

THE PIXEL CARTEL

Written

by Robert Breedlove

Set in the world of SURF CITY

Contact: Robert Breedlove
Surfcityfilms@gmail.com
407-619-6478

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EXT. SURF CITY – NIGHT (LATE 2000)

A blizzard hammers the front windows.

A spotlight grazes a hand-painted SURF CITY surfboard sign hanging above the door, throwing harsh blue light against the driving snow.

INT. SURF CITY – CONTINUOUS

The heavy hum of cooling fans and the relentless clack of mechanical keyboards drown out the wind.

Rows of heavy CRT monitors glow in the dim light. On the screens: the blocky, 3D fantasy world of EVERQUEST.

Snow-dusted Carhartt jackets hang over the backs of chairs. The air is thick with the smell of burnt espresso and hot electronics.

ROB BREEDLOVE (early 30s), ex-military, posture sharp, eyes always scanning, moves down the narrow aisle.

He doesn't watch the games – he watches the hardware. He reseats a loose CAT-5 cable. He taps a struggling PC tower fan until it hums smoothly.

He stops behind VANDRA (mid-20s), Fire-red hair tucked under a dark knit cap. She farms mobs with surgical, mechanical calm. No wasted motion.

On her screen, a massive digital beast collapses.

ON SCREEN: Loot Drop: RUBICITE BREASTPLATE.

A cheer goes up from the players sitting at the terminals next to her. Vandra doesn't celebrate. She just clicks to the next target.

Rob nods and continues toward the front counter.

BEN (late 20s), meticulous and monk-calm, wipes down the steam wand of the gleaming espresso machine – every motion deliberate.

Rob steps behind the counter and pulls a heavy, red LEDGER toward him. He flips it open.

CLOSE ON LEDGER

Columns of meticulous handwriting.

EXPENSES

Rent – circled in red.

Power bill – triple-underlined.

INCOME

MANASTONE – \$511.11

RUBICITE – \$510.00

GLOWING BLACK STONE – \$412.25

Rob presses a sticky note onto the corner of the page.

ON STICKY NOTE:

VANDRA – 78 HRS – COMPED

He exhales, tracing the triple-underlined power bill with the cap of his pen. It's close. Too close.

Suddenly, the heavy front door BANGS open.

A violent gust of cold air rushes into the stifling heat of the cafe. Snow swirls into the entryway.

The clack of keyboards slows. A few players look back.

A LAWYER (40s) steps inside, brushing snow from his shoulders – a small, human gesture at odds with his sharp, expensive suit. His polished shoes track melting snow across the worn floorboards.

He adjusts his grip on a thick leather briefcase, taking in the room with a quiet, practiced assessment.

He scans the room. He sees the steam curling from the mugs. He sees the pale halos of phosphor light reflecting in the player's eyes.

To Rob, this room is a symphony of survival. To the Lawyer, it's an illegal factory.

Rob slowly closes the red ledger.

INT. SURF CITY – CONTINUOUS

The Lawyer stands in the entryway. The heavy wooden door clicks shut behind him, cutting off the howl of the blizzard.

He unbuttons his overcoat. He doesn't look like a customer. He looks like an executioner.

He walks past the front counter, ignoring Ben, and heads straight for the stairs leading to the gaming lounge.

Rob tracks him. He steps out from behind the counter and follows.

INT. UPSTAIRS LOUNGE – CONTINUOUS

The Lawyer crests the stairs. He steps into the pale phosphor glow of the EverQuest monitors. Players lean into their screens, unaware of the intrusion.

The Lawyer's eyes lock onto the far wall.

ON THE WALL – THE WHITEBOARD LEDGER:

RARES SOLD

Manastone – \$511.11

Rubicite – \$510

GAME-TIME LEADERS

Vandra – 78 hrs/week

Her sticky note is pinned next to it like a badge of honor.

The Lawyer watches, his ungloved hands flexing in the warmth.

A loud PAYPAL PING cuts through the room from the admin terminal.

Rob reaches the top of the stairs, wiping his hands on his jeans. He squares his shoulders. The military posture kicks in instantly.

ROB
Can I help you?

The Lawyer turns. He nods toward the whiteboard.

LAWYER
Efficient little economy you've
built. Organized. Profitable.

ROB
I'll ask again. Can I help you?

LAWYER

Your network is profiting off my
client's intellectual property. 989
Studios. You're the owner?

Vandra rises from her terminal. She doesn't hesitate. She
walks over, planting herself shoulder-to-shoulder with Rob.

The Lawyer clocks her red-purple hair and the heavy bags
under her eyes, then looks back at the whiteboard.

LAWYER (CONT'D)

Keeping the lights on, I see.

Vandra's eyes burn with quiet fire.

VANDRA

You think you own what's on that
board? The IP is yours, sure. But
the hours are mine. The bruised
wrists, the burn behind the eyes.
That's mine. You didn't earn a
single cent of that.

The Lawyer stares at her. Unfazed. Cold.

LAWYER

It isn't legal.

VANDRA

I've spent seventy-eight hours this
week staring down the Cazic Thule
in The Plane of Fear. You really
think a guy in a suit scares me?

Rob touches her arm. A gentle anchor. He knows the war is
lost.

ROB

Okay. I'll show you the server.
We'll handle this in downstairs...
On my terms.

Vandra stares the Lawyer down for one more second, then gives
a fierce, earned nod. She stays planted on the landing.

Rob leads the Lawyer back down the stairs. Vandra's gaze
flicks back to the whiteboard. The numbers.

INT. SURF CITY – BASEMENT – CONTINUOUS

Rob leads the Lawyer down the narrow, unfinished stairs to the humming EGAMESAUCTION server. The LEDs blink rapidly in the dim light.

ROB

This is it.

The Lawyer snaps open his briefcase. He pulls out a thick Cease-and-Desist order and presses it hard into Rob's chest. Rob takes it.

LAWYER

Shut it down. Or face injunctive relief, fines, and criminal charges. The infringement ends tonight.

Rob stares at the legal document. He looks up at the glowing monitor – the engine keeping the cafe alive.

LAWYER (CONT'D)

Full compliance is expected. We'll be watching.

Rob's jaw tightens. He steps up to the keyboard.

He types a command. He hesitates for a fraction of a second, then hits ENTER.

On screen, active windows close. Processes halt.

The heavy, metallic hum of the server winds down. The cooling fans spin to a stop.

A heavy, suffocating silence fills the basement.

The Lawyer gives a satisfied nod. He turns and heads for the stairs.

INT. SURF CITY – MAIN FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

The Lawyer reaches the top of the stairs. He doesn't look back at the stunned room. He pushes through the heavy front door and steps out into the whiteout.

The door clicks shut.

Rob slowly follows, cresting the stairs from the basement. He walks onto the main floor, steps behind the counter, and slumps onto a stool.

INT. UPSTAIRS LOUNGE – CONTINUOUS

Dead quiet. The frantic clack of keyboards has completely stopped.

Players murmur in low, anxious voices. Vandra stares at her blank monitor. The reflection of her face is caught in the black glass. The \$511.11 Manastone on the whiteboard suddenly feels like a tombstone.

INT. SURF CITY – MAIN FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

The heavy silence from the floor above presses down on the main floor.

Behind the counter, BEN watches Rob. Ben doesn't offer a pitying look or a word of comfort. He just turns to the gleaming espresso machine.

Grind. Tamp. Pull. The sharp, mechanical hisses cut through the stifling quiet.

Ben walks over and sets a small ceramic cup on the counter next to Rob. A perfect Doppio. Ben gives a single, firm nod, turns, and walks back to his post.

Rob looks at the cup. His hand trembles slightly as he picks it up. He takes a sip.

The bitter espresso hits him. He closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath.

When he opens his eyes, the shock is gone. His posture shifts. His back straightens. The military edge returns.

He sets the cup down. Hard.

MONTAGE – THE DIGITAL HUNT

A tense, driving 90s electronic track kicks in.

INT. SURF CITY BASEMENT – CONTINUOUS

Rob drops into the chair at the Admin terminal, his face a mask of absolute focus.

ON SCREEN: He types in playersauction.com. A slick corporate site loads. He clicks through. No contact info. No address.

ROB
(muttering)
Amateurs.

He launches a traceroute. Green text scrolls down the black screen:

Anchorage → Seattle → Chicago → Los Angeles.

A breadcrumb trail – but a crooked one.

He cross-references IP blocks. Hits a Proxy service. A dead end.

Rob pivots. He pulls up old WHOIS archives – walls of raw text and half-broken links flicker across his face.

He stops scrolling. He leans in, inches from the monitor.

He grabs a pen and a torn receipt from the desk. He scribbles down a name and a Seattle area code.

END MONTAGE

INT. SURF CITY BASEMENT – LATER

The basement is completely silent. The dead server looms in the shadows.

Rob picks up the heavy desk phone. He dials the number from the receipt.

It rings twice.

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE)
(filtered)
Yeah?

ROB
You're the guy running
PlayersAuction out of Seattle.

A long silence – not confusion, but surprise. Someone who thought he was invisible just got seen.

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE)
Who is this?

ROB
Someone who just got handed a cease-
and-desist from Sony 989. Which
means you're next.

(MORE)

ROB (CONT'D)
But I'm looking at your site, and
you're still moving EQ loot. How?

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE)
Sony can't touch us. We don't sell
their intellectual property.

ROB
I'm staring at a listing for a
Singing Short Sword going for three
hundred bucks.

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE)
Look closer at the terms of
service, pal. We aren't selling the
sword. The sword is free.

Rob freezes. A spark. Something shifting behind his eyes.

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)
What we charge for is the time –
the hours it takes our farmers to
get it. A service fee. They can
copyright pixels. They can't
copyright human labor.

Rob's eyes widen. Something shifts.

He looks up – past the ceiling, past the floor above – toward
the gaming lounge where Vandra sits.

Her words echo back to him: The hours are mine.

ROB
A service fee.

COMPETITOR (ON PHONE)
You need an infrastructure to make
it bulletproof, but yeah. That's
the loophole. Now... how did you
get this number?

ROB
I'm a guy with a room full of the
best farmers on the West Coast. And
I think we should talk about a
supply chain.

Rob leans back in his chair. The tension drains from his
shoulders, replaced by a sharp, dangerous confidence.

He reaches out and presses the heavy, mechanical power button
on the server tower.

The server roars back to life – fans kicking in, hard drives spinning up with a rising, triumphant whine. LEDs blaze across the tower, bathing Rob's face in pulsing green light.

Rob leans into the glow – reborn.

FADE TO BLACK: