

# Rhest and the Collection

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FROM THE MIND OF

**RVA**

There are a lot of really loathsome jobs you have to take as a street merc. The worst is probably collection and repossession. Rarely do you feel like the good guy when you have to roll up on someone and tell them 'I need the thing'. When people overextend themselves financially, a lot of time it's not on luxuries. Usually it's stuff like a car or a computer or a bodily organ. You're never the good guy when you have to be all 'you missed a payment; gimme back that lung'. I've been there and it sucks. Why have I been there? My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

So yeah, collection jobs suck. But they're also plentiful and they pay the bills. In the modern world, there's never a shortage of people who realized too late that their paychecks didn't go quite as far as they were expecting. You got to choose between food and a payment plan, I get why they choose the way they do. Sometimes when you've got a payment plan, they let it slide. Sometimes they send a sternly-worded letter. And sometimes they send a highly cybered-up street merc carrying six pistols.

I arrive at the University of North Dakota-Sacramento just after lunchtime. Well, lunch time for normal people. For college students, this is probably slightly before breakfast. Point is, it's roughly noon-thirty. The campus is a large vertical tower out on the north side of the suburbs. It's a brick structure about thirty stories tall, with satellite dishes all along the sides. Solar panels on the corners, so the collectors can turn towards the sun. It's got a nice bright blue sign on the front of it, which is a little weird because North Dakota has a proprietary green. I guess they won't let their satellite universities use their flagship color. The sign itself is like six stories tall, which is weird because the entrance to the tower is a double-door of normal height. The sense that the sign might fall and crush you is unsettling.

I ride the escalator up to the third floor of the main foyer because I'm being a dick. Escalators don't like cybernetics of any kind, so this little bastard's having to work double-time to get me to the top. It's chugging along, groaning and griping. Serves it right for think it's superior to stairs.

The escalator finally deposits me onto the third floor. This is where the administration offices are. First floor is all stores (because universities are primarily about selling licensed merchandise). The second floor is where you find the facilities' offices (meaning admissions, dean offices, and suicide counseling; all the usual stuff for a modern college career). At the top of the escalators, a security guard is awaiting me. The sensors at the front door no doubt let him know six guns walked into the campus. He's a tubby dude with a night stick and several patches denoting various sensitivity trainings. He's got big, grandma glasses and a pocket-marked face. Big, white teeth and a vaguely Polynesian or southeast Asian vibe to him. "Hey there," he tells me, standing really, really casual. "Got some guns on you?"

He's being silly. I've got two big-ass pistols on my thighs, two smaller guns in my armpits, and two giant pistols over my shoulders. I'm wearing high-spec tactical gear over a light, high-mobility body suit. In any other city, I'd look like a caricature. In Sacramento? I look understated.

"Yep," I tell him. "I'm Rhest. I'm here about a debt collection."

The security guard nods, hands on his wide hip. I notice two tiny dots tattooed on his thumb joint. Odd and very muted place to have a tattoo. "Well, I need to see some ID, and licenses to carry those guns, and I need to know who you are here to see, and I need to know who sent you." He keeps rattling stuff off that he needs to see, all casual-like. Meanwhile, I tune him out because I'm trying to figure out where those tattoos come from.

"And that's it," he concludes.

"Escrima!" I realize, snapping my fingers.

He smiles, all friendly-like, even though he's confused. "Say what?"

"The tattoo," I say, pointing at my thumb, at where the tattoo is on his. "You're an escrimador. You do escrima."

"Yes sir," he says, very humbly, smiling again. We shake hands. "I got my mastership...oh, fifteen, twenty years ago."

"Hot damn," I tell him. "Going around with just that nightstick makes a lot more sense."

"What, this thing?" he disregards, holding up the polycarbonate cudgel. "This is just to rattle lockers in case I need to wake up sleepyheads in the library."

In my experience, dudes with that kind of rank in martial arts like escrima, who are still this humble, are usually the real deal. I might have six guns, but I'll wager I'm the less dangerous of the two of us. "Still need that ID and information," says the guard.

"Can't, due to my client," I tell him. "I've got a requisition order. I can email that to you."

He nods, hands on his belly. "That'll be just fine." He waves for me to follow, turning his back to me. Dude is the world's most slack security guard, or he's a really good judge of character. Or he's really that good with that stick.

Security office is a paper-strewn closet with stacks and stacks of forgotten forms, reports, records, and files. There's no window and only two

lights: an overhead bulb without a cover and a ten-dollar desk lamp. The computer is so old, it's got a giant full-sized monitor.

Security Guard James leans back in his chair so ancient, it's probably from back when there were only two political parties. And yet somehow, it doesn't squeak when he moves. "Yeah, I think I know him. Amal Carson." His glasses are glowing from the light coming off the screen. He turns and pulls out a bottom drawer on the side of his desk so that he can put his feet up. "He was a good kid."

"Was?" I ask, leaning against the door frame of the office.

"Yeah, I haven't seen him in a bit," says James. He puts his hands over his belly and stares just above me, just right passed my head like he's looking at my guardian angel or something. "I mean, I don't keep up with all the students, but I try. I try to at least say hello to the new ones. James was a nice kid. But like I said, I haven't seen him in a while."

"This place has mandatory on-campus living, right?" I ask.

"For freshmen, yeah," James nods. "But Amal qualified for waiver because he was head-of-household." My eyebrow goes up. "He had a family he was supporting. He was a full-time student but he still had at least one kid. Maybe a spouse too."

I ask, "What's his enrollment status?"

James turns to the computer, then has to pull his legs under him to type. He hits a few keys, squints, then hits a few more. "It looks like..." He reads, his lips moving a little as he does. I can hear him over the rattling vent right next to the lightbulb in the roof. "It looks like he's gone inactive."

"Inactive," I repeat, thinking. "Did he drop out?"

"No, if he dropped out, we'd have that marked," James says. He does some more clickity-clack with the keyboard. "He transferred," James says with surprise.

"Transferred?" I repeat, even more surprised.

James looks at me over the top rim of his glasses. "Your employer didn't know that?"

I shake my head. I come over and lean over James to read the computer screen. "He's supposed to be actively enrolled for the full five-year period for his degree. No off-time, and at least one credit each summer." I study the page but it's not very useful to me. I don't understand college software. Few people do. "He transferred, but...does it say where?" James shakes his head, even as he checks the screen. "So he's inactive, even though he transferred..." I stand up and scratch my chin. I look at James. "Is he just taking a semester off?"

"No, that'd be listed as sabbatical or something," says the guard. He gets up and steps around a stack of performance evaluations. "Let's go ask admissions."

"Sounds good," I say, following him.

The halls of the university are narrow, dim, and uninspiring. Since this is the administration level and not the living levels or teaching levels, I guess they are saving on space. The ceiling is barely tall enough for me, the hall barely wide enough too. The carpet is a different shade of ugly from the walls. The posters and pictures are faded from exposure to the lights. Everything is sound-dampening so it's eerie-quiet.

"Can you tell me what you need to collect?" James asks, turning halfway back to me as he keeps walking forward.

"Sorry," I half-wince. "If I could tell you, I would."

"Yeah, I get it," he says and we keep walking. "I know how it is."

We turn a corner and go through a pair of double-doors. We're back into the third-floor landing from the main entrance. Totally different environment. Shiny floors. Spacious ceiling. They want you to think they're a big deal, with nice and stylish designs. The lights are crisp and vibrant, the floors are reflective and clean.

James leads the way to the escalators, but then pauses. "Let's take the stairs," he says and gestures for me to follow him to the spiral staircase on the far side. I chuckle. "I don't want to have to call the mechanic to fix the escalators again."

"I hate escalators," I share, following.

"I'll bet they hate you too," James snickers like a nerdy little kid. I do too.

The second floor looks like a nightclub that's been renovated. There are neon lights along the roof and the windows of the different offices. The floor is different-colored plates that change color very gradually. There are video screens in every inch of the walls, showing the happy people just living life to the fullest because they go to UND-Sacramento.

Under a hanging wooden sign that doesn't completely and totally stand out against all these high-tech decorations, we go through a door labeled 'Admissions'. Inside is the most air-conditioned space in the world, outside of a fridge. It's not frigid, but it's damn-sure chilly. James chuckles and apologizes as we enter. There are nine stalls before us, with a line demarked with event ropes. James ignores all of that, I presume because

we're the only ones in here. He goes to the stall in the very center where an older man is playing games on his phone.

"Hey-hey there Markie," James says with a shuffle in his step and his voice. "My friend here needs to find a student."

Markie looks like he should be a professor. Maybe he was before he got addicted to online games, because he keeps playing, even as he looks up at us. He's got white hair, a white beard, a holier-than-thou-because-I-know-more-than-you look to him. "Name?" he asks. I'm not sure which of us he's asking.

"Amal Carson," James tells him. "SID 6284398247."

"SID?" I ask.

"Student ID," James tells me with a friendly grin like this is the most interesting, most fun thing he's done in days.

Markie puts down his phone and taps at some keys. He reads a screen, then scowls subtly and leans forward. He's confused too. "He's inactive," he says, more to himself than to us.

"Yeah, what's that mean?" asks James. "He didn't drop out or something."

"No," Markie acknowledges. He taps some more keys, trying to get to the bottom of it. He reads a couple of screens, then has some sort of epiphany. "Oh! He transferred."

"Yeah, we know," I tell Markie. How does this dude not irritate James? "He hasn't even been here for, like, two years, then transferred? Where'd he transfer to?" I know I say it aggressively but I'm kind of mad. He wasn't supposed to transfer. Doing so tells me this was deliberate. In my head, he went from being a sympathetic idiot to a scammer.

Markie develops a curious, then confused look. He says, "He transferred to one of our secondary online programs."

I facepalm and lean on the divider between stalls. It groans, not used to handling my weight, which makes me yank off of it. I take a step back and fume. "You're telling me this punk dropped out halfway through a five-year college, to take online video tutorials?"

Markie makes a noncommittal 'kids-these-days' gesture. Not the most inappropriate reaction, but a paycheck renders me incapable of apathy. Meanwhile, James' unflappable happiness and perpetual smile like today's just the greatest day of his life is really starting to chap me. He turns that smile at me and cheerfully asks me, "So what's your plan from here?"

I don't really do anything except fume for a second. This kid's gonna make me work for my paycheck. I hate when people do that. "Technically, I think I could call it right here, if I wanted," I consider.

James' smile goes from amused to paternal. "You don't seem like the kinda fella who half-asses it." Markie snorts but keeps playing his phone game.

"You'd be surprised," I only half-respond as I think. A very unpleasant idea comes to me. "He's got a head-of-household deferment for his on-campus living requirement, right?" I ask, mostly rhetorically. James is thinking, already trying to figure out where I'm going with this. I look at Markie and ask, "So does that mean you have his home address?"

The Deltas are not nice neighborhoods.

Built during a construction boom meant to stimulate the local economy, the Deltas are a series of megastructures on the remains of a landfill. Named for their triangular shape, the Deltas are two dozen giant-ass apartment buildings that are together large enough to practically qualify for their own zip code. Basically, imagine twenty-four big-ass cement pyramids in an asphalt swamp and you get the idea.

Like most corporate high-rises, the higher the floor number, you get some nicer apartments. Or maybe they transition to full condo at that point, I don't know. Property ownership is complicated in a day and age when even your own thoughts can be trademarked by a company you don't even work for.

Anyway, unlike real pyramids, the Deltas aren't four-sided. Or, they are, but they aren't equal. They're actually triangular bricks. So on the side, they just look like, well, like bricks. I guess them makes them more like wedges? Two of the structures have openings in the middle for some weird-ass reason. Like there's just this shaped gap in the middle of the building, like they wanted to make sure the breeze could get through. Why? Who knows? This whole thing was mostly a works project and works projects do weird stuff.

My mom once told me a joke about the first big works project in the country, something called 'the alphabet soup', whatever that was. She said a general or somebody came out to see a works project where the guys were having to dig a water ditch or something. He gets out there and all these guys have shovels and they're digging. The general, he thought there were going to be bulldozers and cranes and stuff. He asks the foreman 'why are they using shovels?'. The foreman says 'this is a works project; we just need them to have work to do, we don't have to be effecient'. The general,

I don't know, gets pissy or something, and says 'well in that case, why aren't they using spoons?'

I remember that joke in the sweltering heat as I cross the parking lot. It's about a half-mile from the metro terminal stop to the Deltas' gate, and then another half-mile to get to the building in question. From the gate, it's just wall-to-wall packed cars. Sardine-can-packed. The spaces are small. There's barely enough room to open the door between the vehicles. This is a problem because I'd guess one in four cars doesn't look like it can run. Flat tires. Rusted bodies. Broken windows. A few of them even have residents who are living in them.

There are streetlights with solar collectors periodically, with signs reminding drivers where they parked their car. Most of the signs have graffiti on them. Some of the solar collectors are gone, too. Security cameras look in every direction...at least when the security cameras haven't been smashed or stolen. Speakers blast audio advertisements with some breaks periodically for a few stanzas of music. The air shakes with the acrid heat. The density of different clouds of allergens and pollution is obvious.

I'm wearing my rebreather. The fumes are intense and I don't want to overtax my lungs' filtration system if I can help it. My eyes are burning and not just from the heat. We're in one of the toxic parts of town. Lead in the water, chemicals in the air, and radiation everywhere. This is Sacramento for thousands of people. Tens of thousands. Is it any wonder someone would be willing to sell their future for the chance to escape?

I pass a plot of dirt as I hike. It's a cement barricade, about knee-high. Rotten dirt fills it, as does a gaping chasm where there used to be a tree. My guess is this was part of a beautification project. The barricade is about the size of a parking space and it looks just like the ones the street lamps come out of. Not a bad idea. Alternate lamp, tree, lamp, tree. Of course, if the trees don't survive...well, there goes that plan. But then, the days when trees could survive in the open are long, long gone.

I arrive at the Delta-Upsilon building about mid-afternoon. It looks a little like a pastry. There's paint spilled all along the top, probably from a protest-gone-wrong. Or maybe a paint job that was underfunded or really underfunded. As such, the white hints at the very top of the forty-something story building pairs nicely with the baked brick hue, which makes it look vaguely like a glazed dinner roll. That's unquestionably the most appealing thing in the area.

The entry is a wall of doors set a meter under the lip of the building, which gives a brief respite from the heat of the scalding sun. In the shade, I go to open the door but find the handle has been pulled off. Who steals the handle off a door?

I pull open the door into the main lobby. It's the sound of speakers with the volume turned way up but no sound coming through. It's the color of social apathy after a protest. There's a chime when I enter and I notice that they've got weapon sensors here too. I do the neighborly thing and wait for security to come and greet me.

And I wait.

And I wait.

Rule #642 of mercenary work: count to ten. If nobody comes to ask you what the hell you're doing by the time you get to ten, then you can go on with your day. Is that a legally binding rule? Hell no. But then, just what is legally binding these days besides money?

I'm not going to say Delta-Upsilon looks like a shopping mall that burned down, but that's definitely the vibe I get. The floor of the main foyer was once really nice but the glare of the day coming in through the windows and the glass doors means that the floor tiles have lost their luster and their color. The air is really hot because of the daylight and radiation. Posters have faded, as has most of the spray paint on the walls. The place smells like fumes, like behind any of these closed store fronts, there might be a car still running.

There's a wi-fi signal. It registers in my cybered-up vision as a transparent pink cloud that slowly fades from view. I see it, but I'm not connecting to it. Wifi systems in megastructures like this have computer viruses so bad, just connecting to them is like having unprotected sex with the entire internet. You do that and your death becomes a footnote in a Wikipedia article.

I jog up the escalator that has the decency to have died and become the stairs it wished it had always been. On the second floor I go to the elevators and hit the up button. It doesn't come on. I look up at the light-up display, letting me know which floor each of the six cars is on. Only four of the displays work. It better be the light that's busted because if I have to walk up the stairs, I may quit the job right now.

I walk around the foyer with trash lightly strewn in the corners, kicking a drive-thru cup as I do. I hit all the other Up buttons but none of them work. There's an elevator on the fourth floor, based on one of the grungy displays that's working. Looks like I may have to hoof it after all.

Since the likelihood is going up that I will have to take the stairs the whole way – which will make me a very not-happy street merc – I note where the elevators overlap. Because the Deltas are so tall, they have air pressure issues with the elevators. As such, their elevators only go up some of the way and then you have to get off and get a different elevator. Minor

inconvenience when the elevators work. When they don't work, it can spell a long and draining afternoon.

Noting the elevators travel up the floors in group of fifteen, I head to the stairwell door next to the elevators. I push open the door to the stench of urine and cheap weed. There's a small mound of black and transparent trash bags. I think they were white but grease and age has stretched the plastic to transparency. I ignore them (which isn't easy) and jog up the steps. I'm not lazy by any stretch and I like to pretend I'm in good shape, but even with cybernetically-enhanced joints, running stairs takes a toll. I really don't want to do this all afternoon.

I pass the usual graffiti that entertains the bored and uneducated. 'Dez nuts' and 'Jackie's a ho', that sort of thing. I also pass actual art on the only canvas available. The yearning for trees and fresh wind that invigorates, not irradiates. I pass obscure cultural touchstones like favorite bands who have come and gone and someone pronouncing 'Jack Archer Lives', whatever that means.

I make it up to the fourth floor in a few minutes. I exit out onto the floor and wouldn't you know it, the elevator foyer is right here. I hit the button and the rusted-metal doors open up. I get into the elevator and hit the command for the top floor. Or, well, the top floor for this elevator.

Finally, Floor 32.

The walls are two-tone: white on the bottom and light blue from waist-high on up to the roof. The paint has been touched up a few times but an actual fresh coat is years (or decades) past due. I guess they're trying to give an outdoor sort of feel. Given how few and far between windows are, I can't say I blame them. The overhead lights buzz. There's a handrail on the wall that looks like it might have once been brass. There are granules of trash in the corner, and dust and debris where the floor meets the wall. Cracks are small but common. The air smells like dust and industrial cleaner that's gone rancid.

I go to the left, realize it's the wrong way, then go to the right. I have to go all the way down to the end of the hall, and I do mean all the way down. I get down there and the green street sign-looking thing tells me I need to make another right. It's only a few doors before I come to apartment 68. I knock with my knuckle and step just to the side of the door. You never know who might be shooting through there.

I don't hear anyone but maybe that's just solid construction. I wait, then knock again. The neighbor opens her door and peeks out. I smile and wave happily to her. She ducks back inside to get away from the cheerful,

six-gun-toting manic who has the audacity to be in a good mood in this day and age.

I hear a child scream from behind the door. Not like one of those torture screams or neglect screams. Just one of those squeals that's making sure everybody knows that it can make noise. It's like a dog barking at the wind. But because I hear the baby, I knock again. "Come on, Amal, I know you're in there, buddy," I say like we're good friends.

"Amal's not here," somebody calls through the door. I can tell by the way the sound is muffled that they're right against the door, looking through the peep hole. And I mean right up against the door, like pressed against it. Bad move.

Apartment buildings like this don't invest a lot of money in doors. They might drop a chunk of change on security getting into the building, but on the actual apartment doors themselves? Surprisingly little. Oh, I'm sure the locks are nice and all and I'm sure the doors are sturdy, but you're still dealing with multiple stress points that any significant pressure will cause a break.

I step back from the door and, facing away from it, I skip backwards and stamp my foot straight back. I hit the door not straight on, but at an angle. The grain of the construction rarely is expecting that. Granted, if I roll an ankle doing this, I'll feel like a fool, but I don't. Instead, I knock the door open with the force of a battering ram. Somebody goes flying.

I'm inside in a second, Reason drawn. My primary pistol, Reason sleeps on my thigh. So when I draw him out in mid-step, I can put it right in the face of the Hispanic dude that's crawling off the floor. "What the hell, ma—" He shuts up real fast when he sees a gun barrel in his face.

I push the door shut behind me and force the guy back into the apartment. "Quiet," I tell him. There's a baby in a swing chair who is watching with wide-eyed fascination. I guess I'm the most interesting thing it's seen all day.

"Down," I tell the guy, backing him into a chair. He starts to get on his knees and I do a double-take. "What? No, dude, sit your ass down." I have to gesture at the loveseat with the barrel of my gun.

"Oh, sorry," he stammers, petrified.

Simple, one-bedroom apartment. The bedroom is barely bigger than the double bed in there. There are cardboard boxes for furniture and one bone fide bedside table. There's a shower stall and commode in a half-cordoned off section in the corner. No closet. The main room is mostly the loveseat, TV, and kitchen space. This place is probably under a hundred square meters total.

I lower the pistol and look down at the Hispanic dude with blonde-dyed hair and a brow piercing. I begin this interrogation the way most of my questions start: with me saying, "Uh..." I pull up a picture of my target in my Heads Up Display. A semi-transparent image of a young black dude appears next to this guy's face and a big fat red X appears over my vision. "You're not Amal," I observe. The guy on the loveseat shakes his head fearfully. "So then, you are..." I gesture encouragingly, trying to get him talking.

"I'm Mike," the guy stammers. "I'm-m Amal's boyfriend."

"Mike," I say calmly. "Mike, we got a problem: Amal dropped out of college."

"H-he's taking on-line classes," Mike says quickly, already realizing what this is about.

"Yeah, as far as Amal's investor is concerned, that's the same thing," I tell him. I slip Reason back into its thigh holster as I look around at the room. "Alright, look, here's the deal: Amal leveraged his future earnings. You know what that means?"

Mike shakes his head. I can practically hear his eyes rattle, his stare is so vacant. He's terrified. Christ, you'd think this is the first time a cybermerc has kicked in his door and put a gun in his face. He must not be from Sacramento originally. "Alright, listen," I offer him. "You stay cool and we won't have any trouble. I'm not here to hurt anyone." He looks at my guns. "I promise, man." I try to sound genuine. I mean, I am being genuine but I'm trying to over-emphasize it so he'll grasp the situation. "I'm not here to, like, break Amal's knees or something."

I look around for somewhere to sit but there's really just the loveseat. I bat Mike's knee a little so he'll slide over to make room. I sit down and this thing GROANS. It does not like how much I weigh. "So, Amal was in high school and he put his future earnings up for investment. You know how that works?" Mike shakes his head. "It means he..." I sniff and kind of sneer. I sniff again, then point at the baby.

Mike turns to the kid and sniffs and says, "No, she's clean. I think she just farted."

"Oh," I shrug. Funny how an infant farting reduces the tension in any room. "Anyway, it means that Amal said he'd cut an investor in on all his future money if said investor paid for his college. Investor cut him a check, Amal cashed it, and now Amal's dropped out of college." I search Mike's face. "Can you see how this is a bit of a problem?"

Mike nods, then asks in confusion, "Did he really give Amal a check?"

"Proverbially," I tell him flatly. He's deadpan expression tells me he didn't get it. "For all intents and purposes, he did," I rephrase. "Look, my client paid a lot of money for Amal to go to school. There's an agreement. An understanding. My client made an investment and he is expecting that investment to pay off. This isn't just about recouping the loss."

"Well what's going to happen?" Mike asks me. "A-are you going to kill Amal?"

I get a little incredulous. "I hope not."

The infant squeals again and Mike fishes out a pacifier. He has to work to get it into the kid's mouth, shushing and cooing at it. "Amal was really struggling at that school," he says as he soothes the baby back to calm. "Not just the classes and the workload. The out-of-class requirements were brutal. And the other classmates, and the commute, and...and all of it."

The baby quieted down, the young man – barely out of his teens – strokes the baby's head. He shifts a bit. At first I think he's putting his back to me to hide the weapon he's going to go for. Turns out, he's putting as much of himself between me and his child as he can. I'm starting to feel like a real cad. "Where is he currently?" I ask. I get up off the loveseat, which groans again, this time in appreciation.

"He's at work," says Mike. "He works days; I work nights. That way, there's always somebody here with Monita."

I go to the fridge and find mostly baby food. I take a juice box and pop the top. I chug it as I think. It's apple juice. I love apple juice, but it's got this sharp point of diminishing returns for me. Like two gulps, and then I'm done with it. Like, for me, a can of the stuff is usually a sip or two too much. These serving sizes are just about perfect. I put a dollar coin on the counter, which Mike seems confused by. "I'm not going to just steal a kid's juice," I tell him. "I mean, a teenager's, I would, but not like a kid-kid."

"Yeah, no, that makes sense," Mike says. He says it so seriously, I can't tell for a second if he's joking or not. When he smirks, I chuckle.

I crumple up the empty juice box and toss it into the recycling. "Look, man, I'm going to just hangout here with you until Amal gets home. When he does, we'll figure something out. And I do mean it. Best-case scenario for my client is for us to find a way for Amal to make good on the contract."

Mike is clearly aware that he doesn't exactly have a say in the matter. But I think he's realized that it's better to have an uninvited guest than be involved in a low-key sort of hostage situation.

So Amal arrives home to an odd sight. Like, I imagine it would be weird if he came home to find his baby crying and his boyfriend terrified and a cybered-up street merc with a gun pointed at them both. Like, that? That, I'd get. I've been just about everybody in that scenario. I'm familiar with that set-up.

But no, Amal comes home to his baby screaming with delight because Mike and I are playing this pretty slick free-to-play beat-'em-up with really big sprites on the TV. We scroll along, beating up an endless string of bad guys until we get to the stage boss, beat him, then on to the next stage. This game has us playing as Chinese characters, beating up different alpha-numeric letters (naturally the stage bosses are the vowels). I'm playing Green; Mike's playing Red. We're on stage four, which is apparently farther than Mike's gotten. Monita, the baby, she just sees bright colors and exaggerated cartoony expressions. She squeals when the punching starts. Kid's on the road to being a quality street merc in a decade or three.

Amal's a bit on the tall side. He's not, like, basketball-tall but he's over six feet. He's got on this striped collared shirt and khaki pants. He takes off a nametag but I can't tell what big box retailer he works at. He's on auto-pilot after a long day of doing whatever he does that's not college. He's halfway through unbuttoning said shirt when he realizes Mike's not alone. He freezes and asks, "What's this?" He's got an amused smile until I look at him. Our eyes meet and he can instantly tell who I am and why I'm here. That smile drains from his face.

Thing is, he doesn't tense up. In fact, he does the opposite. He kind of slumps as everything inside and out melts. "Hey, babe, can you take Mina into the bedroom?"

There's something really relaxing about getting caught, when you've been doing something you know you shouldn't. You know the endgame will play out eventually; just a matter of when. That tension is slow and steady, like being chased by a rabid tortoise. It's really never a question of if you'll get caught; just when. And for Amal, when is today.

Mike glances up from the game, about to protest. He sees Amal's face and everything about why I'm here comes screaming back. He pauses the game, which prompts Mina to make this adorable 'what happened?' sound. Mike scoops her up under the arms and cradles her. He walks passed me and leaves the tiny space to me and Amal.

I set the controller down on the floor and sit back. I put my hands on my thighs and try to seem as conversant as possible. I don't want to look like my hands are near my guns, but if Amal decides to draw a gun from somewhere, I want to beat him to it.

That said, I don't exactly think Amal's a threat. The kitchenette in the front of the tiny apartment doesn't have too much storage. The food's stacked on the minimal counterspace and unless he's got a gun hidden in a box of Co-co Crunchies (which wouldn't be the first time), I don't think he has a weapon handy. Still, when Amal fishes from his pockets his wallet and some loose change, I flinch. I'm not going lie, my hand started to move, but then I heard the jingle of change and keys in the plastic bowl at the door. As if the pocket change was all that impeded his vocabulary, he finally speaks. "So what's up?"

"I'm Rhest," I tell him. "I'm here representing Mr. Sing."

Hearing the name spoken aloud makes Amal shift uncomfortably. The artificial light that's staining the wallpaper and yellowing the packaging doesn't do Amal's dark skin many favors. He doesn't start sweating but he does get a bit glossier. He fidgets for a second, then just dwindles to perfectly still. For a second, all he does is purse and relax his lips. "Yeah, man, I don't know what to tell you." He's curt but not exactly dishonest. He wipes his face and can't make eye-contact with me.

"You need to re-enroll," I explain to Amal.

"Nah, man, that ain't happening," Amal says. He kind of absently picks at the kitchen counter.

I stand up, loveseat groaning again. "You are an investment," I explain to Amal in slow, deliberate words. "You owe a portion of your income, from graduation day forward, to the man who financed your education."

The way Amal shifts his weight, going from his right leg to his left, I can tell he's about to make a counter-argument. "Not unless I make a set minimum, I don't," he tells me, like this is a negotiation.

I don't engage in the sparring. "So is that the plan?" I ask, going on the offensive. "You're going to work minimum wage in order to avoid paying back what you owe? What you promised?" I lean into the honor, the dignity. Amal's clearly a decent guy. Backing out of this deal has clearly been weighing on him. Appealing to honor and decency isn't always the safest option, but more than one conflict has been averted with some grown-up version of 'your momma raised you better'.

Amal's angry but he controls it well. His head swings up, like he's about to shout, but he then turns and speaks rationally. "Man, I tried. I tried." He's emphatic. "I did the classes, I put in the work, but...but I can't cut it. And this isn't some whiny, 'oh-the-classes-are-so-hard' kind of crap, either." He slumps back against the stove of the kitchenette. "I took a good, long, hard look at my skills and what I got and I can't do it." He shakes his head, as angry at himself as anyone else. "I can't cut it as an

artist. I don't got the skills, I don't got the connections, I don't got none of it. What I got is passion. I got love. But love don't make something marketable. And in this world, there ain't room for people who love what they do. There's room for just one thing: do people want to buy your stuff? If the answer is yes, then you get to eat. If the answer's no, you get to stepping." He shrugs in surrender. "I got to stepping."

Mercenary work brings you into contact with just about all of society's ills. Every shortcoming of justice, every fraction of unfairness, every imbalance in the scales of living, it is always presented right there before you. Mercenaries are overwhelmingly the ones called upon to address these ills. If there was anyone else, usually they'd be hired. Mercenaries are the option of last resort for most people.

But just because you've been called upon to rebalance the cosmic scales of the universe doesn't mean you can do that. I'm standing here in this dude's living room, having to choose if I'm going to put a gun to this kid's head and make him go back to school. I could do that. I've got a gun right here (several, actually). But what will that accomplish? He'll drop out again tomorrow. Or next semester. Or worse, he'll graduate and be locked into a career. He can get a minimum-wage job without a degree. But once he's got that higher ed, a lot of low-end jobs won't touch him. They think he'll leave the instant he's got something better. They know he'll spend the rest of his life looking to make something of that education.

Nine times out of ten, kids saying what he's saying just don't know what they're talking about. They don't know enough about the world to realize the truth of things. But he doesn't have that look. He isn't confident; he knows. He hasn't done research; he's seen and heard and found out. This isn't pessimism; this immutable truth.

"Alright," I say. For a second, I can't look this kid in the eyes. He knows he's let people down; he just doesn't know how badly. And in some ways, I'm going to help him do that. "We're repossessing what remains of the money."

Amal chuckles. "What, you think the school gave me a refund? Nah, man. They got that money. You got to take it up with them." He snorts. "Good luck with that, too."

"Oh, I will," I inform him with the seriousness of a shotgun. "But I'm talking about with you. And I'm talking about supplies," I tell him. "You got art supplies. I want them." I see a look on his face, like he was hoping I wouldn't think of that. He wipes his eyebrows, then disappointedly gestures at the bedroom.

Inside, Mike's on the bed with Mina. He stands up when the door opens and Amal says, "Sorry, babe." Mike steps into the shower stall as

Amal pushes the mattress of the bed. It slides back to reveal the box springs have been emptied out to make room for an easel, a stack of canvases, a bunch of newsprint, and two tackle boxes; one of paint, one of pens. There's probably a thousand dollars' worth of art supplies in this bed.

Just a fraction of what was paid for tuition.

Normally, when a job is completed, I send a notice to the client and we arrange a time to meet. That way, I can debrief them on what happened on their terms and we can make whatever further arrangements need to be made. But given how not-good this mission went, I feel compelled to give the debrief immediately.

Carl's Chicken Shack is a staple of southern Sacramento. It's a local fast food chain that's got about two dozen locations. It's big enough to have a corporate office, but small enough to feel like a Sacramento exclusive. I'm meeting Mr. Donovan Sing at the corporate office. It's in an office park situated between two corporate towers. It's on the ninth floor of a generic brick of a building. Inside, the 9<sup>th</sup> floor is all Carl's. Logos and corporate advertising campaigns and posters of spokespeople and celebrities. I wait in the main reception area, trying not to get hungry as the smell of halfway decent fried chicken wafts in the air.

The room is dark gray, which is odd with the muted light coming in through the slated windows on the right. The transparent stairs lead up to a second floor of offices. The slate metal floor is a darker gray than the gunmetal gray walls. This doesn't look like the corporate office of a restaurant chain. More like a tech shop or even a high-end gun dealer's showroom.

I'm just about to go ask the receptionist to call Sing again when a stooped-over Asian dude comes shuffling out from the offices. He's wearing a light blue jump suit and has well-worn kneepads strapped around his legs. He's missing a few teeth. His cauliflower ear matches his liver-spotted wrinkles. "Mr. Rhest?" he asks. Maybe it's racist of me, but I'm honestly a little surprised he doesn't have even a little bit of a stereotypical Asian accent. He looks about as pure-blooded oriental as they come, but the dude sounds more native than me and I've been in Sacramento since I was born. "Is there a problem?"

"No," I say in that dragging manner than conveys that I'm not about to share good news. I can just see it in his eyes that he already knows this is just going to be nothing but disappointment. "I wanted to give you an update on..." I can't stay tactical with this. "It's not happening."

You ever see someone die? You ever see the way the light just disappears from their eyes and the spark of life is just gone. All of a sudden, you're not looking at a person, but a corpse. That's what this is like. Only the body is still alive. Donovan Sing's body might be alive but he's a corpse in every other sense.

"I tracked down Amal Carson," I report. "I went and spoke with him." I shake my head very curtly. "It's...it's not happening, man."

The details of a tragedy are rarely needed, or even wanted. When a hurricane destroys your house, nobody wants a diatribe about air patterns to explain how it happened. They just want to know if rebuilding is even possible. Usually, they know the answer.

"I confiscated his materials," I tell Sing, trying to stay respectfully in the present but not quite able to look him in the eye. "There's a good amount. I went by your apartment and left it there. A good fence'll get..."

Sing's attention slips off of me. He backs up a few steps and reaches down to secure his descent as he falls into one of the stylish waiting room chairs. He exhales like a death rattle, his eyes still vacant of life. "I don't..." He purses his lips, trying to find an upper lip to keep stiff. "That was our retirement," he whispers.

Just when you think a day can't get worse, a head peeks out from behind the office dividers. A young man who looks like he's never done an honest day's work in his life calls, "Hey, Don? One of the interns spilled some coffee. When you get off break, can you get to that?"

Donovan Sing, in his sixties or seventies, turns his head. He lifts a hand and tries to say several things, none of them coherent and none of them strong. He doesn't have the strength, but the kid didn't have the attention, so I guess maybe it doesn't matter. The kid ducks his head back and Sing faces into space.

I stay with him. There's nothing I can say or do, but I can at least bear witness to his situation. Sometimes, that's all anyone can do. I may regret it, though. I see him glance at the gun my thigh. He processes what it is and how it works. I hope I'm not inspiring him in the wrong direction. Or is it wrong?

His knee pops when he stands. His hips crackle. "My break's over," he tells me. He starts to half-hobble towards the offices. "I gotta get back to work," are the last words he says to me.

I'm not sure if there's justice in this world. If there is, I'm not sure I'd know what it looks like. I just know not all investors can afford to lose. Not all quitters are lazy or foolish. And while there might be victimless crimes, there are also damn-sure criminal-less crimes.



For more of Rhest's antics, check out [Rhest for the Wicked](#), available as an ebook or in print. Or you can find more stories and tales as well as RVA's other writings at:

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