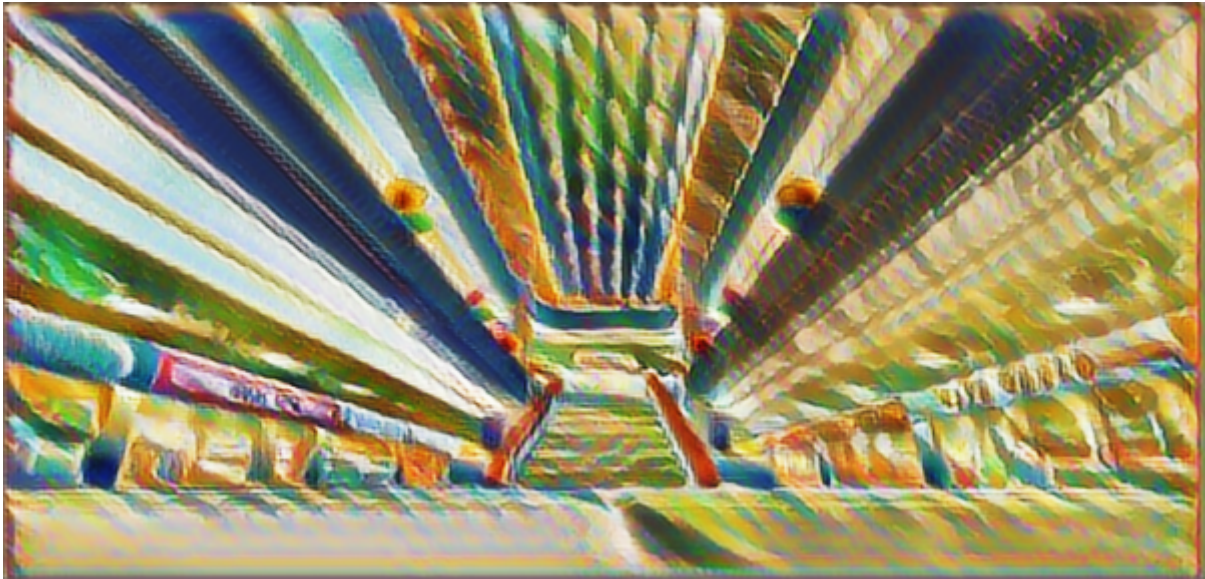


REDIAL



If you had gone to the mall that day nothing would have felt out of place, no more than usual. You would have left your dad's car in the underground park floor that always smelled like gasoline and eggs and you would have entered the automatic doors and taken an escalator that took you to the ground floor and then on your way up would have had your pick between another escalator up to the next floor, expensive fast food on your left, and a smattering of dead and dying stores on the right.

Your friends were there that day, passing through the electronics store, one of them making a joke about a video game, when they'd stopped in their tracks. A bomb had gone off right across the street, somewhere between the bank and the garage.

~

He could feel vibrations all the way from the server room, tucked away on the top floor. They were ahead of schedule and he was behind. And the broken air conditioning had him sweating so bad he could barely see. If only he'd bought a better screwdriver. Fuck. FUCK!

He threw the box at the wall and stomped it. The panel had been loosened just enough for him to dislodge the circuit board and smash it. Good enough. He spun around and pulled his backpack back on, wrestled a walkie talkie out of his ass pocket.

"I'm done, heading out."

The walkie talkie spat back at him. "What took you so long? We need you here now! Do you have any idea~"

"Nothing I could have done. On my way down."

"You'd fucking better! Get your shit together, Fox."

And the walkie talkie went back to sleep.

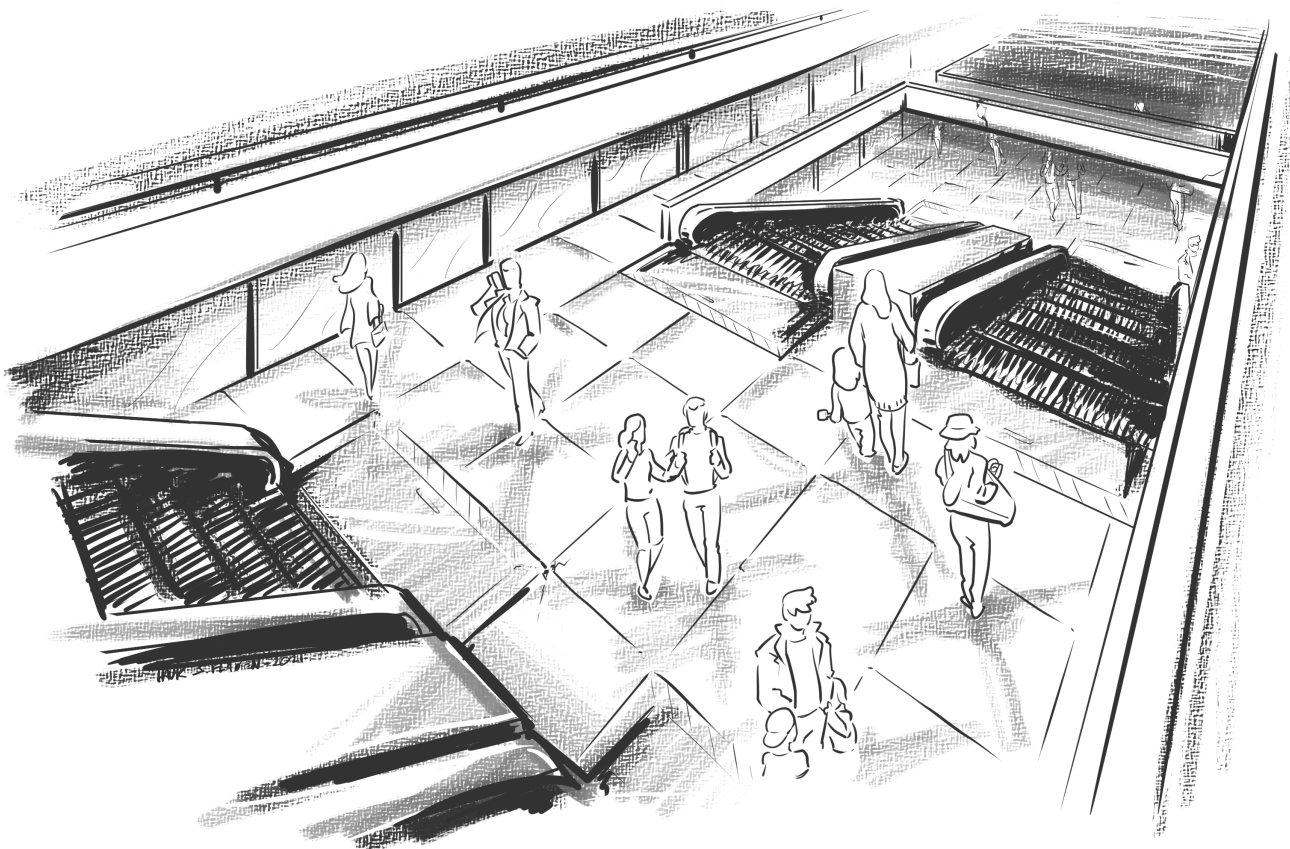
~

Wolf was mad. Fox couldn't blame him. He could hear Pig yelling something in the background, somewhere in the static. Horse probably pulled the trigger too early and needed a scapegoat. He ground his teeth at thoughts about the petty fighting that was most definitely waiting for him on location.

When his head peeked out of the security door he saw people. So many people. They'd been shaken out of their everyday comfort but they hadn't started running yet, they were just standing there, most of them frozen and confused. Someone looked at him. He was pressed for time. He needed to get to the van. Two floors down, or was it three? People were blocking the escalator. Every second was precious. He made a decision. He pulled his mask back up.

Fox started running. He started yelling. Get out of the way. He pulled a gun out of his belt and waved it. It was fake, but they didn't know that. He saw hands go into the air, people ducking for cover. One teenager was frozen in front of the escalator but he could easily be pushed aside. So he did. Every second counted. Mall security should be busy with his distractions from earlier. There was yelling. He reached the escalator and the clanging of his boots hitting the metal drove him forward. He squeezed past an old woman waiting patiently for the escalator to reach its destination and the backpack whipped her in the face hard enough to launch her glasses into the abyss. Not her lucky day.

He lunged forward. There was a bang as he landed on the loose metal plate connecting the escalator to the next floor. His heart was pounding. So many sensations to take in, like the shot of adrenaline had frozen time itself. To his left he saw the electronics store windows and what felt like hundreds of TVs all tuned to the same emergency news broadcast. There'd been a bombing at the local bank. Holy shit, no way? The anchorwoman looked confused. She had no idea what they'd been planning, and the mask kept his smirk out of sight. Nobody knew. The perfect heist. Only thing left was their getaway. And that was all Fox.



Fox shook his head and tore his eyes away from the screen. It'd only been a moment, but he'd wasted another precious second. He kept moving, his eyes taking in the surroundings as necessary. In front of him were more people. To the right was a burger joint that always gave him diarrhoea. A family of four had frozen mid-bite and were looking around, looking at him and his mask. His boots were clacking against the dirty linoleum floor, absorbing chewing gum, undefined stickiness. Walkie talkie buzzing.

The escalator down was crowded. Every second mattered. He leaped onto the connecting rail and slid down legs first just like he'd done as a teen, years ago, trying to impress his friends, doing stunts, parkour, it was like riding a bike, but then he was thrown off, catching himself at the bottom and rolling forward, no injuries, he still got it. He heard gasps behind him. Someone laughed. Next floor.

He scrambled forward and pushed a businessman out of the way, knocking the phone out of his hands. To his left he could hear the noise from another electronics store. Same broadcast. Same woman. She sounded confused still. Step step step clank clank, clank clank clank clank escalator, this one was almost empty thank god. Running down the steps he had a clear view of the next floor. A group of people standing aimlessly scattered across the floor, most of them watching the broadcast and talking to each other. Always someone standing in front of the escalator. One more floor and then he'd be at the van and he'd put the key in the ignition and-

The walkie talkie crackled again. Fox ripped it out of his pocket and yelled. "I'm on my fucking way! Shut the fuck up!"

The backpack straps were digging into his shoulders. He spat some iron out of his mouth. He hunched forward and caught his breath. Fuck, and he hadn't even ran that far. He was out of shape. Donuts. Why. The walkie talkie puked even more static at him but he didn't care to respond. Didn't matter. He made it.

The moving step of the escalator dropped his feet onto the loose metal plate and he almost lost his balance. When stood back up his heart skipped a beat. Ten, twenty people. Some of them looking at him,

looking worried. Most of them staring into the beat down electronics store to his left. An anchorwoman reading from a paper.

"...news about the bombing..." "...police presence..."

He could smell burgers. He could smell mold from the unwashed linoleum floor. He started running again, pushing someone out of the way, reaching the escalator again, looking down at his boots to avoid losing his balance on the unsteady rumble of the moving escalator steps again, and there was a loud bang when he hit the next floor.

He was panicking. He'd absolutely lost it. Maybe he was hallucinating. He'd just imagined being on the same floor, right? Sleep deprivation or some shit. But this was the last one! The walkie talkie was upset. He pulled it to his mouth and blocked out whatever vitriol was coming out of Wolf's end.

"Th- t-traffic's fucked, I'll be right there-"

He clipped the walkie talkie to his jacket. On his way across the floor he bumped into a businessman talking on the phone. It fell out of his hand. He gave an absolutely indignant glare. Sorry. He could hear more fragments from the TVs. A chorus of the same voice repeated tens of times each one barely out of sync with itself.

"...police on their way..." "...investigating..."

He didn't dare look to his right. He landed on the escalator. In front of him, below him, he saw people. Facing left. Another escalator. The mask obscured his vision, so he couldn't quite see what was past the escalator, the angle wasn't great, but, but. It looked like another floor. With another escalator. Fox reached under his mask to claw at his face in frustration and looked behind him, smacking someone in the face with his backpack once more. Above him, behind him, he saw ten to twenty people standing around. Escalators going up. People. Escalators going up again. Maybe... maybe next floor. Right?

The walkie talkie just spat more insults at him.

-

Bang. Next floor. More seconds wasted.

The anchorwoman was talking again.

"...suspects are near apprehension..."

A group in the middle turned to stare at him. The businessman was blocking the escalator again. He pushed him. The phone fell to the ground and cracked into pieces. The businessman crouched down to pick the pieces back up. Fox could smell fries. His legs hurt from all the running. Something cracked under his foot, like he'd stepped on a twig. His gun had slipped out of his hand somewhere on the last floor.

Wolf was breaking up. "...and if you think your cut... betrayed us... padded cells unless you... make your life a living hell..."

Bang. Next floor. How long?

The TV had an aerial view of the bank. Blurry, from slush hitting the lens, and from a low quality connection, static on snow.

"...witnesses accounts match profiles... hiding somewhere..."

They were all staring at the screen, expressionless. Fox bumped into a teenager who fell to the ground, climbed back up, not once breaking eye contact with the screen. He saw workers standing outside the burger joint, unmoving. He was short of breath, the mask felt like it was choking him. The floor felt soft. He could hear dripping.

Wolf could barely make himself heard beneath the static. The signal was cutting out. "...how could... ...get away... please..."

Bang. Next floor. Next floor next floor BANG next floor.

The anchorwoman's suit had been torn in places. The seams were falling apart. She was mumbling. The side panel that used to show a helicopter feed now only showed static.

The audience stood there like usual, quiet except for their breathing, their skin starting to slough, like they'd been underwater, their eyes were glassed over, nobody even cared to look at Fox. And when he pushed one over, a teenager in a green shirt and jeans and a stupid hat, he just fell to the ground and crumpled over. There was a splat when his head hit the linoleum tiles. He didn't get back up. The burger joint looked dilapidated. The sign had fallen off. The family of four was still there. Whatever they were holding was grey. They were all frozen in time, deer in the headlight. Water poured down

from the concrete pillars. The mask finally came off and he threw it behind him. It fluttered in the wind and disappeared. The skin on his face felt raw. Warm. He'd been crying. Every step he took made a splash. The cuffs of his jeans were wet. It seeped into his skin.

The walkie talkie was trying to talk to him. This time the static reminded him of Horse. But he couldn't hear what it was trying to say.

Bang. Next floor. Almost there.

He was exhausted. Couldn't run any more. His van was on the next floor. His friends were waiting for him in the garage. But he was so tired. They would just have to wait a little more. He landed on his knees. Looked around him. At the body on the TV screen. The audience around him. Nobody wanted to look at him. Nobody would mind if he took a little break right here. He could hear the storm past the walls, feel it rattle the building. Somewhere behind him there was another splash. He closed his eyes, laid down on the warm floor. Wet. It stuck to his face. It poured into his open mouth. And it tasted like nothing.

