

# Park

## by Aaron Stewart-Ahn

Welcome to Gorgona Island, a former penal colony turned wildlife park where creatures have broken free from containment, to be hunted down by enthusiastic tourists. Aaron Stewart-Ahn – co-writer of *Mandy*, the Nicolas Cage psych-revenge masterpiece laced with DMT and demonology – reports from the end of days.

The wealthy man was demanding to examine the gun. Gonzo knew management was watching, and she was already in enough trouble. The number-one rule was to accommodate the guests' desires and, although instinctively she regretted it, the need to keep her job overrode her conscience. Impassively, she handed the squat bullpup over to the silver-haired man.

Gonzo stepped back to covertly shield the man's family. He was hoisting the gun up as if he knew what he was doing, but his finger was already over the trigger, violating the most basic firearm safety principles. Gonzo wondered if he even knew the implants in the gun and her arm wouldn't allow anyone other than her to fire it.

It was obvious from his clothes, his dialect and his attitude that this was a man who'd never had a day of compulsory service in his life. That aura of money had kept him out of the conflicts in Venezuela or Singapore or even Oakland. He had no scars, could only speak English. And the tattoos, like his neck-piece, were too much. Gonzo's military tattoos were hidden under her clothes, and she was self-conscious about the scar where they had reattached her arm, and how the skin over her prosthesis wasn't exactly the right shade, how hairless it was.

The man's spouse and child stayed behind Gonzo. The wife was agitated, rolling her eyes watching her husband's pantomime of a badass. The daughter was wide-eyed, maybe scared.

"What's this, an Indonesian MN77? What kinda ammo you packing? Six-point-eight-millimetre? Caseless?"

The wife sternly cut in, "This isn't one of your virt games, Breton. We're in a jungle. I think we should go back. It's dangerous."

"Daddy, what are you doing?"

"We're going hunting, dearest. A savage beast is on the loose. And your dad is good with a weapon," he said, smiling at his child.

Gonzo suppressed her anger as he waved the barrel of the gun around at the treetops. Her logo chimed and management was in her thoughts.

*Gonzalez. You're now on a tier-five. Containment is breached. Subject is in your vicinity. Lethal force required.*

Gonzo thought back: *I can capture it. I'm sure of it.*

*Danger is too great. Terminate immediately. Make sure to do a dead check, destroy brain and heart. We are sending a burn unit for cleanup.*

*What about the guests?  
The adult male is going to be trouble.*

"Hey, chica, you think I can let just a round or two off?" the man was fumbling with the slide lever.

*Checking... He's got VIP status.*

Gonzo held back the cursed 'fuck' that rolled through her mind, making sure she didn't broadcast it. VIPs were the worst.

"Breton, I think she's thinking with someone. I don't like it," said the wife.

Management spoke up in her mind: *We're dropping a waypoint in your vision. Take them in the airwolf. Have them sit tight while you terminate the escaped subject. You're authorised to give them loyalty reward points.*

*I'm telling you, this guy has no price.*

*Unlimited points. Comp them a visit to the birthing lab if you have to.*

That was new. She'd never been to the birthing labs. The guests were always rich; only the ultra-wealthiest could afford to travel by air. Whoever this family was, now she knew, they were *puntos ceros*. The .000 per cent, with reserves of money that made them distantly related species on an evolutionary tree. Her humanity wasn't on their level. She got up on the airwolf's standing platform and started up the electrical quad rotors.

*Your quarry is faster than you and on the move. Everyone in the Park is in danger while it's free. Its genetic signature has become too compatible with current mutations and we can't risk it going full carrier. You're the best chance we have of containment. If you fail, then we have an incident. The whole Park locks down. And you won't just be fired, we'll invoke the debtor clause in your contract. Do not fuck this up.*

She kept her thoughts offline again. In her retinas a thumbs-up jabbed at her and then the company logo flashed to end the chat. She composed herself, and tried to remember a time in her life, before the conflicts, before conscription, before the years in the camps, when she was briefly studying to be a paleontologist. At least she could bite



that enthusiasm, repurpose it. Maybe even make the kid feel OK. She had nothing against the kid.

"OK, gang! It's not every day visitors to the Park get to experience this exclusive VIP incitement. We're hunting. I'm gonna need you to get back in the airwolf and stay on board at all times. But I promise you a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"Let's go hunting!" The father surrendered the rifle, passing it to her dangerously by the barrel.

He reeked of bug-out adrenaline. He had paid all this money to come see the rarest of life and the thought of it being extinguished was an even greater thrill for him. Her bionic arm reprised soldiering muscle-memory and secured the rifle.

The little girl looked up at her with such pride and wonder she almost fell for it herself.

As she banked the airwolf around a grove of trees, she riffed off her intro, too well-rehearsed, trying not to sound bored. Sometimes the job was as much about acting as it was about being a park ranger. She went back in on Gorgona Island's history...

"A former penal colony turned wildlife reserve. During the conflicts it remained uninhabited, sitting empty off the coast of Colombia."

The rich woman interrupted. "You have incredible eyes."

"Ah, thanks."

"Where did you get them?"

"I didn't. My mother was a Paisa from Medellin. Dad was Korean. It's what I ended up with."

"Amazing... I've seen clinics try for that look, last spring, and they didn't even come close."

"Honey, let her drive the damn thing."

Gonzo pitched the 'copter up to clear some foliage and continued her monologue: "Anyway, after the prion pandemic rolled in, the island was completely empty..."

"Terrible tragedy. So much suffering," interjected the father.

"And after Venezuela, Progena bought the entire island. Here they would be able to use their radical gene manipulation, assisted by their nano AI assemblers, to achieve what had once been impossible, the stuff of dreams and legends... To resurrect a lost past, the wonders of nature lost forever."

time, before we lost them. Before we lost everything. I never, ever forgot that sound, but I forgot what it was like to see one."

The father only offered a slack, "I never saw one before. It's so small. It's incredible, the technology they must have to bring them back."

Gonzo caught the reflex, the flutter, the rapid ascension, as the tall grass bent wildly and downward, the sparrow already leaping into the sky and away on its wings. A predator was lurking.

She had the gun drawn and was already leaping down from the railings. "Stay here," she said. "Progena is offering you a chance to visit the birthing chambers. But only if you stay here. Do you understand?"

The father nodded, excited.

Gonzo crouched into the grass, following a path of bent stalks. She could hear the creature. It was ahead of her, rustling, evading.

*You are right on top of the subject. You had better nail this termination, Gonzalez. Management cutting into the silence of her mind. Hunting mode was instinct, silent, without words.*

She heard clanking metal and she knew that the family were leaving the airwolf. She held her breath and heard the father: "Let's check it out. We're never going to get in trouble."

For a moment, she hesitated. Follow her gun-barrel and proceed with the hunt, or try to get control of the family? The family could wait. She pressed on into the grass.

She led with her weapon, as the grass gave way to an embankment of beach sand. It would be hard to rely on her hearing, with the ocean waves seemingly coming from every direction. But then she saw tracks. Claws. She followed.

Further from shore, she heard the parents calling out for their daughter. Not good. She zoomed around with her implant eye, followed the heat signature of the tracks, and saw that they led to a palm tree. And there, the little girl was kneeling. Gonzo tucked the gun's stock over a forearm and sprinted towards her as fast as she could through the sand.

Under the soft, dusk-light shadows of the palm fronds, the girl had one hand out, wide-open. She was smiling. The gun was no use now, or she'd risk hitting the child. Gonzo approached cautiously.

Its hind legs were caked with sand and water. A droopy pink tongue fell out of its mouth, and the tracks led right to its paws. The dog whimpered, as if awaiting the child's touch. It tilted its head ever so slightly in a gesture of play and fondness. It was

a ridiculous-looking thing, with short legs and floppy ears and a coat of fuzzy fur.

"Don't move!" Gonzo hissed. But the girl couldn't resist, and her small hand was soon delicately tapping its black wet nose.

The dog rolled on to its back and its short limbs bent in the air. The girl was rubbing its tummy, and the dog's tongue fell downward in delight.

The parents came from the other direction, and the mother screamed. The father was refusing to even touch his daughter, shouting about infection.

*Gonzalez, status. Report. Dammit, Gonzalez, did the family make contact?!*

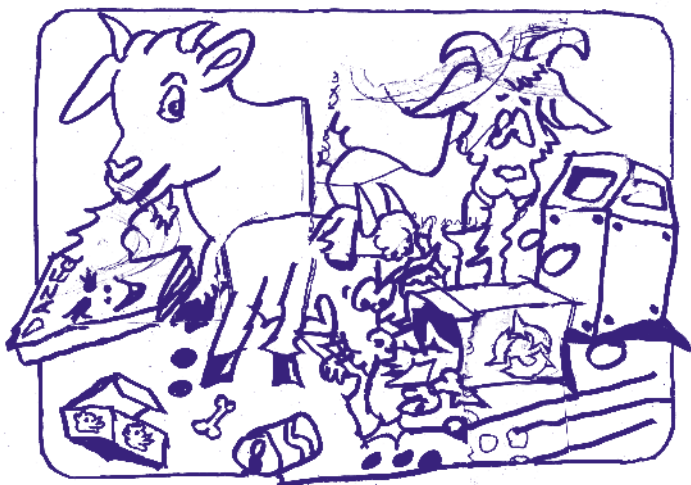
Gonzo's weight shifted in the sand, her prosthetic arm heaviest of all. She dropped the gun. The way her body settled, it felt like she might sink forever, her whole being might sink, until the tide came in and her head was buried beneath the lapping waves.

She remembered the chihuahua her mother had. The last dog she ever saw, until she came to work here, where Progena could keep clones of all the extinct animals alive for days at a time until the pervasive infection that was in the air and in the water got into their systems. There was an entire facility dedicated to euthanising and burning the cloned animals, before the new ones could come out as attractions for their few short days of life, until they, too, were corrupted. The burners would be coming soon.

After her mother had passed away from the prion disease, she spent a year alone in that apartment in Medellin, only nine years old. And the small dog always came to bed with her, dreamed next to her, little gasping howls and kicking legs in its sleep. Sometimes it would jump into her lap and almost seem to smile at her. The dog was her best friend. Then the constables came for her, and people in plastic suits came for her dog. She did her best to protect it, but she was only a child and they had guns, and after they shoved it away into a carbon sack she held on to some kind of innate rage and need to see an animal again, and decades later she could never afford to come to Progena's island, but she could work there.

She had failed. The child was touching the dog, bonding with it, and no doubt she was infected now.

With her failure came a kind of strange elation, the same exhilaration of watching the sparrow take flight. Something new. Something liberating. Watching the child pet the dog, violating the systems that had been put into place for the sake of humanity's survival, she felt something forbidden. She desperately longed for the order of things to change.



She felt sweat creeping out of the edges of her Progena baseball cap and took it off.

"Mommy, mommy, look!" said the girl, scrambling to the edge of the rails as her parents held her back. The father hushed his daughter. Gonzo set the airwolf down in silent mode.

Everyone was looking in the direction the girl had been so excited by. Nothing: only tall strands of wild grass swaying in ocean breezes.

"There... Look!" the child whispered-screamed.

Gonzo caught it. The grass bending ever so slightly. And then the sound.

The family gasped. Gonzo heard the mother sniffing. Tears were streaming from her eyes, her whole body convulsing.

Soft chirps. Birdsong.

A sparrow.

Its petite bird-toes wrapped around a thick blade of seagrass, head jerking in sharp, adorable rotations, notes emanating from its snubby beak.

"Mommy, isn't it beautiful...? Why are you so sad?"

The mother wrapped her arms around her child's shoulders, "I saw one once, when I was a girl. Just a little bit older than you. In a tree. In a park in Paris. Only that one

