

Rhest and the Music Festival

By Robert V Aldrich

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2019

Published: 2020/01/03

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

The elevators at Daisuke Jigen Resort & Convention Center hate me.

Look, I know this is a super-nice resort and stuff, and I know they've got high-grade, super elevators and stuff, but they still hate me. I don't care what kind of dope-ass, tensile ultra-strength elevator cables you got, an elevator still has to carry heavy people all damn day. The last thing it needs is a street merc with a bad attitude and more cybernetics than some cyber-docs carry in-stock. That much gear weighs a lot. Trust me, I know. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

And it's not just the gear that weighs a lot. It's the attitude too. This is the ninth time I've had to ride these elevators today. I am not in a serene place at the moment. I'm a little cranky. I'm a little grouchy. And that much emotional baggage takes a toll and I'll be damned if the elevators ain't aware of it.

The doors part and I'm scowling. Standing dead-center, I'm sandwiched between two ravers and three keyboard jockeys and they couldn't be more opposite. The ravers are in black clothes, all skin-tight and shiny, with epilepsy-inducing flashing lights and neon highlights, like they're cosplaying a heroin fever. On the other side of me are khaki and short-sleeve t-shirts with specialty keyboards and laptops with more processing power than humankind possessed when we first went to Mars.

The ravers are already dancing like they're at the party on the bottom floor. This is the ninth floor and they came up with me. Why? Because they didn't want to wait for the elevators to take them two floors down, so they got on an upward-bound elevator and just figured they'd wait until it was going down again. So they're trancing and twerking to whatever cacophony is coming off the dude's phone. This causes the whole elevator to rattle a little bit and this...this is why hate is the dominant lifeform on this planet.

The keyboard jockeys are off to some LAN party in some room. Some enterprising idiots set up a Local Area Network in their hotel room and they try to compete with the actual LAN party down at the convention floor. Oh, they're probably going to try to hack them, or run a counter-op in the same game everybody is playing down there. It's what we computer geeks do.

Oh, yeah, I'm working a music and video game convention this weekend. Did I not mention that? Did I mention being testy? Because that's the kind of weekend it's been.

Like I said, the doors open and I step off. The elevator immediately kicks up a centimeter or two and all three keyboard jockeys look at me in awe. Since they all have guts and I don't, I guess they're trying to figure

out why I weigh so much. Somehow the combat harness, tactical armor, and six pistols didn't clue them in that I'm a street merc. The ravers didn't notice. Guess whatever drugs they're on are pretty potent.

Out of the elevator, I take a second and just breathe. I got a million things to do but it's been a long night and there's going to be a lot more to come. I've been in enough gun fights to know that if you don't stay calm, the stress is deadlier than a bullet. Well, maybe not, but it will make a miss turn into a hit.

I take just a quick second to look out the foyer windows. This weekend, I'm in the picturesque Centennial Harbor. It's a big resort on the ocean. It's a neat little mini-town right on the water, far enough away from the highways to feel secluded but near enough to the junction of several major interstates to make commuting a nightmare. It's that super-trendy retail spot with brick sidewalks and elevated parking decks. It's cutesy statues on the corners and excessive pedestrian accommodations. It's got multiple hotels and condos that nobody can afford and food that nobody actually likes and attractions nobody actually wants to see. Like a ferris wheel that is alight with colors, even if nobody has ever actually ridden it). But because the Centennial Harbor includes the Jigen Resort, it's the site of dozens of top-tier events like political fundraisers and national rallies and even the occasional corporate retreat. That makes for a pretty captive audience for the businesses. This is because the Harbor is a few stops off any reliable transportation system. That means you either bring your own food or you pay double what a hamburger should actually cost.

That said, the view is really something. The main hotel of the Centennial Harbor is the Jigen. It's sort of like the center-piece. It's this big-ass complex, like a hotel fused with a modest corporate bio-dome. Ten billion hotel rooms. A hundred gazillion square feet. Eleventy-hundred convention rooms. Seventeen in-house restaurants, only three of which are open at any given time and none of which are even remotely reasonably priced. The big attraction for the Jigen, though, is this gorgeous indoor, open-air promenade. At least two dozen stories tall and enclosed with a glass wall and ceiling, the enclosed outdoor space is truly gorgeous. The level below the Lobby floor – whatever weird-ass, hotel-ese name they have for it – has this simulated garden with a few free-standing shops that look like a miniature shopping village. At the heart of the village is a big fountain. At night, these multi-colored lights in the fountain glow as streams of water shoot through the air in an aquatic dance. Soft music plays, enough to be ambient but not enough to irritate. From the 9th floor elevator foyer, it's positively gorgeous.

Sadly, I can only enjoy this for a second because I have to get back to work. Work doing what, you ask? Well, some asshole thought it would be

fun to run up and down the halls and throw flour at people. Since I'm working security for the convention this weekend, that means I have to deal with him. And by 'deal with him', I mean stop him and take him to con-ops for a stern talking to. And by 'take him to con-ops', I mean shoot him.

I start down the beige and taupe hallway of the resort hotel, ready to start throwing hands if anybody so much as looks at me wrong. I don't get pranks like...well, I don't get pranks period. I've yet to really see the difference between a prank and bullying. Still, harmless bullying (if there is such a thing), is one thing. But I can't begin to grasp the rationale behind vandalism for the sake of vandalism like breaking stuff and trashing hotel rooms. That said, something like throwing flour really fries my circuits. Plus, I don't like working conventions to begin with so having to actually earn my tiny paycheck is especially irritating.

Why did I take this job? Well, funny story. I work for a staffing agency, which is code for 'nexus of mercenaries, cutthroats, and others of ill-repute'. If people need work that involves a certain degree of muscle, force, violence, or simply illegality, they typically go to a staffing agency. My preferred staffing agency is Macee's. Macee isn't my boss but she runs the agency and I'm a free agent who contracts under her. Somebody called in a favor with Macee. Macee called in a favor with me. So here I am, working security for the nation's biggest digital media festival.

Digital media is a ten-dollar word for video games and festival is a five-dollar word for indie music. I'm working Super Mario Brothers-meets-Woodstock.

I smell under-baked goods and stop at the junction of two hallways. Straight ahead is an endless hall of inoffensively calming-colored walls and a red carpet with geometric patterns laid out in the usual interesting and stain-hiding arrangement. Lights set into the walls give a comfortable level of illumination without seeming bright. To the right, however, is almost the exact same thing: impossibly long hall with doors on either side and room numbers that make sense to that hall and that hall only, not the rest of the floor.

One major problem I've been having the whole damn weekend is that this convention center is laid out like a damn maze. There are cross-sections and routes that are consistent on several floors, and then just randomly the next floor will have a slightly different layout. Some stairwells go all the way down, some stop two or three floors shy. Some have no access to the business floors, some do. It's so weird. I didn't realize this place was this crazy at first, so I spent the first night using my Mapper to get a layout of each floor. That tripped off hotel security because apparently

they weren't cool with a little golden orb the size of a golf ball with wings zipping through the air. We had a fun chat.

So I'm not a dog, so tracking by smell isn't something I'm particularly adept at. I live in and work in Sacramento, a city where you generally don't want to smell period. Still, I'm walking down the halls of the Jigen Resort, sniffing in the air like I got the world's worst runny nose. It takes me a little bit but I manage to track the smell of baked goods to some white skid marks on the carpeting. It's not quite a clump but this is clearly the remnants of a fist-full of flour that got thrown at someone else. It doesn't appear to be in the air, so I'm at least a minute or two behind this ass, but I'm at least on the right track.

I hear giggling and footsteps. My instinct is to draw my gun but I'm working security, not wetwork, so I gotta play nice. Initially. I stand and start to the next intersection. The halls are deceptively quiet. The hotel rooms are in four-door alcoves, which helps to buffer the sound. This means you can hear a lot (because the halls are super-long), but the sound is really muffled and dampened. So you hear 'sound' but you can't hear what you're hearing.

I arrive at the intersection just as several dancers are passing. They're not true ravers like the brain-fried pair on the elevator; these are more like ravers-lite. They've got some of the fashion – glowing neon highlights and lots of shiny accouterments – but their cybernetics look more functional. Their glowing eyes look like features they can turn on and off, and their hands with flashing fingernails could pass for the real thing when they're working their dayjob. They look a bit more useful and less 'steampunk fashion show'. They're also reasonably dressed, which means their skirts actually cover their hips and their shirts aren't so tight a deep breath will cause them to pop a stitch. More importantly, they're actually aware of their surroundings because when the cyber-merc turns the corner, they shut the hell up and freeze.

"Hey," I tell the four of them. "I'm looking for some dude...or dudes...or dudettes...that are throwing flour. You seen anybody?"

One dude is a tall guy, but less basketball tall and more pro-wrestling tall. He shifts forward and I think he's about to start getting an attitude with me. To my surprise, while he does get defensively between me and the other three, he asks in a very polite tone, "Are you with the convention?"

A very reasonable question. I reach into my harness and one of the girls gasps, "Are you going for a gun?"

I stop, not horrified but amazed she could think that. "No I'm not going for...my guns are right here!" I tell her, gesturing at the two big-ass

pistols on my thighs. I take from the harness my convention badge that says 'Security'. I had to write on it with a black marker 'Consultant' so people would stop asking me for directions. As if anybody knows their way around this labyrinthine hell.

The lead guy calms a bit, as do the three dancers behind him. He stays polite but he speaks more casually now. "No, man, we ain't seen nobody throwing flour, but we saw some clumps of it. Plus, there's like four parties down that way." He gestures down the impossibly long hallway they just came down.

"Cool," I nod. "You be safe," I tell them as I start passed, letting them head towards one of the one hundred and sixteen elevator foyers in this place.

So if you've never been to a convention, they are something else. Conventions, or 'cons', often have a bunch of little rooms where people hold panels and roundtable discussions and workshops. That sort of thing. Then they have big rooms where celebrities talk or keynote speeches are given. They also have a few big rooms where dealers and merchandisers try to hock their goods.

Well, at conventions aimed at more party-centric demographics (IE young people), sometime after sundown, the dances start. The big rooms turn into raves and ballroom formals and all sorts of stuff. Of course, enterprising individuals (IE: jerks) will sometimes turn their hotel rooms into raves of their own making. They push the furniture to the corners, they turn their laptop volumes up to full blast, and they cram as many people as physically possible until the room is one massive dry-humping session. This is illegal, it's dangerous, and – most importantly – it's irritating.

I pass one such room and knock on the door. I hear somebody yell "Turn it down" before they yell through the door, "Who is it?"

"Con security," I tell the idiot on the other side of the door. I show him my badge. I hear the door unlock and a skinny dude without a shirt opens the door. "Turn it down, keep it down, and get half the people out of that room before a fire burns you all." I'm already starting to leave.

All this idiot had to do was keep his trap shut and I'd have forgotten about them, but no. He protests, "I ain't got nobody in here." Man, I am not in the mood.

I'm back at his door in a flash, my face in his. "Son," I warn him like the finger I've got in his face is a knife to his throat, "turn the music down and keep it under sixty decibels, and kick everybody out until you're down to single-digit occupancy, or so help me, I will take you outside and curb-stomp you in front of the ice cream parlor." He's too dumbfounded to respond, not

sure if I'm exaggerating or not. I'm not either. I tell him, "Enjoy the rest of the con," and walk on.

What was I doing? Something about flowers? Flour! Right, now I remember. I look around my immediate area for some clue that I'm still on the right track but there's no indication on the weird geometric patterns of the reddish-brown carpet. I crouch down to run my fingers along the surface, to see if maybe I can pick up something. Hey, when in doubt, do something different. It's amazing what an altitude change alone will reveal. I don't pick up any scents. Instead, I pick up music.

It's a somewhat upbeat melody, with a strong but patient rhythm. I can't exactly make out the instrumentation but it sounds like a synthesizer. I turn and glance back at the room party about half a dozen rooms back, but that was electronic dance music. I can still hear that (though they've thankfully turned it down). What I'm hearing, crouched on the floor in the middle of the Jigen resort, is something different. When I strain, it sounds a little less like a synthesizer and more like a rock band with some orchestral instrumentation added. It's like a very small symphony with a garage band out front. The weird thing is, it doesn't sound like its coming from any of the nearby rooms. I check every way, but it sounds like its coming from beneath me. This hotel is massive, though. These floors are thick. Music doesn't permeate up or down.

I stand up and I can still hear the music, though it's not as loud. The melody has continued and gotten into a breakdown, with some kicking drums and just a hint of melancholy tone to the melody. It sounds on the cusp of familiar. Hearing it scratches the back of my brain, like its tugging on some forgotten memory. I call up my Heads-Up Display, the visual controls of my embedded computers showing as transparent over my vision. I activate a sound analyzer, but the volume unit meter stays flat. I squat back down, thinking maybe the sound is too subtle, but the meter doesn't budge. Odd.

Before I can further respond, I hear somebody shout "Oh my god, what is wrong with you?!" It doesn't sound exactly like somebody just got flour thrown in their face, but it's something. I leap up and go running down the hall. I spin around the corner and see no one. I run down that hall and come around another corner to find a guy and a gal in the middle of an argument. I skid to a halt, realizing what's happening.

The dude's crying, his cheeks all red and flushed. The woman's holding it together a bit better but she's clearly upset as well. I do not have time for this and I am not qualified to give therapy. The pair look at me and both stiffen up, but I defuse the situation by asking, "Do you guys hear

music? Not that crappy room-party stuff. Like..." All the words I know and they all fail me. I shrug.

"What? No, man," says the guy, wiping his cheeks. He sniffs and tries to hide that he's crying. He's dressed for the rave, or maybe he's a cosplayer. Shiny black pants and a mesh top with wings on the back. I could see it going either way. She's not dressed for anything but pizza and a movie, in pajama pants and a dumpy over-sized t-shirt.

I don't want to do this, but screw it, I'm on the convention's dime. "You two okay?" I flash my laminated badge. "I'm con security."

"Oh god," the woman says, covering her mouth apologetically. "I'm sorry if we're being too loud."

The guy knows what I mean, though. "No, we're fine. We're..." He just leaves it.

I don't want to linger but my trail of the flour-thrower has gone cold. As I try to come up with a new move, I get a beep in my ear. "Sam to Rhest, are you on?" It's the con-chair.

I turn from the two, my eyes shifting to...I think orange? Color-changing eyes are kind of standard these days and they're sort of a polite protocol when you are answering a phone or surfing the web using an internal system. Plugged into the convention resort's crap-tastic wi-fi, I'm linked into the security radio system. I don't use radio signals much, so I've forgotten what I set my eyes to turn to when I do, but I think it was orange. "Go for Rhest," I tell her.

"Hey, Rhest, can you switch to channel four?" asks Sam.

She clicks before I can tell her no and I groan. I have to pull up my Heads-Up Display again and go through the tutorial to remember how to actually change channels. I leave the arguing lovebirds to their thing. I start down the hall, trying to find channel four. The HUD may be transparent but that doesn't mean you can do two things at once, like change settings and walk. I still manage to only walk into a wall twice before I arrive at the nearest elevator foyer. Pushing the down button, I finally get onto channel four. "Go for Rhest."

"Hey, hotel security got the guy with the flour," says Sam. "He's going to be charged. I'm heading there now to give a statement to the police."

"Geez," is all I say. I'm waiting on the elevator, looking through my reflection as the picturesque beauty of Centennial Harbor.

“Well, that’s what you get for throwing flour at people,” says Sam. I can hear her walking. “Can you get back down to the convention floor and resume your patrol?”

“Will do,” I tell her. “Hey, there’s a band playing up—” I get cut off. Normally I might take that personally, but I’ve seen what Sam has to put up with. Frankly, I wouldn’t be entirely surprised if she was holding two other conversations while she was walking. Convention chairs handle catastrophic emergencies at a frequency with which most people blink.

I look out at the Jigen Resort’s indoor expanse and, for a moment, all my frustrations melt away. Nine stories up and all I see is the shimmering lights of a Rockwellian model city. The fountain is shooting drops of crystal water through softly-lit air to the tune of indoor ambiance and soft orchestral music. No amount of jaded, world-weariness can keep this view from being anything less than awe-inspiring.

Just beneath the ambient music from the promenade comes that song again. Not the soft instrumental of the Jigen’s music system; this is the rock ‘n roll with symphonic backups from a few minutes ago. It’s a different song, but it’s by the same band, or it’s from the same movie or something. It’s connected to the previous song. This has a bit more guitar work, and its playing with the strings of the symphony (or orchestra or whatever the difference is). It’s a faster piece, with a sense of urgency, sense of desperation to it.

I put my hand to the glass of the windows looking out on the promenade and they’re fairly calm. It takes me a second of listening to realize this music is coming from behind me, not beneath me. I turn around in the elevator foyer but don’t see anything among the six elevator doors. I turn over a nearby plant, check the underside of an accent table, scour the immediate surroundings. There’s no identifiable source of this music, but it sounds like it’s coming from just the other side of the wall. The wall with the elevators.

As I look at said wall, the center elevator chimes. The doors part and the music is gone. I glance around the foyer yet again, but I shake it off and step inside. The elevator groans and I roll my eyes. I hit the button for the bottom floor, beneath the lobby and the first floor. The promenade with the convention proper on it. As the elevator shifts into gear and beginning its descent, I look out the windowed rear of the elevator at the promenade. So lovely. Trees sprout amongst the stand-alone buildings, meant to look like some idealistic village.

I hear the music again.

Out of the elevators, I exit into a white foyer with brick floors. This is the lowest level, beneath the lobby, and the easiest to access not just the promenade but also the convention proper. I exit away from the fountains and the ambient music and the comfortable light towards the convention halls next to the Jigen proper.

Down a hallway lined with shops closed at this hour, I arrive at the bright gray halls of the convention center. At the mouth of the hall is a taped-off area where the world's most annoying DJ is playing. The taped off area is where a small crowd of about two dozen smoked-out loonies too crazy to go to the rave are dancing in the middle of the biggest thoroughfare in the convention hall because why not? The DJ is blasting either electronic dance music or an audio file on loop of a bunch of pots thrown down a flight of stairs. I ignore the music and the dancers and walk on.

Beyond the world's most annoying dance party (which is saying something), I come to the convention hall proper. On the bottom level, this means there are four huge rooms on my left and the escalator and elevators to my right. The Jigen Convention Hall is made up of one absolutely massive convention room that can be partitioned off into two, three, four, down to a dozen individual rooms, depending on the needs, wishes, and budget of the renting convention.

In the case of this weekend, there are four rooms with multiple entrances. At the far end, well behind me, is the rave itself. Down that hall is madness and no amount of money could persuade me to go in there. Sensory overload is a special breed of hell, and that's before you have cybernetic upgrades. Next is the dealer's room, followed by the vendor's room, then at the far end and closest to the exits, is the check-in. Pretty standard set-up for a convention.

On the floor above me (or, half-above me as it only covers part of the roof) are more convention rooms where panels and smaller events are held. I start up that way. Despite the late hour, there are still dozens, hundreds of people still awake. Some are ravers and other dancers, surviving on hedonism and chemicals. Others are just night owls who are soaking in every sight and sound of this admittedly unique world. This convention is hopping at all hours so even this late in the night, it is a thriving and bustling world all its own.

Music dominates. Violinists play classic gaming tunes on the side of the walkway, next to flautists, guitarists, and even a mariachi band. DJs have their portable rigs set-up and aspiring gaming companies are showing off demos, sometimes on their own personal phones. The crowd is thriving, conversation filling the gaps between notes.

I pass through the crowd and circle around to the front of the stairs. I don't even bother with the escalators. Those poor bastards don't want anything to do with a cybered-up street merc. I end up breaking most escalators anyway. As I jog up the stairs, I hear that convention tradition: The Roar. It's from some classic video game where a character roars really loudly as they do some screen-clearing attack. Some trendsetter at these conventions started doing it and it caught on. Somebody does that yell way too loudly and it circles around, with everybody within earshot doing it. When you're twelve years old and it's 6pm? Yeah, it's kind of cool. When you're not twelve years old and/or it's anytime in the AM? Less cool.

The stairs go up a floor, stop at a landing, and then continue up to the next floor. Like I said before, the floors are named stupid things like 'Atrium', 'Lobby', and 'First Floor', and nobody actually remembers which one is which. On the middle landing is where I spot Coolly McRoarface. He's got some band's t-shirt on and he's just starting The Roar yet again, because if something was annoying once, why not do it eleventy-hundred more times? He rolls his head back, his arms thrown to his sides, and he starts to let out this guttural Tarzanian scream. Just bellows from his toes to his temples and lets it all out.

He's got a team of others with him and they all do the same thing; noise and posture. Instantly, there's an echo that roils around the convention hall like an auditory version of The Wave or a mild STD, depending on your opinion of the matter. The guys all grin and smile as the roar swims through the air while I contemplate smacking all of them.

"Guys," I tell them with a stern look, not even breaking stride. If it's too late for the sun, it's too late to be doing that.

As I start up the second flight of stairs – ignoring somebody who tells me my costume looks awesome – I hear the music again. Similar melody, but a different beat. It's not anything classical; it sounds like a soundtrack or something. I know I know it! I stop at the steps' zenith and look around. There's a lot of music in the area. The DJ and the dance parties from below are creating a wash of noise, along with the aspiring musicians trying to win the admiration of passersby. The TV screens from the late-night bars in the lobby are barely perceptible, especially with the swell of conversation and the soft din of crowd movement. This is decidedly different. This is somebody playing music deliberately and competently. And it sounds nearby.

At the top of the stairs is another massive intersection of convention space. To my left is another archway leading back to the Jigen's hotel area and the apex of the promenade (this time above the lobby). Just to my right is a hallway that leads away from me towards more convention spaces

(including a ballroom dance, which is a rave for pretentious people). Directly right is a passage towards office space, small convention rooms, and the plethora of convention operations like con-ops, medical, programming, etc. It's where the grownups work to make this whole thing happen. And back behind me are the actual musical rooms. This is where many of the concerts play and this is where I am now heading with my hand inching towards my gun. Why? Because even over this mild cacophony of convention life, the music is getting louder.

As I approach the middle of three music rooms, I pull up the convention schedule on my HUD. I check and confirm there are no concerts right now. I'm guessing somebody decided to have their own unofficial concert. Wouldn't be the first time. Wouldn't be the first time they decided to live-stream it so people could hear it. Fine, cool, great, but I'm security so I got to put a stop to it, no matter how good they are.

I go for the doors and push them. They don't budge, which means these idiots secured the doors. Fire hazard AND against the rules. Great, now I've got to...realize these doors have handles and I just pushed doors that pull out. Ugh, it's been a long day.

I grab the handle, able to hear the modest crowd cheering. As I yank open the door, my hand instinctively moves for my gun on my thigh. I do this pretty much whenever I get surprised when I enter a room. What's the surprise for me in here?

The room is empty.

Soft carpeting and lovely textured walls are all that greet me. There's a sturdy but adjustable stage at the far end of the slightly long room, with a lighting rig above it. A few lights are on, customary at a convention. The stage is completely empty, without even so much as crew tape to denote where stands or instruments need to go. Stacks of chairs line the far wall. Wires are draped about for the set-up to begin tomorrow. But right now, the room is absolutely bereft of anyone other than me. More than that, the music I heard not even one full second ago is gone. No crowd. No band. No string instruments. Nothing. Not even any speakers (that I can see, anyway) for where the noise might have been piped in from. Hell, I don't even see any wireless signals to suggest how speakers might have been fed. This is seriously strange.

When I exit the concert hall, everything is quiet. Well, not quiet-quiet. It's still the late-night hours at a convention / music festival. There's still loads of people around and there's that perpetual din of chatter, walking, and the like. Late-night zombies and all-night stimulants. People trying to avoid the pain of loneliness and others living the life-defining weekend with their dearest friends. Conventions are a lot of things, but they are never

uneventful. They're amazing, they're terrible, or they're exemplary, but they always stand out.

As I start to head back for the stairs, I hear radio chatter and notice Sam coming down a nearby set of stairs. The stairs from the mezzanine, the maybe third floor, maybe not, are horseshoe-shaped and thankfully lack an escalator. This means most people only go up there if they actually have some real business to attend to. As such, it's not surprising that it is from this direction that Sam is coming.

Sam Parker is a charming and generous woman when she's not in a hurry. Which is never. Not your typical nerd, she's a plump black woman with octagonal glasses, brushed-down long hair, a sweet smile with dimples, and a glare that will chill your goddamn soul.

"Hey, Rhest," she says, walking alone which is rare for her. She sounds exhausted but also a little hyper. I'm not sure if it's stems, sugar, or just the indomitable will of someone insane enough to chair a convention. She's wearing a band's t-shirt, a fluffy Pokemon skullcap, and a Dr Who scarf. "What's happening?"

"I dunno," I tell her honestly. Our routes just sort of merge and we don't even break stride as we're suddenly walking side-by-side. "I'm getting some musical pranksters or something. Trying to track them down."

"Great, that's all we need," she says. "I'm heading to talk to the police about flour thrower."

"Is the hotel pressing charges?" I ask and she nods. "Good."

"The new shift will be here at the top of the hour," Sam says as we walk. She checks her wristwatch. She has an honest-to-god wristwatch. "If you can, sweep the dealer's room and the merchant hall."

"On it," I tell her.

She concludes our conversation with a strong exhale, like she's getting ready to dive into water. She doesn't say anything but gives me a smile that says more than most people's words. She does give me a nod, then she keeps straight while I turn and go back down the steps.

A lot of mercs don't like working events like this, and there's plenty of good reasons not to. Hours suck, and the pay is usually low. And there's rarely much excitement. It's usually a lot of irritations. I mean, you're basically a mall cop, but like a step down, which is really saying something. Crossing guards have more respect and authority than mall cops.

Thing is, conventions are unique worlds. They're very insular and very condensed. People tend to save up for cons, and I don't just mean the

money. Conventions are like the real world for them, and who they are in their day-to-day lives outside the convention is some kind of costume. Cons are where they can be honest. Now, this is beautiful in an all-people-are-special-little-snow-flakes sort of way, but it also means that crimes happen when they might not normally and wounds inflicted on body and soul can sometimes be much, much deeper.

There is an air of anonymity at conventions. People come from miles away, states away, countries away. They live an insular life for the hours between opening and closing ceremonies. They get to be someone new. This can be empowering or it can be detrimental. Drunk on this freedom, they can decide to do what they might never have seriously considered. Infidelity, theft, vandalism. It all happens. Hell, you think somebody throws flour at home?

That's the main reason I'm here. The convention has their own security. Most of them are volunteers because, frankly, that's all that's needed: somebody to say 'hey, don't do that' and give a stern look and maybe report it. They've got some security staff, people who are paid (volunteers get badges, swag, and maybe a hotel room) and who usually have some kind of security or even military background. They handle the drunk and disorderly, the domestic disputes. Etc.

But the real world intrudes, even into the blissful fantasy of convention life. Cons have been around for well over a century (or two?). Sooner or later, somebody was going to bring a real gun to see how their favorite slug thrower matches up against the kill-o-zap ray-guns they read about in fantasy. For liability reasons, the convention can't hire armed guards. So they don't. Somebody unofficially hires me. I'm not on any documentation. No allotment has been officially labeled for 'the street merc'. But I'm here and I'm doing whatever. I'm handling whatever the con asks me to handle. The money isn't great, but it's a job. The con atmosphere is nice and all, but what really sealed the deal was they threw in an all-weekend spa treatment for Onyx.

See, successful cons use money to entice people but smart cons entice their family. Onyx is my...girlfriend? Wife? Humanoid, live-in pseudo-spouse? Anyway, she likes heat. So the offer of a 24-hour room at a hundred plus degrees? Even if I wasn't eyeing the job as a favor to Macee, Onyx informed me I was taking it and that was the end of that particular discussion.

I head down to the dealers' room first. Most conventions have posted hours that are reasonable, but this is video games and music, and thus sleep is for the weak. This place is open twenty-four hours. That means at even this unreasonable hour, it's bustling. And when I say unreasonable,

remember this is coming from a street merc who works urban Sacramento. For most people in the world, it's 2am in the morning, but for some people in this crowd, it's Day Three.

The dealers' room is full of a gazillion different things only tangentially related to music and video games. Oh sure, you've got the game dealers, and the bootleg game dealers, and the knock-off game dealers, and the pirated game dealers. You've got the instrument sellers and the instrument pawn shop and the instrument simulators. But you've also got crazy stuff like blankets that look like video game characters. Plushies of your favorite bands. Erotic art. Fan art. Erotic fan art. Knitting yarn. Costumes. Hackneyed novelists. Independent film studios. Voice actors. Niche-market anthropologists. Bunny accessories (not the fetish). Bunny accessories (the fetish). When I say 'the whole schebang', I ain't exaggerating.

So I'm down there, walking around. This means I'm basically window-shopping but keeping an eye on the other customers more than the merchandise. Not a big deal. Most of the people in here aren't bad. You've got to be serious scum, or seriously stupid, to pay to get into essentially a flea market, just to steal something. The people who are here aren't shopping too intently, anyway. This is mostly just another place to hang out. And half the booths are closed anyway. Even if they're not secured, it'll be hella obvious if somebody tried to steal something.

So I'm at the custom dice booth, contemplating some polished bronze dice just in case I ever take another spin at table-top gaming, when I hear something coming from the nearby wall. The section of the wall divides the dealer's room from the vendor's hall. Dealers are the local merchants and artists-turned-sellers. The vendors are the actual game makers, the actual instrument makers. The division between professional and novice is a lot thinner than you might think, but saying merchants are the novices and the vendors are the professionals wouldn't be the most inaccurate description ever.

Anyway, the portion of the wall is from the cordoned-off section where they have their set-up stuff. It's basically the geek equivalent of a locker room where only the vendors' staff can go. There shouldn't be music coming from there. And this isn't somebody got their phone turned up loud while they're doing something else. This is, like, a band jamming. Even more, though, is it sounds familiar. If this is the band that's been playing that soundtrack or whatever all night, they're on a new track or something. Familiar but not recognizable.

I go to the dividers and unlock them. I know I shouldn't. I should walk up to the front of the dealers' room and walk around to the vendors'

hall and go in that way, all official and nice like. Yeah, that ain't happening. I got a security badge and I got six guns: let somebody say something.

I push through into the vendors hall and shut the divider back real secure. The room is darker in here, so people can see the video screens. There are a lot of games being demoed in here, by new studios and establishment developers. There are some sound-proof rooms over in the corner where some instrument companies can allow their new guitars to be demoed. It's the middle of the damn night, though, so most of the screens are showing the demo reels. There are a few people – customers and professionals – but they're shadows standing out in the darkness, prismatic silhouettes defining them. Even through the wall of sound, so much video game music and sound effects merging into a solid din of white noise, it is immediately evident that the music has stopped.

I go around into the back of the vendors hall and, lo and behold, the space is empty. There are a bunch of cardboard boxes and plastic bins with names and dates scribbled on them. There're some jackets and some food bags and stuff, but definitely no band. Not even any equipment set up to explain the sound I heard. Those guitars would have to be plugged in to be heard over the ambient noise of these rooms.

This is seriously buggy.

Since I'm here, I do a route around the vendors hall. At the back is the arcade section, where they've got old-style games from the arcade and home console era. I only gently pass through here. It's only a few stemmed-up hardcore gamers straight-lining soda and cheese. They ain't stealing anything but somebody else's chance to play. I go up along the front of the hall. I've seen all the displays so there's not much that catches my eye – although I do think about taking a spin in the Battletech simulators when my shift is over – and head up towards the exit. I see one dude in a raver's skirt and fishnets looking shifty about a guitar, so I go and stand by him. I make it look like I'm contemplating a purchase and just wait him out until he goes somewhere else.

I head back around to the front, the only part of the room where the lights are on full. I nod to the night crew working the room, including their security guy. She's a street merc from a local agency, even though she's working security proper for the convention. She's a big girl and she doesn't carry any guns. She carries a 2x4, going all Buford Pusser-style. We nod at each other as I walk by.

I exit the vendor's room and spot The Roar guys about to start. Just as their lead dork is about to throw his head back, I grab his shirt collar and yank him forward. I don't hit him or anything, I just throw him off balance and send him stumbling. "Quit it," I tell him and his troupe of irritants

without breaking stride. Someone else compliments my costume as I head back towards the dealer's room.

I only have a little bit left until my shift is over. I think they've got another merc coming in; I don't remember the arrangement. Anyway, back in the dealer's room, I head down to a table in the middle of the second row of island tables (which means it's one of seven-hundred-and-ninety-four tables in this flea market), the table run by a small film studio who make online videos of gaming parodies. A skinny dude with short hair and a scruffy beard by the name of Joe is wearing a shirt that says 'I Hate Deer'. He's counting the day's sales in the middle of the night. "Sup," I tell him as I pull over a chair. I sit in it and it immediately gives out. Stupid, non-reinforced furniture. Sometimes I forget I weigh more than some cars.

"Hey," he tells me as I'm laying on the floor. He doesn't look away from the bills he's counting. He taps them on the table to organize them, then puts them in his lock box. "What's up?" he asks finally, looking at me.

I groan as I get up. I just kick the debris of the chair away. "What are you doing down here?" I ask.

"There's eight of us to the room and Abel snores," he tells me as he scribbles down the take. "Plus, I work nights back home so it's kind of natural for me anyway. And last year, we did, like, two-thirds of our sales between 11pm and 7am."

Huh. I look around at the room and kind of nod at the various people milling about between the tables. Most of them look like they're just shooting the breeze with one another or the dealers, but I guess that can lead to sales awful fast. "Um...hey, do you hear some music?"

"I do in fact," he tells me ultra-casually. He gives me an academic look and informs me, "From what I hear, they have a band or two playing in this little shindig."

I humor him with a snide look. "Ha, ha. No, I'm serious. I keep hearing..." I gesture around. "Like a band and an orchestra, playing together."

"Maybe you're picking up something on your cybernetics?" he speculates.

"Nah. I might pick up noise or static, but not localized music. Not...not like this." I mean, it's not a hundred percent impossible, but any diagnostic I run right now is going to sap processing power. And it's not like it would be truly definitive. At best, it would probably just tell me there was a problem, not what it is. "There's a cyber-doc over by the spa," I think aloud. "Maybe tomorrow I can go and get checked out."

"Yeah, be careful with that," says the studio's cinematographer/accountant/editor/dietitian/cobbler. "I got a dyslexia implant touched up while I was on vacation. They used the wrong software. Cost a fortune to get straightened out."

"Really?" I gawk. That's the cybernetic equivalent of amputating the wrong foot. At least its correctable. But then, I guess amputating a foot isn't as permanent as it used to be.

I look around at the dealers' room as Joe keeps taking inventory. I 'da-da-da' the theme. Joe looks up from counting the shirts and stares at me. "Is that Zelda?"

Is it? I think about it. "No...?" I don't think it is.

"Keep going," he says. I repeat the melody. "What is that?" he presses, mostly of himself.

"I dunno."

"It's a video game," he says. "I recognize it. I mean, you know, not enough to remember the name, but I know I've heard that."

"Yeah," I nod. "I think I heard it on Rolling Thunder." Joe's face scrunches up like he bit into something sour, or he smells a particularly bad fart. He turns his confused look at me. "It was this old TV show," I wave off. "Public access. Local. One of those things."

"Ah," says Joe. "Yeah, no, I had big-boy TV. PBS." He nods and keeps going back to folding shirts as I chuckle.

I keep rolling the melody around in my head, now wanting to find this band just so I can ask them what they're playing. Before I kick them out for playing off the schedule. Music festivals in big event spaces are dubious prospects and all it takes is one banding playing after the auditory curfew to make sure this convention never see the inside of this (or any) venue ever again. If only political rallies were held to the same consequences.

I cover my mouth when I yawn, then rub my eyes. The melody from before is in my head but I can't for the life of me place it. I start humming it, dah-dah-dahing it, anything to get it out of my head and into the world beyond me. "What is that?" I remark. It's a good song, whatever it is. Upbeat and invigorating. I keep trying to duplicate it with my absolute lack of musical skills. "Is that Xardion?" I ask rhetorically.

Joe shuts the lockbox and sets it under the table. "Do it again," he asks with a nod. I keep doing the melody with dahs and bahs. Joe listens, staring out of the upper-left side of his eyes. His head twitches for a second and he pulls his lips in as he searches his mind. His eyes suddenly light up.

He snaps his fingers as he tries to lasso the realization. "No. It's, uh..." A few more snaps as he tries to place it. "Turrigan! Super Turrigan."

It's like a bomb blows up in my mind. That's it! Super Turrigan. One of the unsung gems of the pre-millennium video games. Man, now that I've placed the melody, it's like a weight is lifted off my shoulders. "Man," I grin with unimaginable elation. "I got to find out who's playing that." I leave Joe to count T-shirts in the middle of the damn night and head up to the front of the dealers' room.

Super Turrigan, if you've never played it, is a...was a?...is a platform shooter. That means you control a little dude running along, blasting little things, and jumping around on tiny floating things in the air. Basically, the whole gimmick is shooting little monsters and stuff and jumping around, onto, off of, platforms. Hence platform shooter. It was a tossaway game for the most part. Not bad but not all that. But man, did it have great music.

I go up to the front of the dealer's room where the room management is camped out. Literally. Behind their double-folding tables duct taped together, three of them are asleep. Not in sleeping bags or anything; they just leaned over too far, closed their eyes, and out they went. The only other person awake is stoned out of his gourd. I think he's playing monopoly with himself, and losing. The only person awake and lucid is the one-woman army who's running the whole room. I've seen her in here every time I've come in, which makes me suspect she hasn't gotten any sleep. Like, at all.

"Hey, Simp," I tell her as I approach. Simp is short for Simpson, her last name. Hell if I know what her first name is. I'm sure I've been told, but everybody calls her Simp. "You got the concert schedule handy?"

She looks up from the half-dozen paper forms she's juggling and takes a second to process what I said, or that I'd even spoken. "Yeah," she realizes suddenly. She adjusts her horn-rimmed glasses and goes looking for the convention handbook. "Who you looking for?" She finds the thick pamphlet under Pothead McParkplace. She doesn't say anything or ask; she just smacks him on the ass. He half-stands, still playing monopoly. She yanks the guidebook out from under him and flips it open.

"I'm looking for a set list," I tell her. Eyes darting over the book, her lips purse as she inhales. "Yeah, I know that's a crazy request but it's worth a short."

"What're you looking for?" Simp asks as, still reading, she leans over and smacks one of the sleepers who is snoring. Dude doesn't even wake up; he rolls onto his side and we're spared the chainsaw-in-a-blender cacophony.

"Super Turrigan," I say. She looks up at me like I switched languages suddenly. "Old, old game from before the millennium."

"No, I know it," she says. She takes off her glasses and clips an additional lens on the right frame. She keeps reading. "It was like Contra, except you had this freeze ray thing that was kind of useless." She finally just sighs. "I don't think so," she says, folding up the book. "I mean, unless it's an NES or Genesis game, and I mean one of the big ones like Super Mario Brothers or something, they'll let us know if they're doing something like that. That way we can circulate it to any fans of the game we know, so they can be at their concert."

"So nobody's doing Super Turrigan," I summarize.

Simp makes this pensive face, like she can't be 100% certain but she'd be truly astonished if anybody was performing it. "I mean, maybe in one of the hallways, or the jam space? But..." She shakes her head.

"Alright, cool," I tell her as I leave. I want to get to the bottom of this but I've also got more patrolling to do. This is a lax-as-hell job but it's still a job.

I head back up the stairs, to where I ran into Sam just a little while ago. The major hub of the convention, it has died down a tiny bit. Still a lot of people, but not a crowd. Still lots of noise but it's the amount of noise, not the volume, that's producing the din. Music on my mind, even as my thoughts focus on security, I look down the rows of rooms where the bands would be playing. They're all silent now. Music festivals run late, but they do have to turn off eventually. Otherwise, the bands will play themselves until they burst and the fans will dance until they collapse...literally. And in an age of advanced robotics and chemical augmentation, that goes from being hazardous to being deadly. You ever see a cyborg at a rave where the meat can't keep up with the metal? Ain't nothing pretty about that.

I decide to head to the far end of the hall. This is out past the convention rooms where the panels are. That's where programmers talk about coding for hit detection, music theorists gab about how the Bee-Gees inadvertently invented all game music or some such nonsense, and writers with no connection to gaming or music try to hock their tangentially-connected books. The farthest rooms serve as a sort of auxiliary concert space, usually where the smallest bands play or the bands with really niche sounds. Not everybody can fill a full ballroom and trying to can actually ruin a band's sound if they don't have the equipment for it.

I get towards the farthest door, just around a corner from the hotel exit. The doors are auto-coded to specific hotel and convention staff, so vendors and guests can't get in prematurely. Thing is, this is a video game

convention too, so there are lots of programmers and hackers, so the security has been beefed up. But there are programmers and then there are street-merc-programmers. So that means...look, long story short, I don't even break stride as I hack the doors.

I open the door and peek inside and, yep, place is clear. Like the other performance rooms, the space is empty. The black stage has a few mic stands and some speakers, but nothing is plugged in. The lighting rig is unremarkable and unplugged too. The cream-colored wallpaper and golden accents of the wall paneling don't really match the vibe of a rock show, but the acoustics seem okay. There's one light on in the back, but that's normal. The place is empty and completely serene. Stage is in minor disarray from the end of the last show earlier in the night, but all in all, things look ready-ish for tomorrow's performances. Satisfied, I pace around the red carpeting of the room. I check the wi-fi signals (which appear like little balloons and spheres of softly-tinted light, thanks to my digital vision). I circumnavigate the room, checking the corners. It's quiet and secure, so I depart.

So it's all the more surprising when the door shuts behind me and I hear music.

I just sort of stop mid-step as I hear the melody play. Now that I know the game, I can place it immediately. Super Turrigan, stage 2-4. I never played the game, but I watched run-throughs. I know that music, with the decisive percussion and the piano scales at the forefront. And this is the same band. It's that same half-orchestral, half-rock band that I've been hearing for the last hour or so.

I sort of stand there for a moment, trying to decide what to do. I hear this band, I hear this music, I hear this melody. Do I play somebody's little game and go running back in there, yelling 'hey waddaminute!' or do I walk away and let them...do...whatever it is they're doing.

I sigh and relent, already turning around. I'm looking at another empty room, aren't I?

To my surprise, I'm not.

When I push through those doors, I'm not looking at an empty musical space. I'm not looking at a shadowed hotel conference room with a stage set-up against the far wall, bereft of occupancy or interest. No, instead, I'm looking at a rock concert. Stage lights glow, bringing the band to life. Smoke machine accents the wonder of the show while powerful amps make the air hum with a positive charge. And it's not just the electricity and the humidity that's doing that. It's the music, too. This slick guitar beat, accompanied with piano, is being driven by a drummer's purest dream of a

percussion set-up. Flanking either side of the stage are some string, brass, and woodwind players. Hell if I know what the instruments are. I just know that they are taking music and making it into magic. No conductor. No vocalist. Nothing between them and the crowd. Nothing but music and the love of it.

The room is full but not with people. Around me shadows in the air, filling the place where the audience should be. They have the shape of people, the presence of people, but they're nothing but three-dimensional outlines of people. Incorporeal placeholders for the packed house of fans that should be thronging the stage. In another circumstance, I might think my visuals were messing up. I might think my cybernetics were shorting or a virus had gotten into my operating system's code. In this moment of music, I know the answer is something far more esoteric.

As a merc, we deal with spirits quite a bit. When I say spirit, I mean the soul of a thing, the core, the lucent essence of a thing. The Spirit of the Law. The Spirit of Hope. You might mistake us for being nothing but hired muscle (which we often are), but in reality, it's working with and respect for a spirit of a thing that separates us from just run-of-the-mill goons. We deal with the world behind the physical. It can get real metaphysical in there but still.

I say that so it's not surprising that I decide to set aside curiosity and paranoia, put away confounding theories of what's happening and the implications this might have on the cosmic makeup of the world, and instead I just enjoy the music. Surrounded by a hundred semi-transparent shadow people, I stick my hands in my pockets and wade into the crowd. My head bops and I forget the world. It's a good arrangement of Super Turrigan's score. It's not even a straight performance, either. As I listen to the band, they begin to flow from one stage to another. They use Stage 2-1, which has this nice building melody, to flow around the different stages, taking a musical tour of a soundtrack better than the game it was from. Video games of that era had short musical interludes that they recycled for the stage music, so it doesn't take long for them to play a whole stage like Stage 3-1, then go back to 2-1, cycle to stage 1-2, then back around to 2-1, using it as the chorus they return to again and again. Majestic.

I start to bob my head, getting into it. I'm not exactly dancing but I'm enjoying it. I'm drinking it in. I'm not one living among the ghosts of the dead; I'm one audience member out of so many others. It's an experience and I'm loving it. I look around the room at the shadow people with me and see them moving. But they're flat without any texture or expressions. They're not there; they're just the placeholder for whom should be there. This band deserves an audience. This band, this music, this performance. A

hundred people should be in here right now. A thousand. The world. Instead, their audience is one. Their audience is me.

The medley ends. The rock band concludes with a flourish, the world's most intense drummer laying it all out with their sticks. The orchestra blares one final note, all together, all in unison, as the two guitars strum one final time. It's not merely a crescendo, but the final heartbeat of the music of life. It is the final, joyous gasp of an artist as their masterpiece is completed. The rockers take a bow. The instrumentalists take a bow. The drummer stands up and takes a bow. The entire group, they all bow as one to a room of dark shadows and one confused though admittedly handsome street merc. The room is totally silent except for one person clapping. The whole of the audience, an audience of one, is clapping. Applauding. Cheering and shouting. An audience of one, but an audience. The band stands, all smiles of pride. Their looks all find some way to land on me unceremoniously, like they all looked out into the room and by random coincidence just happened to glance at me all at the same time. I don't let up. I clap harder. I yell again. I'm an audience of one but I will give them the standing ovation they deserve.

"What are you doing?"

Sam Parker has come inside. She's got a worried look, and understandably so. Her hired merc is standing alone in an empty concert hall, smacking his hands together. I look down at my still-applauding hands and decide now's a good time to stop. The room is bright compared to the performance darkness from an instant ago.

"Hey," I tell her, turning around. I thumb to the empty stage and tell her, "Room's clear."

She nods a little disbelieving. "Uh, Simp in the Dealer's Room said you were asking about the playlist?"

I wave it off. "I got that taken care of."

"Okay," Sam tells me, again pensively. "Well, the morning guy is here. You're good until 4pm."

"Sweet," I announce. I'm a contrast of emotions. I'm refreshed but I'm tired. I'm serene but I'm spent. I don't feel like I've worked a full shift. I feel like I'm wide awake, but like I've exhausted the final bit of energy that carried me for a decade or more. Were I a spiritual man – and I'm not – I'd guess that I just witnessed ambition that lasted longer than the chance to do great. Musicians try and many fail. Maybe most. But just because they fail doesn't mean their ambition dies. And if an ambition doesn't die, it might linger around. Who knows how long that spirit of ambition has been walking these halls? Who knows if that was a band that never got to play, or simply

a song that never got to be played? Regardless, what I just saw was someone else's dream performance. Maybe a dream for me too.

It may be the AM but it's still the middle of the night. No concerts are playing and not a whole lot is going on. I contemplate going up to the spa to check on Onyx but a hundred-degree room doesn't sound that appealing right this moment.

I follow my feet and I wind my way into the vendor's room again. I head to the back, where the arcade cabinets sit. They've also got a million televisions set up with home consoles, back when those were a thing before cell phones basically took over the market. In the middle of the night, it's just a dense black with numerous rows of bright screens facing out, all cloaked in the ambient white noise of music and sound effects from a thousand video games.

I walk among the TVs and happen to spot an old, old console playing Tetris. Possibly the world's simplest game (after Pong, maybe), it involves four-section blocks that you have to stack as they continuously fall. It's simple, it's silly, and it's fun. After a long shift, why not? So I sit down in a chair that, for once, actually holds my cybernetic weight. I take up the controller and, my work done, I enjoy playing a video game.

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