

Rhest and the Body Count

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

It was just after eleven pm when we arrived at the Old Town Manufacturing Campus. They had to use the term manufacturing campus instead of manufacturing plant because plant connotes one or two big buildings with smokestacks and conveyor belts. Manufacturing campus is more like a small town all built around the fabrication and manufacturing of...whatever it was they made here. Hell if I know what it was. I don't really know how manufacturing worked back in the day or how it works now. That's not my scene. My scene is violence and action. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

Corporal Allan Freedman and myself stop as soon as we step foot inside the first building of the campus. Allan – who I call 'All Anne' because he has two Ls in his name and because it pisses him off – doubles over in exhaustion. His hands on his knees, he's panting so hard that sweat drips from forehead onto the sand, dirt, and sawdust off the ground. Chunks of concrete and brick dot the littered floor. Looters and vandals have come, gone, and come and gone again. The graffiti on the pillars and what little glass isn't broken is so aged as to be gauche by modern standards. The dark is intense and the place is more than big enough to have its own air currents. This means it's not silent, but it also means we get buffeted with a smell that was probably a contributing factor to the squatters' village that left her years ago. You know a place is dilapidated when even the homeless don't want to live in it.

I take out Reason and check my rounds. Reason is one of my two primary guns, always paired with Respect. Reason is a precision pistol, but he's gasping like Corporal Freedman. I change out the clip and mentally tally how many more rounds I've got; for Reason and for all my guns. I slide him back into the thigh holster on the combat harness. "They're still after you," I say.

Corporal Freedman just nods, more sweat dribbling to the ground like the world's saltiest sprinkler. He stands up and swallows with some effort. Thanks to the almost-black dark blue of his police uniform, you can't see the sweat stains. His uniform belt is black mesh and seems to absorb light. Thank god he doesn't wear those glossy belts. "How many rounds do you have?" I ask him.

Allan takes out his issued sidearm and checks the magazine. Department-standard, his boxy gun is big, impressive, and all for show. He shakes his head and says, "Less than five." He checks the holsters over his right hip. "Out of backups."

"Very precise," I chastise.

Allan makes a frustrated grunt as he holsters the weapon. He looks around at the giant warehouse, at the unfamiliar machinery that throw ugly

shadows on the metal walls, dark meshing with darker. "Any idea where we are?" I only shake my head. "We've got to get out of here," he insists.

I nod. I risk activating my Heads-Up Display, bringing some of my cybersystems online. A transparent window appears in my vision, overlaid over the world beyond me. It gives me an immediate status update on all the local web systems, or lack thereof. "They've got to have some kind of dampener." I take my cell phone from a pocket on my combat vest. "There's no way we've found the one spot in the whole damn world with absolutely no reception." I say that and yet the data detection is saying otherwise. "Man, not even satellite." I got to build a vacation spot out here or something.

Allan takes out his own cell phone and confirms our mutual isolation. "First thing's first: we got to find out where the nearest help is," he says.

"No, first thing is we've got to keep moving," I tell him like I'm housebreaking a puppy. "We're on THEIR turf."

He yells back at me, "We don't stand a chance unless we get—"

Our bickering is cut off by a gunshot that narrowly misses Allan's head. He ducks and draws his pistol, turning to face out the big doors we just entered through. He takes two shots, the pop of his police issue sounding like a firecracker compared to their military-grade ordinance.

I don't return fire as eagerly as Allan. I draw Respect and partner him with Reason, sure, but rather than shoot like a panicked grandma, I run to the opposite side of the door and flatten myself against it. I study the structure for a second as a few more shots pepper the dirt where we were. This is a manufacturing plant, so I confirm the might of the structure we're dealing with. That door isn't stopping a damn thing, but these walls are built to hold up the sky. They're going to have to throw something a lot harder than run o' the mill lead to get through these walls.

I peek through one of the convenient little holes they just put in the door, able to see the crowd outside. Looks like Jocko brought his whole gang. There's at least a dozen guys, maybe two dozen. All men, all pushers and bruisers from the local drug scene. Gang members. Jeans. Track suits. Expensive shoes and cheap cybernetics. High-concept tattoos applied by dime-store artists. They're all packing more heat than some professional soldiers and they all look deadly. These are tough men whose whole job is violence and clearly business is good.

And they want Corporal Allan Freedman.

The numbers are bad enough but these guys are smart (well, some of them). They don't come just rushing in. They hang back at the edge of the

very big parking lot, the broken asphalt overgrown with patches of bare dirt sprouting waist-high weeds. They're a good hundred meters from the doors, which means somebody got overzealous to take those shots. Either there's dissent in Jocko's ranks, or a break in discipline. Either way, that gives me something to work with.

I look across at Allan as he hugs the edge of the door, his standard-issue pistol held up by his face like some movie poster. He glances at me and we consider our options. There aren't a lot.

Jocko steps ahead of the gang, which is bold. He's a local gangster, but one with promise. He's not greedy, but competitive. He's not selfish but ambitious. One of those guys that's starting to bridge out from street crime to organized crime to corporate crime. Yeah, one of THOSE guys. He's still got a body made out of street fighting, corpse-hiding, and gun-carrying. And he still spends his money in distinctive ways. "Hey merc!" he yells over a bullhorn, or a really good bullhorn app on somebody's cell phone. He's got charisma by the truckload. "You spilled our blood but this ain't about you. Give us the pig and we'll let you walk. Hell, I'll even fill out a review form for you. Give you four stars. Praise your intelligence."

Allan looks across at me, afraid I'll take the offer. I'm afraid I'll take the offer too, but I know I won't. I took the contract to protect this cop and, as much as I hate it, I'm going to see it through. "No dice!" I yell, leaning halfway out the door. No shots come at me. "I'm contracted until dawn. Through dawn, really. A soft seven, seventy-thirty."

Jocko answers, "That's a shame, piglet, because by 7:30, I'm going to be eating me some bacon. And sausage." He says that like he was going to keep listing pork products but couldn't immediately think of anything else. "That pig's coming with us."

Allan's hysteria gets the better of him. "Why do you want to kill me?!" he yells.

"Shut up," I whisper loudly at him.

"I'm just a beat cop," he yells. "I was just on patrol."

"Because this is our neighborhood!" Jocko yells. The others cheer and shout some threats, but in Jocko's voice there's a real sincerity. This isn't bravado with him. This isn't a power trip. He genuinely feels like he's protecting the territory he knows as home.

Allan looks across at me, young eyes full of terror. "What do we do?" He's not a kid, maybe not even a rookie, but he damn-sure isn't a veteran. He looks like he should be playing softball for some college league. He should be working in a call center at the start of the corporate ladder.

Instead, he's covered in sweat, grime, and all the trappings of our exhausting chase through the neon hellscape that is the Sacramento night.

I look into the warehouse. Situations like this, running is like backing up in a fight. The difference between retreating and getting back on your heels is often real subtle. It's no different here. We've been running and if we keep running, we will be caught. Unless we can get to help, or get somewhere safe, or lose these guys. This is likely still their turf even if we're hell and gone from their neighborhood. That said, given the shape of this warehouse, and the other buildings in the campus, maybe that doesn't include this place. It's an algebraic risk (an algebraic risk is a calculated risk where you don't know all the variables), but that's better than the simple math of 'their guns > our guns'.

I put up Reason and Respect and I draw out Vicious. He's one of the two pistols I carry over my shoulders. He's a large pistol in the same way a badger is a large rat; it's a galling inaccuracy that's definitely gotten more than one idiot killed. "When I shoot, run to the far side of the building," I tell Allan as I ready the small, one-handed shotgun. Vicious packs elemental rounds, which means it does more damage than just the shot. Of course the damage caused by the shot has to be calculated by an astronomer because only meteorites hit with more force.

I swing around the door and take one shot. One shot. Pull the trigger once and one bullet leaves Vicious. I don't shoot the guys; I shoot the parking lot between us and them, right at halfway. Fifty-yard line if this parking lot was the football field it's big enough to be. Now, why would I 'waste' a shot like that? Because when Vicious hits, he sends up a wave, a cascade, a veritable avalanche, a damn tidal wave, of asphalt. That's bad enough, but the asphalt is beginning to liquify in the air because right behind the impact is fire. How much fire? All of it. All the fire. In the world.

Like that was the world's most dangerous starter pistol, Allan takes off like a shot and goes running. With all the flame, we have for the briefest instant light by which to see the warehouse. There are a thousand machines in here and not one of them is in one piece. Everything's been picked clean, stripped, roped, and robbed. The only things left are the robotic bones, and even some of them are missing.

Allan runs ahead of me because he's not weighed down with seven hundred and ninety-two pounds of cybernetic implants. I lag behind but I put up Vicious and activate my low light. With the fires going out, the light drops to nil. Even my low-light is barely working, so I switch to full dark vision. The world takes on a dark, sickly hue. I can't keep this on for long because it's actually projecting a beam of ultraviolet or infrared light (I can't remember which). Somebody else on the same spectrum can see it. It also

doesn't have much range. I can see maybe five times farther than my arms can reach, and not that clearly at that. Imagine looking through a pipe, and that pipe is wearing sunglasses.

We make it to the far end and Allan flattens himself against the wall, his pistol aimed back the way we've just run. He searches the darkness, panting. "I'm on your left," I say. "I'm going to grab your shoulder." He begins to protest out of sheer panic, but I grab his shoulder and pull him off the wall. "Just walk," I tell him.

"I can't see," says the young police corporal.

"Close your eyes," I tell him. "You'll have an easier time if you stop trying to see." There's a psychological effect to losing your sight that is hard to anticipate, or replicate. To suddenly be robbed of probably your most primary sense, it's unnerving. There's not much more basic to humans than the fear of the dark. We mock little kids for it but in the heat of the moment, the all-encompassing shadow is a fear we all share.

With my night vision, I guide him along the wall to the nearest door. His steps are uneasy and uneven, tripping over the ground. Again, we're so used to vision we simply do not appreciate how much every movement we make includes it. Divorced from our sight, even walking upright becomes a huge challenge. Anyway, we make it to a door and, wouldn't you know it, it won't open. At this point, I'm not even surprised. Fortunately, I'm able to reach through a jagged hole in the door, rusted and eroded by the elements, and unlock the door from the other side.

We exit into a small alley between warehouses. There's enough ambient light from the starless sky that I can activate my low-light. I shut the door as Allan tries to acclimate. I try to bar the door shut but the trash I put in front of it won't hold for long. I contemplate trying to rig something more serious, but that's time that we could use getting out of here.

"I can't believe this," Allan whispers. "I can't believe they're this determined to kill me."

"Believe it, POPO," I tell him. "People tend to take getting murdered kind of personal." I grab his shoulder and we push on to the next building. It's in about the same condition: smells of urine-stained cement and rusted metal. Husks of ancient machines picked clean by the piranha-like homeless. Dust and debris blown in through broken windows and chunks of wall missing. This warehouse is different, though, because it has some offices on a third floor. How you get up there isn't immediately obvious.

"Are they following us?" Allan asks, checking through a crack in the door.

"Right now, they're calling for backup," I tell him as I take out my Mapper. A little golden ball about the size of a golf ball, it will scan the interior of a location and create a 3D model uploaded to my own internal systems. The downside is that those scans are detectable to anyone using an infrared scope, infrared sights, or just halfway decent urban optics (infrared scanners are pretty much standard issue for street mercs). Likewise, the data stream connecting the Mapper to me could be tracked as well. Like my dark vision, using it is a risk. I decide against using it. "Come on," I tell Allan and we begin to negotiate our way through the trash traffic in this warehouse.

We move around the corpses of giant machines that are somehow still vertical (some of them anyway), with only shadows of different intensities to really guide us. There are windows along the roof, the non-light of urban nighttime filtering in like odorless pollution. The air is still, and the quiet is pervasive. The only noise is the settling of metal in the heat of the night, and the gentle stirring of the air caused by spaces too large to be considered indoors. I step on some broken glass and stop, checking back behind us. I listen, prompting Allan to stop as well. "What is it?" he whispers.

"I don't hear anything," I whisper back.

"Me either," he says.

"Exactly," I lament. "No footsteps, no voices," I whisper to him. "No engines," I add, doing little more than psyching myself out. I keep walking, worried. Pretty sure we're being surrounded.

I spot a door at the far end. Actually, several doors. I select the door that looks least likely to take us outside and, sure enough, it opens into the stairwell/bathroom. I step over a pile of...I don't know what and I don't care to speculate. I step over the mound of stuff and start up the stairs. Allan dry-heaves but manages to follow. We ascend the narrow corporate steps into a small office without windows. There were desks but they've been turned over and reused as beds, walls, and barricades at least once. My fingers dance over the gun-blasted desktops as I pass them, our steps causing the floor to groan.

I feel around, more to just touch the papers than anything else. I sigh and surrender. Night vision's great and dark vision works in a pinch but if you want to read, you have to have an actual source of illumination. Beneath my pistols, I have tactical lights so I click on the light beneath Reason's barrel, a tiny penlight's worth of vision piercing the darkness. Allan flinches with the tactical light but quickly adjusts. He looks at the office and wretches again. "What are we doing here?" he asks after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Looking for some indication of where we are," I tell him. I confirm there are no windows. The likelihood is good that there are cracks in the floors or walls for my flashlight to shine through. We've got to move fast. "After Jocko first opened fire, after you shot that guy in the middle of the damn street," I remind Allan with a glare more serious than a heart attack. I go back to searching. "After that, we've been running blind. I've lost track of all the boroughs we've passed. I don't know where we are. We could be in Lovdal or Rio Linda for all I know." I look for papers, maps, anything that could give us the slightest idea of where we are. There's a lot of trash but surprisingly little reports or pages from when this factory will still open.

Corporal Freedman doesn't seem to understand that he's supposed to be helping. He instead sits on the edge of one of the desktops and stares vacantly for a moment. His eyes close, and then tighten. His whole face clinches up. I can see him force himself into artificial serenity. If he didn't seem like such a straight-laced guy, I'd swear he just released a narcotic into his system. A lot of cops use internal release systems to help stay cool, or at least appear to be staying cool. A subdermal cocaine dispenser looks an awful lot like a totally-legit antidepressant dispenser to a quarterly health scan. Assuming the local branch hasn't removed routine scans for the street cops.

"I can't believe they killed Geoff." Allan's eyes open and they've gotten all teary. In my flashlight beam, they look like crystal. A shaky hand goes to his mouth and he recalls the events of the night, against his own will. "They..." He scoffs in disbelief. "His back...when they shot, it looked like a flower...opening. Like my grandma used to grow." His lips tremble. "So much blood." He blinks a bunch and looks around, like he expects the blood to be around him right now.

I lower the flashlight. We REALLY don't have time for this but his 'woe-is-me-I-am-the-victim' expression is grating on me. "What did you and your partner think was going to happen?" It's not a question; it's an accusation. "Sacramento police decide they're going to start patrolling three of the most heavily gang-controlled neighborhoods in the entire city, 24/7. I'm amazed – genuinely amazed – you guys made it three days before there was a uniformed fatality." I resume searching the office. "Note I stipulated 'uniformed' fatality."

Wet eyes fixes on me. "You're talking about the Rodriguez Case."

"I'm talking about the Rodriguez Murder," I snap back at him. "Dude was shot dead in the street."

"He was resisting arrest," Allan argues.

"He was walking away!" I yell at him. Bad time to lose your temper.

"He punched a cop," Allan argues back.

"And that's not a capital offense!" I exclaim. I point at him, but with Reason in my hand, it half-looks like I pointed a gun at him. "You know how many people have died OFFICIALLY at the hands of the Sacramento PD? This year? This month?" I step closer. "This week?" Silence reigns as that gut-punch registers with him. He's glowering at me, young face of idealism unused to the ugliness of history. "Yeah, let's talk about Hector Rodriguez," I tell him. "Let's talk about Almar Donahue. Let's talk about a goddamn tradition going back to Stephon Clark! Stephon Clark, at least!"

Allan knows he's dealing with the worst person in the world for a cop to deal with: someone who is informed, in the right, and armed. He tries the old line of, "This city's gang situation is out of—"

"The police are a gang!" I yell at him. Christ, why can't I shut up? Or at least keep it down? "You just don't serve the local community, or the corporations. I honestly don't know who you serve. Maybe the politicians? Maybe? But you damn-sure don't support anything like law or justice!"

I get cut-off by another gunshot. This one tears through the floor between us, splinters and dust going everywhere. I don't know who among Jocko's friends is so damn trigger-happy but boy am I glad he's a crap-ass shot. The floor between us bubbles up and bursts like the world's deadliest pimple and shotgun pellets tear by us. Reason and Respect are readied in a flash and I return fire through the floor. Muzzle flashes illuminate all the empty space I'm shooting into, making the floor beneath us just a stark blackness. If I scored any hits, I couldn't hear or see it thanks to the deafening and blinding machinegun fire sent back our way.

I grab Allan's collar and yank him into a run. We haul ass across the office and run to the far side where the stairs to the third floor await us. I push him up the stairs and linger for a second to see if we're being followed. I don't see anyone so maybe we've got more breathing room than I realize.

I rush up the stairs after Allan and we empty out into the executive office. It's not any nicer, but there are fewer desks. Allan grabs one desk and overturns it, placing it against the stairwell door. "That won't hold for long," he says. This office has more windows, a few of which are even intact. It's almost bright in here, compared to the darkness of the lower office.

A quick cursory scan, mostly looking for a way out, and my eyes fall on a logistical map. I see a line, squint, and ask "Is that the 16?" Allan whirls around and spots the map immediately. I run to the map. It's ugly and faded and warped but I think I can make out the word 'Deer Creek Hills'. "That's California-Highway 16," I concluded with far less certainty

than I ever want my life to depend on. "Holy crap, we're almost in Rancho Murrieta."

"WHAT?!" Allan exclaims.

I trace back through the last few hours, trying to figure out how we could have possibly gotten that far out from Sacramento. "Coked-out taxi drivers cover some ground when you're lost," I tell the police officer. I pop him in the stomach to break his fixation on the map. "We got to go."

"Go where?" he asks just before I push open one of the few intact windows. "Are you joking?"

"Are you suicidal?" I ask back at him, reminding him of the situation with a single glance at the stairwell behind us. "Come on!" I guide him out onto the terribly narrow ledge of the construction warehouse. We're three stories up, but not a clean drop. There're nineteen different conveyor belts and transportation tracks and whatever the hell those things are connecting separate warehouses. Glancing down, we see less a terrifying drop and more a spiderweb-like network of bridges connecting the buildings. Bereft of meaningful urban light, we can't really even see the ground, just shades of lighter and darker shadow informing us of what we'll hit on our way to the bottom. Fortunately, we aren't going down but lateral.

Once we're out on the ledge, I tell All-Anne, "Slide that way," and point. He begins to slide as I shut the window. It makes a tiny squeak but nothing else. I shimmy across the window and look across the rooftop we're sliding along, hoping we can get back across the whole thing. I look down passed the lip of brick barely even ten centimeters wide and don't see anybody through the connecting paths beneath my feet. I wonder if those bridges are sturdy enough to climb down. I then immediately hope they're not when the ledge gives out underneath me.

So, downside to having as much cybernetics as I do is that you weigh what in medical and cybermedical circles is known as 'too goddamn much'. So it's little surprise that a police officer with a dyslexia implant and maybe a few entertainment additives can move just fine along the ledge, whereas I weigh more than some commuter vehicles.

I don't fall the whole way, though. Thank goodness. No, I just fall down onto the first conveyor belt and land on my inner thigh. Captain Gemini and the Step-Children don't get crushed, but they're right next door. I grab my mouth to keep from screaming at the top of my lungs and just barely keep from wrenching my jaw off, I squeeze so hard.

In the pristine silence that follows, as I sit there straddling a conveyor belt two stories in the air, all I hear for a moment are the distant hisses of steam vents. The familiar gas release punctures the night, and then

absolute quiet follows. I lower my hand and wish for death to all forms and causes of gravity, but manage to keep from making a single noise. I even manage to exhale as loud as a shadow.

My eyes tilt up and my head back and I look above me. One of Jocko's men is looking out the window. He's surveying the rooftops quietly, certain he heard something but not sure where or what he heard. His blue denim vest and a gray hoodie make surprisingly good camo, even if it wasn't a starless, moonless night. However, his cornrow braids expose the sheen of sweat on his scalp. Plus, those cornrows end in beads, clinking together like cheap plastic tassels. In this silence, they might as well be windchimes.

I reach under my armpit and draw my backup gun, Affinity. My backup guns are a little bigger than my hands. They're meant for close and personal encounters, but don't let their size fool you: they pack a punch. Affinity might be only a hair bigger than a TV remote but he's got the punch to stop a car. So when I aim him straight up and pull the trigger, the head of Jocko's goon completely evaporates.

The gunshot weakens the conveyor belt I was straddling but I leap off it as it gives. I grab onto the wall of the warehouse and hit nothing but brick and metal. With nothing to grab, I fall. At least I was ready for it this time. That way when I land on - and subsequently crash through - the conveyor belts and connectors beneath, I don't lose my orientation. I do manage to land on my feet, but that goes poorly. I roll my left ankle.

I collapse onto my back and steady Affinity. Two guys lean out the window with assault rifles but they don't get off any shots before I pepper them with shots from a single pistol. I score two or three incidental hits but nothing game-winning. It's weird shooting one gun with two hands, too!

I roll onto my side and hobble up as those two goons go retreating and the JV team comes up next. As I get up, my ankle inflates. Part of that is my swelling from an injury, but most of it is my body's internal repair systems. My ankle is getting flooded with make-it-all-better juice from a med-implant in my calf. I'll be fine in ten minutes and I can manage now, but it feels like I'm walking with a water balloon on my urban combat boot.

Around the corner of the building comes a guy and he fires a submachinegun. Bullets rip all around me but not exactly near me because SMGs are pieces of trash. I squeeze my trigger once and we've got a second headless gangbanger. The guys in the windows on the third floor are starting to pull off shots, but between me moving, the building connectors, and the general difficulty of shooting into darkness, they don't even get close to me. Thank goodness.

I swing around the far side of the building to find Allan climbing down an emergency ladder. He sees me and is relieved then rushes for me. "No!" I scold him with a loud whisper, and wave him the other direction. "Run, fool, run!" He does an about-face and starts hauling ass. He's only a few years out of the academy too, so he can still move. He hasn't gotten the five-year beer belly most cops get. I try to keep up as best I can but, again, water balloon foot.

Things get crazy for a little bit. Ever heard 'everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth'? Yeah, avoidance tactics and engagement protocols go out the window when you're ten- or twenty-to-one in almost-pitch black with no backup. You don't retreat in those circumstances: you run.

And run we do. It's mostly me following Allan and yelling at him when he makes what seems like a dumb move. He's got me hobbling down narrow paths and through alleys between manufacturing buildings. State and internal laws dictate Product A can't be made in the same building as Product B, but there's usually few rules stating exactly how far apart those buildings got to be. As such, there's a lot of five-meter-wide spaces along these fifty-yard buildings. I don't know what they made here but the assembly lines were long.

Running blind in mortal fear has been a theme for tonight and this is no different. We run until panting starts to drown out the sounds of footsteps and shouting behind us. We've 'lost' them, meaning we're at least far enough away from Jocko and his boys that we can't hear any incidental sounds they're making. And hopefully they can't hear us. I see an opening nearby, a gap between two buildings that's just wide enough to let workers get a smoke break and let toxic fumes escape from inside the warehouse. "Hey!" I yell at Allan, already making for it. We duck between two buildings and then run back the direction we came. We're very quickly lost in the maze of buildings and warehouses of this manufacturing campus, but hopefully that will make us that much harder to find.

After a few moments of running, I say "Hold up." I find a storage shed and wiggle the doors open. Unlike most everything here, it's not cement and brick but wood and cheap plastic. I bet the maintenance crew bought this with their own money, just so their stuff wouldn't get rained on. That sounds like corporate thinking.

The doors of the cheap-ass shed are locked shut with a chain but I'm able to open it enough to slip inside, ducking under the chain. Inside is a ten by ten square with a bit of rubbish and dust but not much else. There are tiny windows on each wall, one of which is blocked off by the warehouse the shed is positioned against. The others are caked in dirt, dust, and dirt-

covered dust. There are a few ruined remains of things that an anthropologist might one day be able to identify as having once been tools.

I sit down on the ground and roll my toe. "If I get off it, it'll heal faster," I tell Allan before he can ask. I exhale finally and go about reloading my guns. My backup rounds are getting awfully light. "I think I've got a vague idea of where we are," I tell him. I'm whispering. "If we get back to the gates and if I can find a road sign, I can get us back to civilization." I don't verbalize 'I think' or 'I hope' but they're hanging in the air. Corporal Freeman just nods. In the darkness of the shed, I can barely process the movement.

We listen for a moment. In the far, far distance, we hear some talking but it's indistinct. It doesn't sound even remotely close. We don't really even hear it; we're hearing the very tail-end of the echoes. With all the hard surfaces in here, though, sound can travel deceptively far. It's a little comforting to give us some indication that they're not that close. Yet.

"Why did you take this job?" Allan's question comes out of the blue. "Why are you body-guarding a cop? You hate cops."

"I told you when we left the station," I say curtly.

"You told me a personal favor, to...to Sandra Bulheart, or..."

"Sandra Bullard," I correct. "She works downtown."

"I don't know her," he says.

I exhale and roll my toes again. I'm healing but slowly. "She called in a favor with Macee, who runs the agency I work for. Bull's a former street merc."

"Were you two partners?" he asks.

I scoff. "Street mercs don't work that way."

"Lovers?" he asks.

Now I smile, a moment of memory after drowning in a sea of seemingly final moments. "Not really. We grew up together. There were a couple of, uh, dates." I shake my head, though. "No, this wasn't with me. She and I don't talk anymore."

"Why?"

"She wears a badge," I tell him, practically cuss at him. "I ain't got time for that."

I don't need to see him to feel him bristle at that. "You took the job," he repeats.

Now I bristle. "Why do you care, man?"

"Dying man's last request," he says with a glare as hard as his tone. Gee, that's not melodramatic at all. Still, I have to admit, the situation isn't exactly in our favor. I wiggle my toes and confirm the repair system is working. I could pull up a display on my HUD but it won't tell me anything my throbbing foot isn't already saying. "Bull knew this plan by the Sacramento PD was a bad idea. So in an effort to save face and blood, she called in a favor with Macee's Staffing Agency. Macee gave all her active mercs assignments to shadow and partner up with the cops, to bodyguard them."

"So this is just a job to you?" he asks.

"This is just a job to me," I confirm without hesitation, without obfuscation. "If it had been anyone other than my employer asking, I'd have turned it down. Hell, I damn-near went inactive just to avoid her asking me."

"Why do you hate cops so much?" he accuses me. "There's corruption, sure, but there are a lot of good cops."

"There's no such thing as a good cop."

"I'm a good cop," he insists.

"I said what I said," I make patently clear. "Because if there were good cops, their first responsibility would be to stop the bad ones. Their first responsibility would be to protect the people and not their own asses. Their first responsibility would be to hold other cops accountable, not cover up for them." I can't see his expression. I can barely even see him, except for the slightest silhouette against the window. "How many murders have there been like Rodriguez? How many indictments? How many police have been convicted? Or even charged? Hell, even arrested? Nine times out of ten, they end up on paid leave until 'an investigation is completed'. And then they're back on the streets. Every once in a while, they lose their job...and then get rehired at the department down the street."

"I can't comment on--" he starts to say.

"Oh bull!" I laugh. "You totally can. If I see a street merc doing something dumb or wrong, even if it's after the fact, I will absolutely tell everybody and their mother 'that moron shouldn't have been doing that'. Cops? Y'all will back another's murdering even if there's a live-stream, social media posts bragging about it beforehand, and the victim is holding two forms of picture ID. It would be genuinely admirable if the body count wasn't so damn high."

"We can't pick and choose every last person on the force," Allan argued.

"That's exactly what you can do," I tell him, while I wish I would tell him what else he can do.

"We're at the mercy of who shows up when the call for duty goes out," Allan argues. "We're also at the mercy of what we have the funds for, what we have the training for."

"You see, that's what's called victim-blaming," I tell him with sarcastic cheerfulness. "It's the people's fault you don't have the money to get paid enough. It's the people's fault you don't have the money to get the proper training. It's the people's fault not enough 'good candidates' apply. It's the people's fault." I close my case by reminding him, "You can go to hell."

"Then why don't you let Jocko and his men find me?"

"Because I got a job to do," I tell him. But that ain't it. And it bugs me to leave something unsaid. "And while I genuinely don't shed a tear when a cop gets killed, I..." My voice catches. "I can't stand by while a person dies."

"Cops are people," he says.

I make the distinction, "People are held accountable when they murder someone." When Allan doesn't say anything pithy in the intervening seconds, I flex my toe. My ankle's still sore but it moves fully. "Come on," I say and I get up. I begin to push open the door but Allan doesn't move.

"I wasn't on the force for a week before I was shot the first time," he says. "I haven't gone six months without ending up in the ICU. Every single day – and that's not an exaggeration – every single day, I genuinely wonder if this is the last time I'm going to see my place, see my dog. Every day, I wonder if this is the die the odds catch up with me and I bite it. And you know why I do it?"

"Because you hate brown people?" I guess.

"Because at least once a week, I get a call for domestic violence," he answers. "I've been called on restraining order violations and we got there just in the nick of time. Usually. We've caught burglars, rapists, murderers, by the dozens."

"I've been injured more than I've gotten bone fide arrests," he tells me. "Yeah, there's a bonus for arrests. Yeah, there's a bonus for tickets. Yeah, the system is corrupt. But man, I am trying. And I am NOT alone. And if you think for one second that this city doesn't need us?" He chuckles and faces out the window. For a moment, I can see the hopelessness in his

eyes. "I don't need to tell you. You've seen the neighborhoods where the cops don't go."

"But we were going to try," he tells me, practically pleads to me, practically begs at me. "Because those people deserve law. Maybe it's a broken law, maybe it's a law that doesn't apply to everyone. Maybe!" It's an admission and a confession and a concession, all at once and then some. "I'm not a sociologist. I just know that people deserve to live their lives, and as a cop, I help that to happen. And I do report corrupt cops," he adds. "I don't write tickets. Hell, I've gotten reprimands for making too few misdemeanor arrests." He steps towards me. "Not every cop's a murderer."

"Yeah, but every cop's job is to stop murderers," I tell him back. "And I'm sick and tired of—"

Our quarrel is interrupted by gunfire.

Machinegun shots tear through the shed's walls, splintering the cheap metal and kicking up dust all around us. We both exclaim as we narrowly miss being turned into swiss cheese. I leap back away from the door as the bullets continue. Slamming into the wall, I inadvertently punch through in the warehouse behind us. I may or may not have shrieked.

I collapse onto a pile of metal and I feel every last edge. I manage to roll back over my shoulder and stand up, but do so too fast and get dizzy. Allan runs passed me as the gunfire slows down. Corporal Freeman's all about running and wisely so, but I pause. I take out Reason and Respect and approach the hole I punched in the side of the warehouse. "What are you doing?!" he exclaims quietly.

I wait at the hole, my two pistols drawn and ready. I listen and hear footsteps. The shed door darkens and I pull the trigger twice. The door is blown off the shed itself and two bodies go flying away from the shed. I get a running start and leap laterally through the hole, through the shed, and land on my side. I go sliding across the dusty ground, firing wild at the small crowd of goons that were approaching steps behind their more expendable buddies. It's hard to aim but with the whole party all clumped together like that, I just need to group my shots.

By the time I slam into the opposite side of the warehouse, my guns are clicking empty and I don't have any more reloads. But I've also got a bunch of dead bodies before me. I roll up to my knees, guns still held out, looking all badass I'm sure. When I don't see or hear anything for a second, I holster my guns. I check the shed and Allan is peeking out, utterly astonished and dumfounded.

"Eh?" I ask him, waiting to be praised for my awesomeness, when I get shot in the chest.

Next thing I remember, I'm on my back, staring up at the featureless sky. I don't hear anything for a second. Not that it's quiet, but like, I don't process sound. I manage to sit up and my chest aches. I look down and my combat vest's got this gaping hole in it. I feel around in my shirt and realize that a pistol shot tore right through my armored harness and nearly penetrated the mesh weave of my under-armor. Even broke skin. My left chest is one giant bruise and it HURTS! Oh lord, does it hurt. I take out the bullet and slide it into a pocket on my harness. That's going on the shrine of almost-got-me.

I start to get up and I can feel something's wrong. On my feet, my head is all woozy. I feel off-balance so I check my guns. Reason and Respect? Check. Vicious and Victory? Check. Affinity and Affect? Affinity? Affinity? I check my armpit and Affinity's gone.

As I process that I'm missing a pistol, I realize I hear something. I don't actually 'hear' it so much as I kind of feel the sound. I'm not sure if my audio has shut off or if the dampeners are turned all the way up or what. Systems go a little wonky when you get shot in the chest. I can't place what I'm not hearing, but it's noise and I can tell it's coming from somewhere near the front of the production campus. I start towards it, snatching up a shotgun as I go. I check the rounds and it's only got one shell left.

I come around the building's corner right as Allan backs up and begins to take fire. He dashes back into the building and I see Jocko come from the other side. Jocko's got a big-ass machine pistol and he's shooting at Allan. I'm still a little woozy from getting shot in the chest, so I cock the shotgun and shoot at Jocko. I don't hit him but I plaster the ground in front of him with pellets. He stops cold and turns at me, surprised to see me. He's even more surprised that I throw the shotgun at him.

An Ithaca Pump-Action catches him right in the face. He yelps in pain and stumbles back, dropping the machine pistol. I pick it up as I approach, leaving the empty shotgun behind. I can kind of feel him shouting but I can't actually hear it. It's weird. He straightens up and throws a right, but I block and punch him right where the shotgun hit him. He yelps again and falls.

I discharge the machine pistol's magazine to confirm it's still got some shots left, then hand it over to Allan who has joined us. "Is he the last one?" I ask Allan. He answers, but all I can get is the shrug of uncertainty. I take a second to go digging through my HUD to figure out how to turn on my hearing again. I don't know what I'm doing exactly but I know the exact second I realize I should have manually muted my hearing first because I get punched in the brain by sound.

"Oh GOD!" I scream, covering my ears. Everything – and I do mean EVERYTHING – attacks me like rabid shoppers on Black Friday. Oh lord, everything from these two idiots breathing to the heat expansion of the warehouses all the way to two crickets on the far side of the warehouse getting all romantic, it ALL bombards me abruptly. I have to pace a second to walk off the shock of hearing everything ever all at once.

Once my brain can process sound again and I'm not overwhelmed by every atmospheric vibration, I return to the sight of Jocko staring in bloody-nosed shock and Allan worried I'm going to die of a brain aneurism. "...the hell?" says Jocko.

"I'm fine," I lie as I wince at the sound of my own voice. I settle myself and shake out some of the stiffness of being knocked out. I notice that Allan has Affinity, so I hold out my hand to him. He looks a little irritated that I'm taking my gun back, leaving him with Jocko's empty machine pistol.

In hindsight, I'm not sure if I didn't hear the dude coming up behind us, or if I did and I just couldn't discern the noise. I just know that a split-second before the Employee of the Month for Gangbanger's Union #207 takes a shot, I spot him and shout, "Duck!" He squeezes off a shot that would have taken Allan's head, but the corporal slipped to the side just in time. I pushed him too but I don't think that made a difference. What did make the difference is me shooting him in the face with Affinity. People think small guns are less dangerous than bigger guns, forgetting that 'gun' is still the operative word. Affinity might not prioritize punch like other firearms, it might even be the weakest of all my guns, but he still leaves us with yet another headless corpse so, you know, the job still got done.

Like most shootouts in the real world and not on TV, this one's real short. He shot at us, I shot him, and it's over. He goes down. Sadly, this is also when Jocko gets up. I don't know where he had shotgun shells or why he had them if he hadn't been carrying a shotgun. All I know is that he cocks the shotgun I had discarded and points it at Allan. I've got Affinity and Affect drawn, both pistols aimed at him. Allan's got his hands up and he's watching Jocko with equal parts fear and murderous intent. Even staring down the barrel of a shotgun, Allan tells Jocko, "You're under arrest."

"You ain't taking me alive," he tells the police officer.

"We already have," I tell him across my pistols, both sights trained on him. Jocko's got a smooth head with some tattoos. A few are store-bought. One or two of them are legit prison tats. His left cornea is stained, which is usually a sign of cyber-rejection. One or more of his replacement organs is being rejected by his body. His clothes don't fit but in a stylishly appropriate way.

"Merc, when this is done, you and me going to have some words," Jocko threatens.

"I don't typically visit prisons," I tell him.

"Prison?" scoffs Allan. "You killed a cop. On top of everything else you've done. You're looking at the death sentence."

Jocko scoffs right back at him. "Everything I've done? I ain't the one that walled off the neighborhood, telling everybody there 'I got mine, I hope you get yours'. I ain't the one that left a million and a half people to die."

"Die at your hands," Allan accuses.

"I'm a business man!" Jocko yells at him, like this is personal. "I'm keeping jobs going, keeping money coming into my neighborhood. People die, yeah, but they live longer and they live better than they do on their knees, licking your boots. Cause that's what you'd have them doing."

"Everything you do is illegal," Allan tells him.

"It's illegal because you say it is," Jocko comes back. "Don't sell drugs...unless you a pharmacy. Don't sell weapons...unless you pay the city for a permit. Don't sell sex...unless you got a soda sponsorship deal to go with it." He spits passed the shotgun at Allan's feet. "It ain't what I do that you mad at; it's that you ain't getting your cut." He snickers hatefully. "Excuse me, errand boy. What your bosses is mad at."

"You're a wannabe gunrunner. Don't try to sound all noble," Allan tells him.

"People got a right to protect themselves," Jocko argues.

"From what?" asks Allan.

They both yell at the other, "From you!"

Jocko adjusts his grip and I consider shooting him in that split-second. Considering and not doing costs me the opportunity. "People in this town ain't stockpiling guns to shoot gangbangers," Jocko explains to Allan. "They afraid of when – not if, when – when the cops gonna knock in their door without knocking, to 'arrest' them."

"We're not going to litigate the ills of society," I interject. I speak as dispassionately as I can, because I don't want Jocko to get even a hint of how much I agree with him. "He's arresting you. I'm helping. We're either taking you alive, or somebody's going to have to come down to the station and ID your body."

Jocko looks me square in the eye. "Imma remember this."

I sigh and shrug, too tired to pretend. "I don't care," I let him know. "You think you're a crime boss. He thinks you're just another wannabe with a gun and some weed."

Jocko starts doing math and the numbers are ugly. He looks from me, to Allan, to the two pistols I've got trained on him. I can't see real well in this darkness, but I can tell he swallows fearfully. "And what do you think, merc?" he asks me. His words don't shake but I hear the uncertainty. His voice doesn't crack but I hear the fear.

He's never heard anyone in his whole life be so honest as I am in that moment. "You don't matter enough for me to care."

For the briefest second, I see Jocko for who he really is: a scared little boy.

For the briefest second, Jocko becomes an infant abandoned by a parent, or two parents. He becomes a toddler told he didn't deserve what other kids took for granted. He becomes a kindergartener told he was stupid by a teacher. He becomes a child, told again and again, reinforced again and again, spelled out in crystal detail again and again, that the system hadn't failed him. The system had done exactly what it was supposed to, what it was designed to do, what his whole world was set up to do: abandon him. He has been abandoned of all help, of all support, like he has been ten thousand times before now.

For the briefest second, I see Jocko for who he really is: the product of deliberate, systemic abandonment.

Jocko lowers the gun.

Sometime later, I'm doing dishes. I have a cheap-ass dish cleaner. It's more of a steamer than an actual washer. I have to pre-rinse my dishes first, and then scrape them off. I do most of the work. Better than blowing the money on a new washer, and then having to deal with that water bill to boot.

Anyway, I'm doing the dishes when it comes over the news. Jocko's dead. He escaped from his cell while awaiting release. He'd been arraigned on charges – like, a lot of them – and the judge gave him, like, a gazillion dollars in bail. Someone actually ponied up the money, though, and he was set to be released. Apparently, he managed to get the cell door open and was making a run for it. He got an officer's weapon and was halfway out when he was shot.

There's no video of him escaping his cell. Municipal buildings were undergoing a test at the time, apparently. The cop that shot him is being reviewed. He's on paid administrative leave until the review is done. Only the results of the review will be released, not the findings.

I think about Jocko, and that look on his face. I don't regret the gangbanger but I regret the little boy who was abandoned ten thousand times to make way for that gangbanger to come to life.

I just keep washing my dishes. I'm not sure what else I can do.

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