my head off with that one swat. Good to know. I may be a little bit screwed here.

I turn back around and Tornassk roars. I'd heard roars in movies and on television. I thought I had heard roars. Facing down this animal, I realize I have never truly heard a roar. Tornassk informs me that I may not be the one who stuck it in here but by whatever bear-god there is, I am going to get some of that wrath.

Tornassk swings again at me. I've got very little room to maneuver but I manage to avoid the swing. The bear bats at me again and I'm thrown off my feet. And I remind you, I weigh a half a ton or something myself. I'm cybered up for street combat. And this bear is smacking me around like I'm a leaf. I am so, so screwed.

I land and roll and the bear comes at me. No time to draw my guns (and I'm pretty sure I don't get paid if I shoot the bear), so I punch the bear across the snout. For an instant I'm afraid I hurt it. Then for a second instant, I'm afraid I've triggered some terrified/abused animal instinct and it

will see me as its captor. And then it turns its eyes back to me and I realize I just ensured my grave will be that much deeper.

Tornassk, Slayer of Souls, Devourer of Worlds, Smiter of Me, charges. It doesn't have room to get up to a good gallop but for the animal equivalent of a couch potato, it explodes. It barrels into me and snaps with those jaws that look like a dog's snout from one side of the security glass and the gaping maw of Cthulu on the other side. I dodge and roll and come up just before I get swatted again. I am slammed face-first into the security glass and just sort of stick there.

Face-first against the transparent wall, I realize I can sort-of see out. I can't see much more than some vague movement but that does remind me that this is a cage and cages are secured for the thing that's supposed to be in them. In this case, that's a polar bear and not a heavily-armed street merc. I don't know that anybody loses their cool when I draw Reason and Respect, but I must assume they do when I start shooting.

We don't get that nice, satisfying explosion you get from blowing out an aquarium tank from the inside (that's a story for another time), but the glass goes flying out all the same. I burst out like I just made some grand big entrance in a musical theater. There're a dozen Asherton Security guys all around and their guns all swing at me. Twelve of them, one of me. Seems about right. But then I discover that I've got reinforcements.

I don't know if Tornassk really knows what's going on, or if he just wants to go berserk, but a giant white mountain of murder comes flying out of the cage behind me and falls onto the security guys. There's a remorse letter no senior officer ever wants to send: 'I write to report that your spouse got their ass utterly trounced by a bear'.

And that's something else you learn quickly about combat training: no amount of shootouts will prepare you for getting mauled by a bear. Facing a wild animal is just a whole different experience that most urban combatants simply are not prepared for (myself included). So there's surprisingly less shooting and whole lot more hysterical screaming of 'OH MY GOD'. And blood. Wow, is there suddenly a lot of blood.

Deciding Tornassk doesn't need to be the only one getting in on this carnage, I start shooting. There's an insane amount of confusion as the Asherton security simply doesn't know what to do. They know they can't – or rather, shouldn't – kill the bear but that bear is killing them. It's a confusing reversal of priorities. Plus, there's a badass and good-looking mercenary that is dropping bastards left and right.

It only takes us a few seconds to end the Asherton threat. Debbie and Davie are in the backroom hallway, tucked away and absolutely petrified.

The two zoo keepers are, understandably, nowhere to be seen and I presume hiding for their lives. Aside from the stench of fresh corpses and the putrid spray paint scent from the cage, everything seems to have calmed down. "Is that all of them?" I ask Davie and Debbie. They don't answer, so I assume we're good.

I turn and whistle loudly, one of those grandma whistles that registers louder than some jet engines, and yell, "Hey!" Tornassk whirls around to me and snarls. "Come on!" I gesture for him to follow me. He goes back to exacting some kind of weird revenge the corpse of the Asherton guard in his paws.

"What do we do?" asks Debbie, peeking out from the zoo's backroom.

"What the hell are you asking me for?!" I yell at her. I look at my two guns and realize I need to invest in a non-lethal combat system. I then realize I'm not sure if I've ever needed a non-lethal system before. I turn back to the storage room and look around. I spot a walk-in freezer and I throw it open. Meat and lots of it. Also two terrified zoo keepers. I continue my long and rich tradition of ignoring the hell out of them and I grab some carcasses. I come out and yell, "Hey, Fido!"

Debbie starts in on me. "His name is—"

I whistle again, less to address the bear and more to drown out her white-girl activist shrill. I throw the smallest piece of meat I've got at Tornassk. It smacks the bear on the head and he whips around at me and snarls. "You want out of here?" I ask him.

"It's an animal," squeaks Davie in terror. "It doesn't understand you."

"It's a guy. All guys understand free food."

Tornassk sniffs the frozen meat chunk and turns it over with its nose. It then looks at me, realizing that I've got more food. "Nummy-nummy, Fido," I tell him and I begin to back through the hallway. Tornassk gets up and starts to paw after me like the world's biggest and most dangerous puppy. He snarls at Davie and Debbie, and snarls at me as well.

I lead him out to the door and onto the flatbed truck where I drop the first carcass. He grabs it and rips into it with jaws that I'm extremely confident could bite my cybernetic ass in two. Hurion, who is in handcuffs by the truck's cab and being guarded by the two remaining Asherton Security, screams. Both Asherton guards are too busy trying to process what they're seeing to understand the pops that come from my gun and put an end to their lives.

I walk across the flatbed where I left Tornassk and put up my guns. "Drive," I order Hurion as I undo his cuffs. He stares at the dead security guards. "Drive," I repeat. He looks at the giant bear tearing through what I'm guessing was a pig long ago. Hurion starts to point, starts to question, starts to challenge, and I just calmly shake my head. "Drive. Just drive." Tornassk adds a snarl before he goes back to chewing on the meat.

"Right," Hurion decides as he climbs into the driver's seat.

You wouldn't think an animal that's been living for years in captivity would handle driving on the open back of a flatbed truck. Having copious amounts to eat helps, I suppose. And that much time in a prison cell gives any living creature a metric ton of damns to no longer give.

We arrive at Redwood National Park just before dawn. I jump awake, startled when the truck finally stops moving. Tornassk had just flopped down like the laziest dog in the world. I guess kicking that much ass and taking that many names tuckered out the big guy. When the truck does stop, the big-ass bear lifts its head and makes this growl. It's not a threatening growl, just kind of a 'what's going on' noise that sounds the same, regardless of the language or species.

Davie and Hurion get out on opposite sides of the truck, both watching warily at the bear that is increasingly aware something's changed. Debbie gets out on Davie's side and stares in awe at the giant beast that has managed a multi-hour drive without a single instance of trying to jump off. "I can't believe he's still there," whispers Hurion.

"I think he figured out pretty early on that we were on his side," I remark as I hop off the truck. Tornassk growls when Hurion takes a step towards him. "Hey!" I snap at the bear. "Ease up, will ya?" The bear growls at me, but then rises unremarkably. He shakes his shoulders and legs like a dog shaking loose skin. Flakes of paint come off and he yawns really wide.

"So what now, kids?" I ask the trio. They don't have to answer. Tornassk gets down off the truck of his own volition and proceeds to walk into the forest, sniffing at a tree. "Huh. Nevermind."

The big polar bear rubs up against a tree, then hikes his leg. We all awkwardly avert our eyes as Tornassk lays claim to that tree. Once he's done, he turns around to us. He stands up on his legs and beats a bit at his chest, almost like an ape, then flops down onto all fours. He makes another non-threatening growl and turns. He walks into the forest, flakes of paint drifting from his mangy fur as he goes.

"You know he's about to completely screw up the eco-system," I tell the three.

Hurion and Davie are quiet. Debbie is too, but with a strangely bittersweet look in her eyes as she watches the giant disappear into the forest. "What eco-system?" she remarks back at me.

Touche.

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