Rhest and the Easy Job

By Robert V Aldrich

FROM THE MIND OF
RVA

Mercenary work comes in all forms. One week, you're a bodyguard. Next week, you're an assassin. Today, you're a detective. Tomorrow, you're a quality control inspector. Some mercs specialize, and it's definitely important to know what you can and can't do. But at the end of the day, one of the appeals to being a mercenary in the modern world is the sheer variety of jobs you may end up getting paid to do. I should know. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

I keep a sponge under my palms as I type. I've got two cooling fans blowing on me and an ice pack over my shoulders as I work. On the monitor in front of me is a black screen with dark green characters. It's the usual characters: The Hacker's 268. The English, Hiragana, and Katakana characters all smashed together. I'm not typing although it looks that way; I'm programming.

What's the difference? Typing is pressing keys to cause a corresponding character to appear on the screen, usually in a word processor program. Programming? Programming is connecting logic like you are performing surgery. Sure, typing is involved but I'm not connecting letters to make coherent words. Uh-uh. I'm composing a symphony of commands, executable functions, and connecting logarithmic protocols into a cascade that makes calculus look like elementary-school arithmetic.

I hit run, which will give me a preview of the code's effectiveness. And, nope. It doesn't even clear the basic system check. A nice big line of red letters tells me 'you're a dumbass who can't string together basic syntax execution', but in polite computer-ese. Dammit. I start going through the error codes that are highlighted in bright yellow because I hate bright yellow and I want these codes gone.

When writing code, programmers will often write notes to themselves in the code. It's the equivalent of writing stuff in the margins. The letters are there but they aren't meant to be read 'aloud', meaning they don't affect the code. They're meant to be guidelines to what the programmer was thinking or doing. You do this so another programmer can understand what the hell you were thinking when you put an unbalanced logic matrix in a random number generator. My ice pack has already gotten lukewarm. It's really hot in the living room.

I clear a few errors that are easy – simple stuff like single apostrophes instead of doubles, underscores instead of dashes, that kind of thing – and then I get up. I wipe my face and sweat dribbles off. My gray t-shirt is more than a little moist under the armpits and my blue jeans aren't sitting right thanks to the heat. I'm not in my usual combat harness because I'm at home. I live in what used to be the perfect two-bedroom set-up on the

second floor of a mini-apartment building in the perfect neighborhood. It's a nice area, wedged between problem areas. Traffic lights still work but the cops don't drive through too often. The stores are well-stocked but they've got bars on the windows. Perfect. Apartment, neighborhood, everything. Well, it was perfect before I got a roommate.

I hear clacking on a keyboard coming from the other side of the main room. I turn and Onyx is across from me. She's working on a reinforced desktop I built for her. It isn't reinforced for impact; it's reinforced against heat. Onyx keeps the apartment about ninety-something degrees most days. She's turned it down for me, somewhere in the low eighties. Right now, she's typing as she considers whatever it is on the screen. I can tell she's thinking because her black eyes sort of gloss over. Completely black. No iris or pupil; all black.

I stroll over to her, walking around the couch in the middle of the room. "Find a good deal?" I ask conversationally. It's so damn hot.

"Sixteen dual-port visual calibrators," she answers. Her voice is low, a lot lower than seems like it should come from a woman her size. She's slender in build and has porcelain white skin. Her hair is like her eyes: absolute shock black. Like, outer space black. I describe her as a woman because she has the build of a woman, the general shape of a woman, but she isn't female. She isn't female because she isn't human.

What is she? I don't know. I met her in an irradiated cave underneath a haunted facility that was dreaming itself into existence. My team and me escaped after we killed a giant monster. Not exactly your usual first date, but somehow it wasn't my worst. I brought her back to Sacramento and, without any other ideas of what to do with her or for her, I let her move in. God, it is so hot.

The heat is a reminder of her semi-alienness. Onyx normally wears lots of denim and cotton to deal with the frigid Sacramento cold. 'Isn't Sacramento California an almost tropical climate', you ask? Yes, it is. She typically isn't too comfortable unless it's close to triple digits. We take turns who gets to set the thermostat. Today's her day, so she's wearing yoga pants and a silk t-shirt with the logo of a defunct credit card company on the front. I'm wearing a thread-bare gray t-shirt and a perpetual sheen of sweat.

"Are you sending those to Shreveport?" I ask Onyx as I cross into the kitchen. Outside of Onyx's direct heaters, it cools considerably but the apartment is still baking. I open the fridge and the chill hits me like a punch in the balls. I stick my face inside and breath in the cool air, then take out a high-protein, probiotic soda.

"Shreveport or Dalton's facility," Onyx says as she watches the different closed-network exchanges. She stares at the monitor like an infant watching a haunted television screen. "They are bidding on the calibrators now."

"What are they up to?" I ask. I stand on my toes to see over the island counter separating the kitchen from the main room. I see the numbers in the bidding war and I whistle. "Damn."

"They've crossed the minimum threshold I'll need to bribe the customs agents," she tells me. She turns around in her chair and faces me. "I will need you to deliver the bribe." She moves in a unique way. There's a smoothness to her that belies how not-human she is. You know how people have a center of balance? Sometimes I think Onyx has two centers of balance. I don't know, probably not, but it's like that. It's something really subtle, that I can't put my finger on but when you see her turn or look in a new direction, there's something not-human about it.

"Yeah, no problem," I tell her as I take my soda over to my desk. "Is this Amir?"

"I expect so," she says and she keeps watching the screen.

I go back to my desktop. My desktop is reinforced against heat, but it's also got a top-of-the-line processor that was made to make space launches user-friendly It can coordinate air traffic control at two adjacent airports. It's so fast, they had to invent a new metric of computational speed. It's so rare, one has never been sold, only custom made. And it's so powerful, I think it's an international crime for a non-governmental individual to even have one.

I have two, in case this one breaks.

I readjust my cooling fans and return to my code. I look back over the lettering and read some of my own comments and then glance up and down the error list. I fix some more of the little, piddly stuff. A lot of it has to do with transposing the two Japanese lettering systems, hiragana and katakana. Hiragana is usually used for domestic words while katakana is usually used for imported words. So their word for apple – ringo – is usually written using hiragana. Their word for computer – konpyuta – is written in katakana. The languages aren't really hard to tell apart; hiragana looks flowy and pretty, while katakana looks all angular and stuff. It's like cursive and print, really.

Of course, most Japanese programmers work in kanji, not hiragana and katakana. Programming in kanji is stupidly hard. I work with the kanji very rarely. Originally a pictographic writing system from China, modern programming kanji is different from other forms of kanji. The CIPAI, the

Congres International des Programmeurs et des Artistes en Informatique (International Congress of Programmers and Computer Artists, or Those Assholes In Europe, depending on who you ask), helped create the modern programing kanji system. Part alphabet, part pictographic system, it's all awful. I mean, I get the appeal. You use one symbol to replace whole lines of code, and the symbol is contextually significant. It's powerful, but it's still dumb.

I don't work with programming kanji unless I have to, or unless it's really, really useful. Today, it's both. Geez, it's hot.

I highlight a programming suite in my internal computer and my vision begins to stratify across the spectrum. Certain colors phase out (all the reds turn into bright oranges, that sort of deal). My Heads-Up Display appears, fully red, and it allows me to use an internal kanji dictionary. Using that and my own keyboard, I start to insert kanji figures into my program. You use the hiragana keyboard and begin typing. As you do, the keyboard intuits what kanji you want and begins to offer you suggestions. It's not the most efficient system but I'd rather be inefficient on the front end than slow it down later.

Speaking of 'slow it down later', I'm coming up on delivery time. "I'm making a call," I announce across the room to Onyx. I fish out my phone and unlock it. I hit a few simple commands to bring up a number. The phone rings twice.

Over the phone, I immediately hear rapid bursts of grouped shots. In the distance, I hear what sounds like a hyper-velocity sniper rifle. "Yeah?!" screams Bill.

"Hey, buddy, how's it going?" I ask, leaning back in my desk chair. I fan myself with a corporate catalog of tactical vests and impact-resistant knitting yarn.

"We're taking heavy fire!" he yells over suppressive gunfire, an explosion, and I think a laser? "We're stalled at the gate and the bridge is completely cut off!"

"So according to plan," I summarize. "Hey, great. Listen, how close are you to the auxiliary gate that you were planning on using?"

"Insertion will be in forty-six minutes!" he yells at me. He hangs up. He sounds busy.

I check the time on the display of my desktop monitor. Because the red is all washed out thanks to my HUD, I can barely make out the time. Forty-six minutes, give or take eleven because I'm a merc and they're mercs and I know how good our estimation skills are.

"Rhest," calls Onyx.

"Yeah?" I confirm as I clear some more of the edits in my program.

"Awl is calling," she says. "He says he will agree to my terms but only if you will agree to accept the next contract he submits."

"No!" I scream, whirling around. "No, no, tell him no." I deactivate my HUD and head over to her. "He's trying to get the mayor's office ransacked. He's been trying to do that since the election. I'm not doing that until I see the full proposal." Blind-accepting a job is always a bad idea, but especially from a guy like Awl. I go around her and step inside her bubble of blistering heat. I look at the monitor. "What are you—" Oh damn, she's negotiating a sale involving S-17 guidance chips. I step back, jaw hanging open. "Damn. Aren't those for…"

"Long-distance Deployment Robots," Onyx tells me. She turns around in the chair and looks up at me, giant black eyes like mirrors. "Awl wants them to put into interceptor drones."

I give that only a second of thought. "That won't work."

"No, it won't," she agrees, her heavy voice accompanied with a nod. "But if Awl does that, then he will be in violation of the Phnom Penh Treaty." I blink. Onyx doesn't. "That will warrant INTERPOL conducting a raid on his compound."

I'm clearly missing something. Or like six somethings. "…kay?" I say.

"The nearest INTERPOL branch office has one strike team, which will not be enough to take his compound," Onyx explains, her deep voice as soothing as distant thunder. "They will either outsource for help, which INTERPOL very rarely does, or they will call another strike team. The nearest strike team with the capability to breech Awl's compound is in Los Angeles. If they leave Los Angeles, then Hem and her team will be clear to conduct their raid on the Southside Manufacturing plant."

I'm still not seeing it.

Onyx, bless her sweet little whatever is where her heart should be, keeps explaining. "If they go into the Southside Manufacturing plant, and they are caught, then there will be no one to stop Ashton from making his move on the Sony Development Studio. In which case, he will need at least a dozen dual-port visual calibrators, which he now knows he can get from Dalton."

NOW it makes sense. "Dalton jacks up the price. You didn't just deliver the supply; you delivered the demand too." Onyx makes no facial reaction but if she were human, I'm sure she'd be blushing.

My phone rings on my desk. I kiss on the top of the head and return to my side of the room. It's absolutely frigid by comparison, probably only in the low 80s. I pick up my phone to the sound of steel clanging and a chainsaw. "Hey, Rhest!" yells Bill. "When you upload the program, don't just take down the perimeter guns. Take out their sentry ninjas!" I hear cursing, the phone drops, and the feed deactivates. He sounds busy.

I don't even bother sitting down. I can splice in some code that will do that with one hand. I don't even need to use any programming kanji. I open a half-dozen saved codes and just copy-and-paste them right into the current project I'm working on. I go back through and tailor them a bit, but most hacking really is just knowing how to customize pre-existing software.

Once that change is made, I do actually sit down and begin to clear out the rest of the edits. Removing edits from a program isn't linear. You don't have eleven edits, get rid of one, and then have ten left. You have eleven edits, get rid of one, and then either have four left or seventeen left. It's usually seventeen.

I check for edits, fix a few remaining ones, and then run edits again. Lo and behold, the program holds. "We may be good to go," I say to myself. I talk to myself so much, Onyx stopped asking about it. I connect to the intranet in my apartment. It's a dedicated server I have in the hall closet, between the backup power generator and the water heater. Immediately, all three of my cybermates – my internal computers – go on alert because of the increased activity. My laptop on the couch begins to hum, launching various counterprograms as soon as it detects digital movement on my private, dedicated network. It's all pre-emptive. You can't be too careful with all those crazy hackers out there.

Onyx and me each have a desktop which is connected to the intranet and the internet. Same for our phones. My work laptop on the other hand is connected solely to the intranet, our personal network just in the apartment. If I want to get online, I have to use several encrypted cyphers so I can't be detected or tagged with malware. In the past, the internet used to be like a river with some bugs in it. Now, it's more like a flood of sewage with one or two drops of clean H2O.

I pull up to the main website for the Husker-Olbermann corporation. It's a generic corporate website: 'we're big enough to control the world, but we're really just like your downhome country store'. Do they even have 'downhome country stores' anymore? Who cares. I access their maintenance page. Time to see if this bad boy works. I'm trying this on one of their tertiary websites. Corporations usually have their main sites, their secondary sites for customer service (HA!) and social media interactions and stuff, and then tertiary sites for pseudo-business. This one

is where their custodial staff and maintenance crew log work productivity and other matters. This is just to make sure the code will hold. Normally, I'd do a trial run on a totally unrelated corporation's webpage but since Husker-Olbermann uses a proprietary programming language, it's got to be one of their sites. If that sounds like a lot of protection and security, well, there's a reason Bill hired me for this job.

I plug the code into the website and…nothing. Big ol' nothing. "Crap," I say. I sync with my desktop and I'm now viewing things from inside my own mind. It's a virtual reality interface that allows me to manually manipulate the code. Yes, manually. As in, using my hands.

I mean, it's a simulacrum of actually adjusting the auto-forms and compiling software but the user interface makes it look like I'm grabbing a hose from my desktop and trying to plug it into a port on the website. Why do this? Well, to oversimplify, it's changing the way I look at the problem. You stare at code for so long and you start missing really easy stuff. You have to change it up. Some hackers will invert their screens, change the background colors, that sort of thing. I know a guy who will hang up side-down. Me? I like to go from mental to tactile and thus, virtual reality.

"What the hell?" I gripe. I try to jam the code in there a few times, because that's how software works. "Crap," I say, my voice sounding like it's traveling through an old 1970s phone line. I sit back and the virtual reality interface wastes away. The website blocked the interaction. It blocked my hacking before I could even hack them. What the hack?

I switch over to the technical readout of the webpage. It's like seeing the raw code, rather than the user-friendly, pretty graphical version. See even if the corporation uses its own programming language, they have to use common languages for their websites, just so people with non-corporate devices (IE customers) can use them. That exchange is how I'm going to get unauthorized access except it's not working. Why is it not working?

I try my program again but this time I monitor the technical feed. My screen fills up with data. Holy hell! Wholly hell!

"What is it?" Onyx asks me. Crap, I said that out loud.

I scan quickly over the code, attention darting from blocks of text, logic matrices, and a thousand different types of IF->THEN statements. On and on, down the entire command chain, from top to bottom, then back again. "This site is running a seventeen-digit algorithm just to interface. And this is just to get their contact info." I tack on some code and run it again. What I attached was basically a tracer. What it will do is identify not only the response but also where the response came froOHMYGOD! This thing has an entire dedicated server farm. What the holy hell?! What has

Bill gotten himself into? Sweet mercy, I've never seen digital security like this. Seriously, I haven't even seen a government site with this kind of set-up.

I grab up my phone and call Bill. Amidst squealing tires, motorcycle interceptors, and I'm pretty sure a half-dozen spider-robots, he answers, "Hello?"

"Hey, man, it's Rhest," I tell him. "Listen, this program is proving really tricky. These guys have got major security. I'm going to need—" I pause because he's clearly being shot at it and I figure I should let him handle that. "I'm going to need some more time."

"Tic-tock, motherfuc—" I hang up on him. He sounds busy.

I engage in what programmers spend the majority of their time doing: I stare at my screen. I look over the ones and zeroes, alphanumeric sigils and their alignment, all brushing the fingertips of my mind over the code like I'm reading Braille.

I make a few faces as I weigh a variety of options, then I tack on still more code. I check the code, make sure there aren't any errors (there are but I clear them quickly), and then I reattack the website. This time, though I watch intently. It fails, as expected. A window pops up on my screen and I enlarge it. I lean forward in my desk chair and study the graph.

What I'm looking at is a black screen with green lines tracking my computer's recovery. The different colored lines (they're all green but different tints of green) show speeds. Speeds of my computer, speeds of their computers, speed of the net connection. I'm looking for how everything syncs up.

There's the problem.

My computer and their computer are half a step out of sync. They're just running a hiccup faster. "Huh," I muse. I check the net connection and see what kind of data transfer I can handle. Depending on the time of day, my ability to send and receive data is impaired. Right now, I'm operating at optimal speeds. Things aren't just good; they're ideal. When the neighborhood starts to wake up and people start jumping online to see what went wrong in the world today, my connectivity will slow down.

I minimize my programs and summon up a simulator. It's a system I wrote a few years ago when I thought I was going to have to hack a buddy's brain because we thought he'd been taken over by nanites (turns out, he was just in love). But the simulator allows me to run scenarios based off my previous internet connections without having to connect to those sites. It allows me to test theories without relentlessly pinging a giant corporation's

webpage. It's not the most accurate way to do things, but it's better than running against the site in question. You poke a sleeping giant too many times, they tend to roll over and swat you.

I let my simulator run, testing my theory. I get up and rub my eyes. There's something blissful about the strain of writing code. It's like the exhaustion after a long day playing sports or something. Like, remember how much fun it was to spend the whole afternoon playing in an empty lot or running around a burned-out corporate high rise? Yeah, that's what programming is like but it's mental exhaustion. It hurts and it strains and you're mentally stiff and it sucks and it feels great.

"You want to take a break?" I ask Onyx.

"No," she says, still working on her complicated network of manipulation and salesmanship.

I sometimes forget how to phrase things with her. "I'm taking a break; will you come with me?"

"I will," she says and begins to send the appropriate messages to the people she's goading into purchases they don't know they need yet.

I turn back to my computer and check the results of the simulator. Yep. It's processing speed. My computer is just too slow. Which is kind of terrifying because it's so high-end, it's processing power is measured in Mach speeds but whatever.

Our respective jobs on hold, Onyx puts on a heavy jacket while I get half my combat harness. Normally I wear a combat undersuit (its an armored leotard but no self-respecting merc likes to say 'leotard') with a combat vest and armored inserts. Right now, I'm just taking the belt. I clip my two primary pistols, Reason and Respect, to my thighs, and I go to the door. Jeans, t-shirt, and pistols: the California uniform. We're just going across the street. Two pistols should be plenty.

Outside is the Sacramento nighttime. A spanning, starless, smoggy sky. Acrid air that would choke an engine. The stench of backed up sewers, greasy Chinese food, and enough sweat to make a stick of antiperspirant cry. Home. I live in the center of a horse-shoe-shaped apartment villa with a vaguely Hacienda-style to it. At the center is a barren wasteland that long ago used to be a swimming pool. When it rains, enough water collects that the kids whose parents don't love them all that much will let them swim in it.

Me and Onyx descend the steps to the ground floor and head out the front gate. The Tsoukaloses and the Imperials are racing a few blocks down, which means that segment of the street is cut off. They're going the other

way, so we shouldn't have to worry about getting run over. I haven't heard a gunshot since we left the apartment, so it must be a quiet night.

Me and Onyx head over to the Somali bodega a street over. It's open all-night and they deal mostly in white-people drugs so they're one of the last places to get robbed. Plus, they sell real-pork corndogs and anybody who has had one of those doesn't want to jeopardize being able to get another one. It's an ugly little store with bars on the windows, broken tiles on the floor, and most of the ceiling tiles are missing. It smells like asbestos and tobacco filters and cooking grease. Everything looks like those things too. Everything is yellowed, even the stuff that's fairly new. Shelves are taped together, spot-welded, or just propped up. And that's the proper shelves. Shipping carts and storage bins are also used for shelves.

I go to the ice cream bin and fish around for a Mighty Max More bar. They're like a cross between an ice cream candy bar and two protein bars. Each one is enough calories to fuel an adult man for two days or one nine-hour meth-fueled shift of construction work. I get two. When you've got the cybernetics I've got, getting enough calories is always a problem.

Onyx looks indifferent at first but then notices the pack of non-frozen raw turkeys. They're GMO turkeys but they're huge and Onyx processes toxins like most people process the color of the sky, so it doesn't matter to her in the slightest. We lay our snacks on the counter that's covered in ads for the newest education lottery scam.

"Is there delivery today?" asks the Somali guy at the register. He doesn't ring up anything. I point at myself, at Onyx, and back and forth, not sure who he is referring to. "Her." He points at Onyx. His accent makes him hard to understand. So does him missing all the teeth on his right side.

"No delivery," she tells him with a flat, placid stare. "I only pick-up on Thursdays."

"What's being picked up?" I ask between them both.

Register guy says, "Bingo cards."

I give him an incredulous look. "Dude," I tell him. "At least TRY to make your lie believable." He starts to swear at me, but he also rings up our food, so I consider it a net gain.

I pay and we depart with Onyx's turkey and my ice cream bars. I go ahead and tear open one of the bars, which is a little hard since I've got a raw fowl to juggle. I rip open the plastic sleeve around the bar and smell that chocolatey-vanilla-peanutty goodness and grin. I'm such a sucker for treats.

The air's so hot, vapor starts to rise off the ice cream treat, which is all cool. I watch it just outside the little bodega, the neon lights causing the vapor to take on different colors. Red, blue, green. In the blue light, the vapor seems to twist and snake the slowest, like it's the coldest color or something.

Coldest color.

Cold.

As I take a bite, the thought of cold starts to ricochet around in my mind. "I got an idea," I announce, rolling various half-plans around in my head. Onyx glances over at me. Or I think she does. Without irises, it's hard to tell. She does this subtle head turn towards me, so that counts as a glance. "Let's stop at the race," I ask. She doesn't seem to mind, so we head towards the racers.

The popularity of street racing in Sacramento is directly proportional to how recently a movie or video game about street racing has been released. Sometimes I think they release racing movies just so they can get a glut of sales on some new automotive merchandise. If every car in the movie has this sick-ass spoiler, odds are some warehouse had a lot of spoilers to move and this made for an effective advertisement. Nobody's going to buy embellishment for their car's trunk unless a movie star makes it look cool.

I guess the most recent flick about racing involved neon lights because every car on the street has neon runners, or neon wraps around the head and tail lights. Neon along the windows. Neon, neon, neon. Sure, why not?

If the Imperials are racing, then that means Tso is nearby. Tso is the gang's accountant. Sure, gangs are all about loyalty, honor, and courage, but somebody's got to pay for the flophouse and make sure you're getting drugs at a decent discount off street value. Tso's a chubby nerd with a bowl cut, sci-fi earrings, and knee-high socks. He's either incredibly audacious in his fashion sense, or he wears whatever anyone tells him, including his mom. He's a pimply-faced dork with the manners of a gamer just back from suspension, but he's got buddies with automatic weapons and women hanging on his every wish. The leader of a gang may command the respect, but the dude that controls the bank account has the real power.

I roll up with our groceries, wishing I'd gotten decked out in my full combat armor. The Imperials aren't the worst street gang but they aren't the be trifled with. I nod to a few guys I know as I walk up to Tso sitting in a concert chair with two hoochies at his sides. The two girls look at Onyx and instantly aren't sure how to take her off-putting inhuman presence.

"Hey, what's up Tso," I say. He looks up at me like he's all that, tilting his thick coke bottle glasses with sunglass visors over them. His voice

cracks when he responds in Mandarin. He hasn't made it all the way through puberty just yet. "Hey, listen, I was wondering if you've got a burner laptop around?"

Tso spits more Mandarin. I look at the woman to my left. "He says get lost, round-eye," she says in a very forced Chinese accent.

"Dude, you were born here," I condescend. "Quit with the—" I'm shut up as two more cars take off between the Imperials and the Tsoukaloses. Once the howl of their engines dies down, I'm left with everybody cheering and screaming after them. I glare at Tso.

He flips his glasses down and leans back. He says something to the woman. She relays it to me. "He says, he'll see what he can find in the trash can. Get lost and maybe he'll let you leave."

I look back at Onyx, like I'm looking for her to give me an excuse not to shoot somebody. I smile tight-lipped at him and walk away. I think about walking over to the Tsoukaloses, but it's seriously rude to go to the rivals right in front of the people you came to talk to. That burns bridges quick. Plus, I don't know the Tsoukaloses that well. I might be playing with fire.

Me and Onyx head back to the apartment and I'm halfway through my second bar. Onyx unlocks the door for me and we go inside. It's even hotter in here than it is outside, which isn't that unusual. I grab up one of my cooler fans. The blades ice up when it's activated and it blows cold, cold, COLD air right into your face. This model is called the Everest but I just call it heaven.

I return to my computer and double-check my double-checking of the code. Nothing's changed, including my options. My phone rings as I experiment with a few meaningless changes. It's Bill. "Hey, buddy," I tell him.

"How's the program coming?" he asks. I hear a high-pitched whine in the background. That's either a laser lawnmower or a missile targeting system. I hear some shouting in the background, but that's standard on a business call.

"Making progress," I lie to him. "I've got an idea, so I hope we're good."

"Hope?" Bill chokes. "Rhest, now is not the time—oh damn it!" I hear gunfire, profanity, and massive property damage. The California state song. I hang up on Bill and keep noodling with the program. He sounds busy.

Just as I'm about to Google a solution and just as Onyx is finishing her turkey, there's a knock at the door. I turn to the door, a little stunned. I glance at Onyx and she looks at me, a turkey leg sticking out of her mouth like some adorable cartoon cannibal. I stand and approach the door, Onyx handing me Respect as I get near. I'm about to say something when I realize there's turkey grease on the barrel. I start to glare at Onyx but she's already handing me a paper towel. "Who is it?" I yell through the door as I wipe the semi-frozen juices off my gun. I stand to the side of the door, just off-center from where a person would normally check through the peephole.

"It's Tso, Mr. Rhest."

I open up and there's that pimply-faced dork, Tso. "Hey, sir," he stammers. His gold chains rattle around his neck as he gives me a bit of a bow. Full-blooded American, but culture survives immigration for generations, I guess. "I can't be long, sir," he says, he's faux-gangsta attitude totally gone. His English is more marred by his nerd accent than any shred of Mandarin. "I have a laptop you can use. It's one of the burners I keep handy when I need to do some software duplication or the girls need me to make a fake ID for them. The signatures are clean and I got it from Lola, so there are no ISP handholds." He hands me a red laptop with an extra cooling vent.

'Burner' is a designation technologists give to anything meant to be disposable. The idea is you can 'use it and then burn it', meaning throw it away. It'll do the job but it usually isn't too nice. What he's handed me is pretty nice. "Is this a gaming rig?" I ask him, turning it over in my hands. Forget a burner; this would be a halfway decent programming laptop. I check the bottom and read the specifications on the hard drive and motherboard. Not bad.

"It doesn't have any games on it but it would be okay to game," Tso tells me. He's wearing his earrings but he doesn't have any of the garish pinky rings he was wearing a minute ago. He went from wannabe gangster to studious and polite college applicant in seconds.

"I could use some help, man, come inside," I offer.

"I can't," he says quickly, giving me an apologetic bow. "I got to get back before anybody notices." Behind him, at the entrance to the apartment unit is an okay racer. In the driver's seat is one of the two women that had been with him moments ago. I can see her tapping long nails nervously on the wheel. "Hey, about this," he says. "D-don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Yeah, no problem," I say. I already opened the laptop and I'm checking the RAM. "How much do you want for it?"

"Will you go with me to a Science Olympiad?" he asks, like I'd be doing him a favor. "I don't want anybody to know I'm still going to school."

Is he for real?

"Uh, yeah? Sure. As, like, a bodyguard or a teammate?" Joke about bodyguarding at an academic competition all you want, but when college scholarships are on the line, you'd be amazed what can and does go down at those things. "Is that, like, the mathlympics? I did that for a couple of years."

"Yeah, kind of," Tso says, already rushing for the steps. "Okay, thank you, Mr. Rhest, I'll send you the details."

"Wait, am I..." Now I really hope he wants me to be a teammate. Trivia Night at a bar doesn't scratch the itch once you've been a Bronze Medalist Mathlympian. "Yeah, no problem," I wave. "Thanks!"

I shut the door and secure it, setting down the laptop. I double-check the stats on the hard drive and the RAM. "Perfect," I say as I look it over on the kitchen island.

Onyx comes over and looks with me. "Why did you get this computer?"

"Because I don't have any disposable laptops right now and it would take too long to slave a second processor and hard drive to my desktop," I tell her. "And I need something I can destroy."

So, a Beowulf cluster.

Imagine slapping two computers together so that you can share processing requirements between them. That's a Beowulf cluster. Legend has it that old libraries used to use commercially-available computers as servers because they couldn't get the funding for a new server. Everybody's done it in programming. Hell, it's kind of a rite-of-passage for most hackers (along getting inside a utility company, changing your bank account, and making it all the way through the movie Hackers without throwing up). Now, normally Beowulf clusters are made up of a few dozen computers, but technically, any network of parallel computational devices counts.

I'm not making a traditional Beowulf, of course. I'm going to be using one (the burner) to amplify the other. Basically instead of adding the two computers together, I'm going to be using one to multiply the other. I say all of this because ten minutes later, Onyx is hiding in the bedroom while I've turned off all the heaters in the front room. With the cooling units on, it's frigging cold. Ice-on-the-windows cold. Worse, I've laid out four

buckets full of ice water and I've stretched wires through them. Why? Because I'm going to use the laptop as an accelerator for my desktop. I've slaved it to my internal cybermate and I've overclocked its processors. What does that mean? You know how a car can go from first to fifth gear, maybe sixth gear for a sports car? Well, I just installed an eighth gear.

"Alright, here we go," I announce to everybody in the room with me (which is me and me alone). I take out my cell phone and see that Bill's been calling me. Dammit, did I put my phone on mute again? I hate when I do that. "Hey, man, what's up?"

"WHERE THE F—gunfire—K ARE YOU?!"

"Oh, hey, man, sorry about that, I had to build a secondary rig to handle the data exchange across…look, don't worry about that. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, and if I survive this, I'm going to kick your ass into next—"

"Alright, ninety seconds," I tell him and hang up. He sounds busy. I step back from the whole jury-rigged set-up so I can see everything stretched across my living room like the world's most flammable spider web. I take a deep breath and grab the fire extinguisher from the kitchen counter. Let's do this.

I look at my desktop and using the phenomenal magical powers of my psychic will (i.e. using a remote keyboard I have logged into my internal systems), I activate the program. My system begins to run and it begins to clog the corporation's buffers. They start clearing it instantly and the laptop kicks in. The fans on the laptop start going into overdrive. And I do mean overdrive. The sparkly blue casing almost starts to vibrate. I grab up a bottle of liquid nitrogen and pour it into the funnel I've got waiting. The nitrogen disperses into the buckets with a loud, gaseous steam. This thing got hot fast.

The air in the apartment starts to heat up and the A/C kicks on. You can almost see the hot and cold air clashing. I ready the fire extinguisher for a second, certain something's going to go up in flames. All that I've got though, for a second, is the plumes of vapor coming out of the bucket. I pour the rest of the nitrogen into the bucket and rush over to my desktop. I leave the fire extinguisher behind and take over with my fingers. Yes, I type faster than I think.

The digital gates come crashing down and the corporate system is open to me. I'd cackle supervillainously but I've got sentry robots to take over, security protocols to reroute, and several computer-controlled espresso machines to get percolating.

Onyx strolls in, carrying a personal heater in front of her. "How is it going?" she asks, looking at the code streaming quickly as I type, unleashing program after program. She looks at the hissing liquid nitrogen and the fritzing laptop that is starting to belch smoke and a few flames. "Did it work?"

"It worked," I say, grimacing as I type.

She pets my hair like I'm a cat and tells me, "Good job."

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