

VIVA

LOST

VEGAS

A STORY ABOUT THE FUTURE, TELEPORTATION, AND
CONSEQUENCE

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The future ain't all it's cracked up to be for Parker Ludere and Benj Cave, two 2076's many, many ne'er-do-wells, and even after getting their hands on an honest to god teleporter it doesn't look like it's gonna get better any time soon.

While the wealthy have retreated to high rise community towers they never leave, Parker and Benj have been doing their bests to get by down on the streets of Las Vegas, but it ain't easy. Not only is Parkers relationship falling apart, their underground distillery's just been shut down by the cops and the tweaker that lives in shipping containers across the street just killed himself on their porch. They Really thought that getting their hands on a teleporter might be the key to turning their luck around but as it turns, things have just gotten so much more complicated.

Parker & Benj

The snow was a somber quiet falling over a city that looked so desperately like it wanted to kick up a fuss. It covered the streets like a frigid blanket and turned the dirt on the strip into a mirror for every flickering neon light. Las Vegans of any generation seemed to pride themselves on a lack of surprise, but

even the old ones, the ones who lived during the times of clubs and casinos would have lost their minds over an early November snow storm like this. A lot can happen in half a century though, and for most people in the year of our lord 2076 this was just another day in a world they couldn't believe still existed.

The night was growing colder and most people down at street level were ending their days, shuffling off to find either warmth or shelter for the night. Inside of Rusty's Night Bar Parker Ludere, who was fortunate enough to have found both, held a glass of his own home made liquor high above his head and attempted to give a speech in congratulations of himself.

"The world is changing at an incredible pace" He Proclaimed, precariously perched up on a barstool "People's needs and wants are altering quicker than I can keep up and most days I'm surprised I don't give myself a bloody nose just trying to comprehend it all. Luckily though there's one thing that has always stayed constant; Alcohol!"

There was a bravado to his voice that would lead anyone listening outside to believe that there might be a crowd of people surrounding him and hanging on his every word. In reality though it was just his friend mute friend Benj and the owner of the bar, Rusty. Neither of them were so much listening as they were waiting for him to finish so they could drink.

"Today, tomorrow, yesterday. 2076 or 1976, what people are always going to want is something to numb the pain caused by the abrasive nature of time. I'm very happy we can be the ones to provide a little anesthetic to ease the hurt. Cheers!"

They all raised their glasses, took their shots, and tried with all their might to keep the horrific rocket fuel down.

"Jesus Christ! Parker! This is awful!" Rusty barked as he spat what was he hadn't managed to swallow on to the floor of the bar.

"Smooth! I really like it!" Parker replied enthusiastically, while noticeably trying to prevent himself from gagging.

"Enough, i already paid you. Save the salesman shit for some other schmuck"

Rusty was an old grizzled man who looked like the product of a machine shop accident and a bear attack. Generally he was a nice guy but he'd earned himself the reputation of being somewhat hot headed. Rusty was old fashioned, and didn't take a single ounce of shit from anyone. Even at sixty-something years young he wouldn't hesitate to hop over the bar to beat the breaks off of anyone who acted-up at his bar. You don't keep a place like Night Bar open at street level for as long as he had by being soft, that's the sort of behavior that gets you killed.

After some pretty stiff haggling Rusty had agreed to pay Parker and Benj for the swill they'd cooked up in their basement so he could sell it at the bar. He was hoping that having some of the hard stuff on hand would drum up a bit of business for him. Bars down on the streets don't usually get to serve hard spirits anymore. Like most things of value after world war 3, spirits were a lot harder to come by and what did make it to market usually went straight up to bars in the high-rise communities. The towering apartment blocks that littered most cities in America now.

Apparently it's highly illegal to produce and sell hard alcohol without the proper licenses but standards & practices had significantly declined in the passing decades and it wasn't like the police were going to show up to a place like this. Cops generally only payed attention to what happened to rich people and their kind rarely came down out of their skyscrapers. Why would they? They had everything they could ever want for in a 70 story city block.

"You want another one, Benj?" Parker sarcastically asked his friend who had been noticeably

struggling more than the other two to keep the drink inside of him.

Benj scrunched his eyes closed behind thick, coke bottle glasses then mimed vomiting with explicit detail.(replace this with actual ASL description)

Benj didn't speak. Most of the time he didn't need to with Parker doing more than enough talking for the both of them. When he did need to say something though, he used sign language. It was something he'd started doing as a child when a certain trauma had left him, not unable to speak, but without the desire to do so.

Parker laughed, they certainly weren't master distillers.

The deal they'd struck up with Rusty kept the majority of the bills paid and left them with their monthly stimulus checks to use on little luxuries like hot water and the occasional night of distilled indulgence. They liked independently making their own money as neither of them could be described as 9-5 types, what with Benj being an aloof mute and Parker being, at times, slightly abrasive.

The monthly stimulus checks started in the late 40's during a gargantuan unemployment crisis the followed the war. At the time it looked like the government would've been perfectly happy to just let a decent portion of the population starve in a financial culling. They were on the ropes in terms of public opinion and decided to throw the people a little scrap of something. The stimulus checks helped quell what was about to be a full blown public uprising but population pretty much hated them universally from the moment they were introduced. It didn't matter which side of the argument you sat, they were either not enough to live on or just an incentive to stay jobless. Parker and Benj enjoyed the extra financial injection to their accounts and always did what they could to make a little extra. Building a pot still out of old car parts

and selling booze to the local watering hole had been their most recent stroke of genius.

"Nina would drink another one with me" Parker said to Benj using his girlfriends lead stomach to shame his friend.

"That woman could have probably drunk all three of us under the table" Rusty chimed in.

Her ability to drink more than the boys and still have enough wits about her to make sophisticated, ego damaging jabs at them for doing so was notorious.

Nina and Parker had been together for nearly 6 years but they'd all known each other since they were children. She'd grown up in the same part of Vegas as them but the moment she got the chance, she punched her ticket and joined the wealthy elite in the high-rises. Much to Parkers chagrin her chance came in the form of long term employment at the Las Vegas Police Department. Thankfully, she wasn't one of the thuggish beat cops that spent most of their time harassing the homeless people on the old strip with "less-lethal" force. Nina was a detective, and a good one at that. So good that Parker was forced to keep his proclivity for delinquent behavior to a bare minimum. She got it though. Nina knew how it could get down there and understood the things people sometimes needed to do to get by. That didn't mean she would've turned a blind eye to Parker and Benj becoming underground liquor Barons, which is why they had been trying their damndest to keep it as quiet as possible.

"Fine, I'll drink by myself! Rusty, rack me up one more"

"Whatever you want Parker but I'm charging you for this one." Rusty replied

"Charging me? I made the stuff!"

Parker had apparently been under the impression that because he'd made the liquor also meant that he'd be drinking it for free. This assumed perk was one of

his main reasons for starting the whole endeavor in the first place.

"Yeah, and then you sold it to me. If you want any of it back you gotta buy it, plus the cost of inflation. That's called economics."

Rusty shot a wink and a smug grin at Parker who scowled, but knew he had no chance of getting around Rusty on this.

"I'll pay you..." he said "...But you cost yourself a tip old man."

Rusty laughed as he poured.

"No one's tipped since the 50's, asshole"

Parker took the shot and immediately felt regret present itself in the form of saliva crawling across the roof of his mouth, the sure sign of a stomach that was trying to reject something that had just been put into it. The booze he and Benj made wasn't for the faint of heart, but the customers at Rusty's certainly weren't coming in to spend their hard earned money on nuanced flavors. They wanted exactly what Parker described in his speech. Anesthetic, something to numb the pain.

Night Bar wasn't a nice place. It was the kind of establishment where nothing worked right, every parking spot out front had an oil stain, and the bathrooms were teeming with bacteria so advanced and well developed it was surprising they weren't openly trying to communicate. They made liquor that perfectly went with the aesthetic. There was one upside to the place though, and that was the food.

In a world where anything you'd consider good was either scarce or reserved exclusively for the well-to-do, Rusty somehow managed to get his hands on ingredients that people like Parker had no business indulging in.

"Remember, If I find out you microwaved this, I'll show up at your house and break every single one of

"your fingers" He said handing Parker a bacon sandwich wrapped in brown paper "I'll break his fingers too, to prove my point"

Rusty didn't break eye contact with Parker but pointed aggressively at Benj who was visibly distressed by being dragged into this conflict.

"Jesus Rusty, take it easy!"

"I mean it. You know how hard this was to come by? It's not one of your late night cures for the munchies! Show it some goddamn respect!"

Parker reached to take the sandwich from him but he held tight, not letting go before reiterating himself one more time.

"Oven!"

He gave rusty a taunting grin as he tucked the food into the inner pocket of his denim jacket.

"Are you doing ok man? Have you been getting enough sleep?" He reached towards Rusty's forehead to check for a fever but was aggressively swatted away.

"Get out of my bar! Both of you"

That was their cue to leave.

The three men exchanged nods and Parker and Benj made their way out into the cold. By this point in the night the snow was really coming down and gave the city an insulated feeling.

Benj snapped his finger to get Parkers attention, then pointed to the sky.

"Yeah, it's snowing. What about it?" Parker responded as he zipped up his jacket.

In reply Benj drew a line across the back of his left hand with the middle finger of his right.

"It get's earlier every year man." He replied "... what a time to be alive"

Parker did his jacket up to his neck, flipped up the hood, and the two friends headed in the direction of home.

Home was 2 story 3 bedroom in one of the top five wealthiest neighborhoods in Las Vegas. At least that

was true 40 years ago. In 2076 it was one of the top five largest homeless encampments in the city and was affectionately known as "Lost Vegas". Living in an actual house put Benj and Parker in a minority around there.

Benj's parents died when he was in his early 20's and left him the house. Parker's mother had passed when he was in his early teens and Benj's family was so used to him being around that they just sort of absorbed him into their clan. They could've sold it and moved into one of the lower floors of the high rises but no place felt more like home to them. Plus it was only a ten-minute walk from Rusty's!

Most of the neighborhood's denizens were the kinds of people who had fallen through the cracks and been mostly forgotten by the world. Oddball types who didn't fit in anywhere else. As long as you could find an unoccupied space, all were welcome in Lost Vegas.

One of the other great things about having lived there for so long was that everyone around there knew them, they were locals! It's not like they could go out with the doors and windows unlocked but a little cordial recognition from some of the more intimidating groups of residents went a long way.

A local gang of plague doctors hovered around a few burning barrels as they turned the corner to their block and both parties exchanged casual nods.

It was a place filled with all manner of colorful characters with strange stories to tell but one of the more suspicious parties had been Mad Mike.

Mike lived in the dirt lot across from them. He'd just arrived one night a couple years prior along with two hulking great shipping containers which he appeared to call home. They named him Mad Mike because of the long once-white lab coat he was always wearing which made him look like some kind of scientist. He was regularly seen out in the lot around his containers in moments of what was assumed to be speed induced

distress. Mike would be cursing at the sky and destroying miscellaneous electronics right out in the open for all to see. The man was definitely mad, but he generally kept his madness confined to his own yard which is why Parker was very surprised to see Mike's big wiry frame pacing back and forth on their porch at 11pm.

Benj looked over at Parker with wide eyes and signed the letters WTF while mouthing the word each letter stood for as definitively as he could.

Despite the brief lapse in digestive fortitude Parker had acquired a rather pleasant buzz from the drinks they'd had and was less than enthused with the idea of having to pass a final boss before he could dissolve into couch.

Cautiously Parker started to walk up the path to their house leaving Benj at the gate. Mike was muttering to himself and hadn't acknowledged either of them.

"Hey, Mike. Whatcha up to?" Parker called to him.

His tone was calm and non combative. He was doing his best to be polite; after all, life deals some people a crueler hand than others and Parker would be lying through his teeth if I ever tried to claim he'd never found himself very confused and in a strange place before.

Mike didn't look well. His eyes were sunken into the cavernous sockets of his massive skull which gave him a real defined i-might-die-if-i-don't-sleep-soon look. There was something dark all over the white t-shirt he was wearing. Parker wasn't sure if that was related to this specific circumstance or just how he usually wore it. This was the first time he'd seen him without his lab coat.

"Hey! Mike!" Parker said with a little more volume which finally got Mad Mike's attention.

Like the wind carried him, he glided down the three small steps of the porch and before Parker knew

what was happening Mike was clutching him at the shoulders with his big boney hands. It startled Parker to see a man Mike's size move so quickly and triggered something that might've been parallel to claustrophobia. The surprise left him spending more time thinking about how he should be reacting than actually reacting and eventually just found himself staring up into the big bloodshot eyes of the man. Parker wasn't small, easily clearing 6'2 with his boots on but Mike towered over him.

"They can't have it! You hear me!? Do you understand?"

Parker did not understand. Not even slightly. Mike's words were frantic and barely above a whisper but the urgency to them made up for a lack of volume. Parker had no clue how to respond.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?" Mike yelled downwards at parker. Tiny flecks of saliva splattering on his bewildered face.

The man smelled terrible. Like rotten soybeans that had been soaked in turpentine. Parker could almost feel the odor coating his skin, sinking into his clothes like thick cigarette smoke.

"Mike, did you – you know... do something?" Parker asked coyly.

He was tiptoeing around asking "Mike, what drugs have you done" directly.

By 2076 drugs had been invented that let a person perpetuate a lucid dream for as long as they wanted. They could build a personal paradise in their subconscious so realistic that users would forget to wake up to eat, frequently dying of starvation if left unsupervised. Despite these wondrous advances, this kind of behavior was, In Parkers experience, usually brought on by good old fashioned crystal meth. The classics never really went out of style.

"Do something? DO SOMETHING?" Mike boomed.

He was clearly agitated at the suggestion that he might not be of a completely sober disposition but Parker gained a sliver of satisfaction knowing that the man was responsive.

"I did the math! The fucking math!" Mike continued. Letting go of Parker to look skyward and addressing the falling snow.

He brought his big skeletal hands to his head pressing their heels into his eyes and continued to ramble with varying levels of agitated paranoia.

No longer in the clutches of the huge and unstable man Parkers sense of self preservation began to return to him and he noticed how much of his pleasant drunkenness had depreciated during the encounter – and how annoyed he was by the whole thing.

Mike turned around and looked at Parker with the first signs of real clarity he'd shown since they'd gotten back to the house. He took a harsh sounding breath through his teeth before dropping down to his knees right at Parkers feet and began whimpering. Suddenly he had transformed from unpredictable and possibly violent into something sort of pathetic.

Parker looked back over his shoulder at Benj who had backed completely out of the yard at this point.

"Go inside and call Nina. I'm through with this tweaker and I want to go eat my sandwich"

He'd said call Nina and not call the police because the police didn't come to Lost Vegas, at least not to help anyone. A call to Nina would bring the presence of police without actually giving a band of chaos thirsty lunatics a pass to come in guns blazing. A squad car and some flashing blue lights could usually bring an end to a situation like this in seconds. It was a card Parker didn't like to play very often because despite literally being in bed with the cops, openly flaunting the affiliation would only harm their good standing with the neighborhood. It was too late though. In the

distance Parker began to hear the scream of sirens heading towards them.

Mad Mike looked up at Parker, grabbing at the hem of his jacket with a pleading look in his eyes. It was like he'd become a whole new version of himself.

"It works... I promise you it works. But please..." Mike begged again "They. can't. have it."

Mike paused, looking in the direction of the sirens.

"LOOK, man I don't know what the fuck you're talking about but..."

Before Parker could finish the sentence Mad Mike had reached into his back pocket, produced a small knife and without any hesitation slit his own throat wide open.

"JESUS! FUCK!" Parker screamed, reflexively trying to pull away but his jacket was still locked in the very literal death grip of Mike's left hand.

Immediately, there was blood everywhere. It flowed steadily from the fresh wound and soaked into Mike's stained shirt quickly turning the few patches still visibly white to crimson. It spilled onto the floor and all over Parkers pants and boots. He looked down at Mike and saw his lips moving like he'd suddenly remembered he had something else to say, but all Parker could hear was choking sounds and nauseating gurgling. Parker felt Mike push something into his jacket pocket before he crumpled in a heap at his feet. A dark pool began to extend around the two of them. Benj attempted to get Parkers attention by clapping his hands together loudly 3 times. He turned around and looked at him, but Parker wasn't there. The reaction was an answering machine. Just a prerecorded message to inform a caller that the lines were still connected but there was no one available to answer at that moment, please leave a message. Benj couldn't do anything. After a minute or two Parker started walking towards him but his steps lacked intention. There was a

lethargic sway to his body as it went on autopilot and his consciousness descended inside himself.

He watched his body move from the outside and wondered how long he'd been in that yard? Did a suicide effect the speed of perception? He thought about time in a conspiratorial sense. Like it was a funny thing, not funny "haha" funny, just funny like there was something off about it.

Benj clapped again, but Parker couldn't have heard the sounds if they were right against his head. All Parker experienced was everything was going dark, and then everything getting darker, until all he saw was blackness.

Parker.

In June of 2055 a rancher in Montana awoke one morning to find his entire stock of cattle dead in their field. Not just dead, the animals were rotting like they'd been left out there for weeks. He wasn't alone, over the course of a month huge swaths of the world's livestock abruptly began to die from what they learned was a virus that killed quickly then caused sudden and rapid necrosis. It began with cows but quickly spread to pigs and while it was never shown to affect any other species people weren't taking any chances. Just the suggestion that something this aggressive could be transferred to humans sent the world into total panic and by January of 2056 veganism was the way of the world. Farmers tried everything they could to hook a dying industry up to life support machines but even attempts at 'bubble farming' left them with dead animals.

It wasn't just people's diets that were affected, the death of cattle farming sent ripples throughout every facet of daily life. One industry gravely

affected was the garment industry, particularly leather which was forced to cease production almost immediately. Leather products quickly became coveted items for the wealthy. A beaten up, broken-in leather jacket from the 20's could easily sell for thousands of dollars by 2076. A sturdy pair of leather boots? Something like that was basically priceless. This is precisely why when Parker came-to in the back of the ambulance he found himself in a state of unbridled aggression in response to Nina attempting to remove his prized leather boots from his feet.

"YOU CAN HAVE THEM WHEN YOU CUT THEM FROM MY COLD DEAD CORPSE NINA!" Parker snapped at her loud enough to make several of the EMT's and cops working the scene turn and look.

Of course he hadn't paid anything extravagant for them. He actually claimed that he couldn't remember where he'd gotten them, something Nina regularly speculated was a lie hiding the nefarious details of their acquisition.

"Stop being such a fucking baby! They're covered in blood Parker, it's disgusting!"

She was wearing rubber gloves that went up to her elbows and was trying desperately to keep his feet away from her face.

Parker and Nina had an unusual relationship. Anyone who viewed them from the outside would almost certainly say they had no business being in a romantic relationship, let alone one that had lasted as long as theirs had. Even outside of their professional differences they were like oil and water, rarely having anything in common outside of one simply enjoying the presence of the other, that's what made it so special.

Parker, now slightly more lucid, looked down at his feet to see that they were in fact covered in blood and that it was also quite disgusting. Seeing sense, he

relented and pried them off by dragging the heel against the snowy asphalt.

"do you know how hard those were to get?" Parker remarked as Nina tossed them into a black plastic bag.

"No..." she replied with an eyebrow raised "...your memory always seems to fail you whenever it's brought up"

Nina wasn't a tall woman but carried herself like she stood at seven feet. She had crystal clear olive skin and wore raven black curls that rarely saw freedom outside of a tight bun, just like her clothes, they were neat and organized. A glimmer of a smile crept onto her face as she briefly let herself enjoy catching Parker in an untruth.

"Where's Benj?" He asked, intentionally diverting the topic.

"Metro needs the scene for a couple of hours. I made some calls and got you guys a hotel for the night. He was pretty excited. When I told him you'd be just coming back to my place he drove right over to check out the amenities. I guess he wasn't quite as rattled as you were." Nina said with a wink, teasing him slightly.

She wasn't trying to be mean, she knew he'd just been through something awful. She also knew that distraction was the best tactic when it came to comforting Parker and if she could shift his focus away from what he'd just witnessed and on to some playful ribbing with her, he would be all the better for it.

Parker raised 2 exacerbated hands up in front of him
"He was right in front of me Nina! He touched me! I saw the knife!"

Nina ignored his blood stained clothes and wrapped her arms around him, muffling his words in her chest

"I know baby, I know. I know. Let's get you home and cleaned up, yeah?"

Parker exaggerated his hurt feelings, pouting and nodding his head as he looked out of their embrace back

across the yard. Flashing lights from the ambulance bathed the scene in blue and red, casting shadows of emergency workers that danced against the side of the house. Parker watched them shuffle around the yard dropping little paper tents at points of investigative interest; the patch of dark snow where Mad Mike's body had fallen, the trail of crimson footprints, and the lightly stained pink snow they led to where Parker had collapsed. They Marked the porch steps where he and Benj had first seen Mike. Parker suddenly caught himself hoping they wouldn't go inside the house.

"I need to go inside and get some shoes" he said, standing up in bare feet that were already too cold to notice being any colder.

It was true, he did need something to wear but he also wanted to lock the basement door, where he and Benj stored the still that powered their illegal liquor business.

"You can't" Nina replied "not until they're finished. You have shoes at my place, until then you can wear these..."

Nina turned around with what was for Parker, entirely too much enthusiasm. She was holding two baby blue things that looked a lot like little shower caps and handed them to Parker. He looked at them disdainfully then slipped them over his bare feet with all the excitement of a man being led to the gallows.

"Hey," said Nina as they ambled arm in arm to the car "When did Benj start carrying around a briefcase?"

Parker halted at the question. To his knowledge Benj didn't own a briefcase and definitely hadn't had one that night.

"What are you talking about?" He asked.

"Yeah, he scurried off with this little silver briefcase. it was adorable!"

Parker narrowed his eyes and tried to remember ever seeing Benj with a case matching Nina's description but

found that he lacked the ability to dig through thoughts with any real reliability at that point in the evening and just dismissed it.

"ah, you know Benj, always so mysterious" he said with a shrug as they got in the car.

Parker looked back at the house through the snow and his mind flashed back to Mike glaring down at him.

"They can't have it" His voice echoed in Parker's thoughts.

He shook his head trying to clear his mind like an etch-a-sketch, wanting nothing to do with those memories.

"You ok?" Nina asked placing her hand on his thigh.

"Yeah," he said "Let's just get out of here".

Nina's apartment wasn't a penthouse but on her salary she could afford a decent place midway up a high-rise with a nice view. Parker liked it there. He didn't love it, all the luxury was a little too much for him, but he did enjoy his vacations up into the towers. Parker was very attached to life at street level, in particular to his home in Lost Vegas. The neighborhood It was all he'd ever known and it gave him an identity. When someone asked him about what he did for a living? He didn't say that he was unemployed, or between jobs as Nina preferred, Parker could simply tell someone that he was from Lost Vegas and they didn't need to know anything else. They knew who he was. The accuracy of their assumptions being correct wasn't something Parker concerned himself with. If someone chose to believe he was a ruthless killer or strung out junkie just because of where he decided to call home, that was their problem. Parker liked his life and he wasn't about to change just because of what other people thought about it. Of course, it would've been nice to not have to swipe his cash card any time he wanted to run hot water, but extravagancies like

that were what his visits to Nina's place were for.

Just like there were people who'd never set foot outside of their High-rise, there were people from the streets who'd never been inside of one. They weren't supposed to be there and multiple times a week the exact same security guard at the front desk would stop him and make him wait, insisting he up and confirm that Parker was supposed to be there. "You can never be too careful" he'd tell Nina while she berated him down the phone so loudly Parker could hear everything she was saying. Each time he'd stand with a shit eating grin on his face as the security guard eventually apologized and granted him access to their gated kingdom in the sky.

It only took a small glimpse at how the wealthy lived up there to see why people rarely left. Why would they? There were shops, parks, movie theaters and bars, everything a person could want to help them forget that the rest of the world is basically on life support.

Nina had taken a phone call from work, leaving Parker alone with his thoughts. Without her distraction the scene with Mike kept playing over and over in his mind. Not in its entirety but in sudden flashes. One moment his mind would be clear then, like a cheap jump scare in a b-rated horror movie, he'd see the knife gliding through the skin. His imagination had already begun to sensationalize the fountain of blood that poured from Mike's neck and the memory became more harrowing each time he played it back.

in hopes of slowing down his thoughts Parker had poured himself a healthy amount of something nice from Nina's home-bar and tried to relax. He gazed out of the floor to ceiling windows hoping the ocean of twinkling lights that sprawled out around the tower would hypnotize him and help him focus on something else.

Parker always thought it was so crazy that these casinos had all been closed for nearly 30 years but the city still lit them up every night. There were no more craps tables or roulette wheels, that had all been replaced by giant industrial machines and teams of people who worked day and night to keep the lights on and maintain facade. They did everything in their power to try to keep things the way they used to be no matter what the cost or sacrifice was.

As history told it, the world had lost its collective mind during the twenties and everything just started to fall apart. America's fall began when there was suddenly celebrities and social media stars in political offices they had no business being in. It was as if people were voting based on box office numbers.

Everything had started to come undone while a group of old men behind the scenes just let it happen and watched their bank accounts fill up. They probably all had more money than they could ever spend in a lifetime. More than enough to help the world multiple times over but instead the old misers counted their coins while the world was set ablaze.

There was an American civil war that kicked off a world war and after that it was a free-for-all. Before anyone with half a brain got into a position to restore some order everything had gotten so bad people were just fighting over scraps. Somehow after all that, the people of Las Vegas decided its best course of action was to work their fingers to the bone to keep the glittering city of sin shining bright, determined to make it look like none of it ever happened.

Parker eyes lost focus, entranced by the lights, and when he was almost about to let the glass he was holding slip from between his fingers he heard Nina's voice boom from the other side of the apartment shattering the calm.

"WHAT THE FUCK PARKER!?" She yelled.

Parker's fingers clenched around the glass before a single drop of liquid spilled to the carpet.

"Are you fucking kidding me with this shit!?" She continued.

He could hear her striding down the hallway from the bedroom to the living room and by the sound of it, she was letting her cop side show. Never a good sign.

Parker panicked, quickly shuffling through the mental rolodex of indiscretions he had committed over the past week trying to figure out what could cause her to be this angry.

He didn't have to wait long for answers.

"You idiots built a still? You built an illegal still in your basement so you could sell liquor to Rusty?"

The accusations were coming in too fast for Parker to form solid responses. He briefly considered just playing dumb or maybe hanging Benj out to dry? Neither were good options so he decided to try the truth – some of it, anyway.

"Whoa, Whoa, whoa... Yeah we built a pot still. It beat paying bar prices, but selling it to Rusty? That's ridiculous" Parker spoke with what he hoped was total confidence.

Nina took a deep breath in through her nose and closed her eyes. Holding the moment to briefly collect herself before she resumed dismantling him.

"Parker, you made labels! They found everything. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Each time Parker would open his mouth to respond he found himself unable to find words. He was very much aware that there were no excuses and that he'd been caught but that didn't stop him frantically rummaging through his mind palace of bullshit to try and find some. This frustrated Parker. As with most people who invest time into questionable activities, he hated getting caught.

"Why the fuck were they in the house?" He asked, letting probably too much of his frustration show in his tone.

This upset Nina even further.

"Because a wanted lunatic slit his throat on the property! And it was a crime scene! And they're the police! Jesus Parker, how could you be so stupid?"

She baited him with a brief opening but continued the second it looked like he might try to speak again.

"Do you know how this makes me look? They think I've been covering for you!"

There was a long and tense silence that followed. Parker stood very still and let the it hang heavy in the air trying to understand where things were supposed to go next. When she didn't continue to speak he made the incredibly foolish decision to step towards her, raising his arms as if to embrace her. She did not reciprocate. The slightest tilt of her head and widening eyes informed him he had gravely misread the silence.

"I could lose my job Parker!" She said , there was a slight crack to her voice "Did you even once think about me? How doing something like that could affect me? You might be fine living down there with bums and tweakers but I'm not! I'm not going back to Lost Vegas Parker!"

She hit a nerve. Parker knew that it was the wrong time to start trying to defend himself in any way but he couldn't stop it.

"Oh 'cause you're so fucking superior to us? Hiding up here in your tower? You're a slum baby Nina, just like us!"

The words felt tangible as they left his mouth. Like if he'd inhaled hard enough or quickly bitten down he would have been able to stop them from reaching her ears.

At first she didn't answer. She just stood there looking at him. Then her expression shifted, micro

movements in her face telling him a story of hurt, disbelief, and disgust.

"Get out of my house" Nina said flatly.

The tone of her voice sent a chill down Parker's spine.

"I need to change, I still have blood all over me" Parker replied with childlike defiance

"I don't give a shit, get out of my house." She said, turning and pointing at the door.

Parker thought about speaking again but as he looked into Nina's eyes he knew that was probably the worst thing he could have done. So he picked up his coat, pushed his feet into an old pair of tennis shoes by the door, and left without saying another word.

Parker & Benj

When Parker arrived at the hotel he found Benj in the lap of luxury. It had taken a significant amount of time for him to answer the door and when he did he was wearing a white fluffy bathrobe with the matching slippers. Benj's eyes were a little vacant and there was small, but very noticeable grin on his usually stoic face.

"There better be some of that mini bar left for me you little lush" Parker said as he pushed past Benj to get a look at the room.

It was a nice place, not too nice, but nice enough. The kind of hotel that sold you a cheap room but charged you for everything else. Soap, towels, turning on the TV. This place in particular even charged for toilet paper by the square. Something like the mini bar would generally always be left untouched because anyone who could afford a \$20 beer would be staying somewhere much nicer than this, but with LVPD picking up the tab Benj had clearly been taking advantage. Parker couldn't

help but think about the cops laughing at them, knowing this would be their last taste of good living before having to go back to the slums of Lost Vegas the next day. He still didn't know what had become of their pot still but he doubted they'd be making this week's delivery to Rusty's.

Parker quickly noticed Benj's wet hair and a curious smell of perfume.

"Did you take bubble bath?" Parker asked.

Benj tousled his damp hair and bashfully tried to avoid eye contact.

"Hey, no judgment. I do it every time Nina leaves me alone at her place"

At the sound of her name Benj offered Parker a consoling look.

"Don't worry about it..." Parker replied "...really. It's fine. We're fine."

In reality he wanted to pour his guts out and tell Benj all about. Parker had felt a looming dread for some time now about how the rather vast disparity in he and Nina's social standings was affecting their relationship. He'd let paranoia get the better of him and had been waiting for the other shoe to drop on the whole thing.

"It's just that I'm from down here, and she's..." Parker paused and pointed up at the ceiling "...she's up there"

Benj looked at the ground and didn't say anything. He wanted to tell Parker that what he'd just said was ridiculous and had nothing to do with his and Nina's problems, but he also knew pointing it out in that particular moment wouldn't have helped anything. Instead he produced mini bottles of something called Epiq Vodka and handed one to Parker. Apparently the hotel was sponsored by the liquor and nearly everything in the room bore the logo of the company. They tapped the little plastic bottles together and knocked back their contents.

"Oh, that's terrible!" Parker remarked looking at the bottle. It was cheesecake flavored.

Benj, who was apparently fond of Key Lime Pie just shrugged then tilted his open hand from side to side

"You know what? Fuck it!" Parker announced as he grabbed another couple bottles and tossed one to Benj having now made a decision about the course of their night "I think this might be our last opportunity to have any fun for a while. Tonight we have hotel room and an open tab being paid for by the fucking police. That's basically the same as winning the lottery, or getting into heaven! Real problems can wait till the sun comes up! Get me one of those fucking robes!"

Benj's face lit up, and the pair drank heavily into the night.

The following morning Parker woke up to the sound of knocking in a way that felt like he'd just been resurrected. His jaw was stiff and his neck was sore from sleeping on the couch. As he squinted around the mess they'd made of the room through a rapidly progressing hangover, Parker found himself quite relieved the police had provided them with somewhat of an airlock. Somewhere to blow off some steam before having to return to their regularly scheduled squalor.

The knocking continued and Parker mentally thanked the person on the other side of the door for syncopating their knocks with the throbbing of his headache. Had they been out of time the pain might have sent him into some kind of seizure. Obviously that idea was both irrational and completely impossible but he hadn't yet reached a level of being conscious that allowed for reasonable thoughts.

After a small search Parker found Benj in the bathtub where he was making use of a majority of the rooms bedding and sleeping like a baby. His glasses were missing but had been replaced by a replica pair Parker had insisted he draw on to prevent him looking

like a total stranger whilst they searched for his actual glasses which were, as Parker could see right now, in the breast pocket of the robe he was still wearing.

Parker kicked the bathtub.

"Wakey Wakey my child. Time to rejoin the land of the living"

Benj opened his eyes and wore a look of abject terror before pulling blankets completely over his face.

"Not a chance boy, if I've gotta live this hell, then you have to do it with me. It's one of the perks of being my friend!"

Parker started to laugh but winced when his headache reminded him that enjoying anything was currently out of the question.

The pounding at the door resumed and didn't cease until Parker yelled to inform them that he would be right there.

From the ferocity of the knocking he had expected to see a giant with arms like tree trunks but was quite shocked upon opening the door to find the complete opposite. Their wake up call had been provided by an aggressively small woman wearing a name tag that read "HI MY NAME IS... Candi", each letter was written in a different color and she'd dotted the lowercase I with a small heart. Candi couldn't have been much younger than 60 and had skin that looked as though she'd spent every moment of her waking life in direct sunlight. What Candi lacked in stature and hydrated skin she compensated for with the 2 sawn-off shotguns holstered on either side of her hips. Each one of the wooden stocks were covered in colorful hand drawn hearts and peace symbols. She spoke with all the finesse of a chainsaw.

"Check out was 45 minutes ago. You two gotta go!"

"Yeah, yeah..." Parker say dismissively, leaning on the door frame "...we'll be out in 30 minutes"

Candi, amused that Parker believed he had an option, smiled and rested her hands on the butts of her holstered guns.

"You'll be out right fuckin' now" She said, somehow managing to achieve threatening with minimal effort.

There was something about Candi that seemed entirely unpredictable and a part of Parker's brain told him that this was not a woman he wanted to test. She leaned on her hip wearing an expression that screamed "Try me"

"Did I say 30 minutes? I am SO sorry. I meant 30 seconds"

Parker and Benj quickly began to scrabble up their belongings but when Parker lifted his jacket up from off of the desk he saw something that caused him to stop for a moment. Under the Jacket was the silver case Nina had mentioned the previous night.

"Benj, what the fuck is this?" He asked.

Benj looked up from stuffing the hotel towels into his bag and casually drew circles around his ear with his index finger. The short hand sign for Mad Mike.

Parker froze. The dead mans words drifted in through the fog that was surrounding his brain

"...They can't have it."

"Why do you have this?" Parker snapped at Benj who looked a little startled by his tone.

He picked up the case and examined it. The smooth aluminum surface bore the symbol of a snake eating its tail along with the words Itinerant Solutions. The name and symbol both looked familiar but he was unable to place exactly where he'd seen it before.

"Times up ladies!" Candi chimed in before he could grill Benj any further about it.

Parker filed the case in his memory under things-to-talk-about-later as they hurried out of the room before Candi could show them what those two shot guns were loaded with.

When they got to the truck and Benj tossed Parker the keys and explained via the medium of mime that it

was very possible his need to vomit would soon supersede his ability to drive. Parker wasn't feeling much better than Benj but it was fine, he liked driving, even this heap of junk. It also presented him with the opportunity to mess with his friend a little. By this point the joke was as worn as old shoes but every time Parker was in the driver seat of the car he would lock the door as Benj was reaching for the handle, locking and unlocking every time he would try again. He always wondered if it would ever get so frustrating that Benj would speak actual words but his response to this kind of behavior was just apathy and after 3 attempts at the door Benj just leaned against the truck with his arms folded until Parker opened it for him. He stoically climbed inside and refused to acknowledge Parker's existence for the entire drive home.

By the time they'd gotten home through the mid day traffic the previous night's snow had mostly melted. Slushy piles of dirt pushed against curbs were all that remained from the snowfall of the night before. The swift disappearance of the snow wasn't any more unusual than the snowfall itself, the weather had just come to be like that.

A bright burst of afternoon sun was trying with all its might to burn away the clouds as Parker and Benj pulled up to the house. Even from the street they could see where the melting snow had mixed with blood leaving behind a coagulated crimson sludge on the path. Parker was hit with another gruesome flashback as soon as he laid eyes on it. His heart raced and he felt tiny beads of sweat begin to dew his forehead. Benj noticed Parker's discomfort and placed a hand on his friends shoulder.

"you ok?" He signed

"Yeah... Yeah." Parker said. Uncertainly at first then confirming with more conviction.

They pulled down the yellow caution tape that gift wrapped the house and gave a path a wide berth as they walked to the porch. The doors had been left open, both of them shook their heads at the police's complete lack of consideration.

Parker had been expecting the inside of the house to look like a war zone but upon walking in He was pleasantly surprised at the state they'd left the place in. While every single drawer and cabinet had been left wide open. They certainly hadn't been shy, but they hadn't totally flipped the place either.

Parker assumed they'd been afforded a little professional courtesy thanks to Nina.

Benj snapped his fingers and pointed at the basement door which was hanging wide open just like everything else.

Parkers heart dropped.

"You go. I can't bear to look at it" he said.

The pot still they'd built had been imagineered over drinks one night at Rusty's several months ago. The idea stemmed from an interaction Parker observed Rusty having with a local character named Lenny.

At some point or another, everyone's met someone like Lenny. A Person that just always happens to be around while not being too tight with any particular group of people – ultimately on account of them not being very likable. They generally only possess the one redeeming quality of somehow always having a way to get you something you need, specifically when you need something of a more obscure or iniquitous nature. They aren't specifically a drug dealer, this kind of person is just a peddler of nefarious wares who you learn to stomach because they've somehow managed to wedge themselves between you and a thing you want. Lenny was fully aware of his social standing and because of it, seemed to have doubled down on many of his near

intolerable personality traits because he knew you'd eventually need his help with something.

"Buuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuddy" Parker heard him say to Rusty.

'Buddy' was a word Lenny used so frequently that Parker and Benj had speculated it may have been a Tourettes tic. He would insert it in a sentence wherever possible, sometimes even in places where it shouldn't have been possible. As time went on he'd began elongating the U in the word and would sometimes let it go on so long he'd have to take a new breath before he could continue a sentence.

"This is grade A, quality product. It's worth every penny!" Lenny said in earshot of Parker.

He had been trying to sell rusty an entire case of vodka that had "fallen off the back of a truck". It was real, brand name vodka, but he wanted an absurd amount of money for it. The whole reason bars at street level rarely sold anything other than beer or wine was the prohibitive costs. The other side of the coin was that if he'd bought the case and the product happened to be popular he'd probably wind up disappointing any new clientele he'd gained because of it when Lenny inevitably couldn't supply him with anymore. Customer rapport and your reputation was everything at street level.

Rusty tried reasonably to make a deal but Lenny wasn't budging even a little. So he told him to go kick rocks.

The kid strutted out the front door with his case of booze and that was the end of it, but it gave Parker an idea. What if he could off Rusty a steady supply of liquor each month at reasonable price that benefitted all parties?

And so the idea was born.

The next month Parker and Benj called in several hefty favors and spent their entire stimulus checks putting the pot still together. After every trial runs and a brief scare that whatever they'd made was causing

temporary blindness, they nailed down the process and started weekly deliveries to Rusty's Night Bar.

Despite the illegal nature of the business, and that it probably would have been a death blow to he and Nina's relationship, Parker was beyond proud of the accomplishment they'd achieved. It was more just a clever way to always have liquor at the house. This meant not having to scrape by on the government's stimulus handouts. The still had provided them with a little Independence. Which is why when Parker eventually worked up the courage to head down to the basement and see what the cops had done to it, he completely lost his mind.

"FUCK!" Parker yelled so hard his vision swam slightly.

"FUUUUUUCCCKKKK!" This time screamed like he didn't care if he would ever talk again.

The pot still had been destroyed. Not just destroyed, it looked as though the police had methodically leveled the equipment to the point it barely resembled what it had been as car parts.

A tsunami of colorful language erupted from Parker until words no longer provided the kind of catharsis he desired. After deciding he needed something more tangible, Parker swung a leg back to punt a piece of the busted machine like he was trying to kick a field goal from the end zone.

With all the grace of a landslide Parker missed whatever he was aiming for and the velocity of his kick carried his entire body into the air – and then down onto his back knocking the wind completely out of his.

Benj watched it happen as if it was in slow motion. He gazed down at his fallen friend like he was watching someone regress back to a stage of human evolution that preceded thinking man. For a person who never spoke, Benj's expressions could be incredibly wordy. Parker punched and kicked at the dirt floor while he coughed and choked, trying to gather breath back inside

of himself until Benj had seen enough. He snapped his fingers as loud as he could and angrily pointed to the steps that led up and out of the basement. He wore the face of a disappointed parent.

Benj had known Parker long enough to know when he needed to be sent to bed and this was one of these times. He was tired, hungover, and now furiously angry. He was no help to anyone.

Upstairs, Parker poured himself a drink and went to front porch so he could get some fresh air and feel stupid about his temper tantrum. He shot the liquor back in one and immediately realized it was the worst thing he could've done when his body quickly responded with a painful burning sensation. He flailed around like a clown in an exaggerated pantomime of how bad the liquid felt traveling through him until he wound up hunched over the side of the porch looking at the gravel watching long thick ropes of saliva drip from his mouth.

Parker tried to center himself. To find a calm place where he could ignore the burning in his stomach and the pounding in his head. He wanted to live, just for a moment, in an area of his psyche that had yet to be permeated by the tribulations of the past 24 hours. The block was strangely quiet and Parker tried to focus on the wind, or the distant hum of traffic, But at the same moment he felt himself approaching something that might have resembles serenity it was shattered by the shrill beeping of a semi backing up across the street. It wasn't peace, but at least it was something new to be upset about.

"What the ACTUAL fuck!?" Parker yelled as he hoisted himself upright to see Mad Mikes containers being lifted by crane up onto the back of a flatbed.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The man had been dead for less than a day! His blood was literally still on the ground and the city was already trying to make it look as though he'd never even existed.

Parker didn't know Mike, he couldn't have even pretended to know him. Mike was just a walking halloween decoration that lived across the street and occasionally entertained him by public battling anger management. He had no idea why Mike had decided to spend his last moments on earth with him. Maybe he just happened to live across the street during a moment of desperation? Maybe it was a calculated decision? Parker didn't know, but he figured any answers he might've been able to find to those questions were loaded on to the back of a truck headed off towards the nearest landfill.

Something all of a sudden felt off about what he was seeing. He noticed that the crew of guys clearing the lot didn't look at all like they were from the city. Instead of dirty coveralls and work gloves they were wearing leather jackets and dark wrap around sunglasses. These guys couldn't in any way have looked any more suspicious in their misinformed attempt to be inconspicuous. Then it occurred to Parker that he didn't think the city even came into Lost Vegas to do things like clear up vacant lots, they didn't even get regular trash pick up! Every two weeks they'd load up Benj's truck and take it all to the dumpster around the back of Rusty's, he hated it. Even if the city was compassionate enough to help them with waste disposal Parker was almost certain they wouldn't hire 6 foot tall white guys with fresh cuts and perfectly fitted clothes to do it.

Something didn't add up – and then he saw the logo on the back of the container. Itinerant Solutions.

Mike's memory whispered to him.

He heard the anxiety and the panic. The man had been so rattled that he decided his only option was to kill himself. Until now Parker had chalked it up to drug induced paranoia – and maybe it had been, but as Parker looked at the symbol of the snake eating its own tail

and the group of shady characters quickly making sure there was nothing of Mikes left for anyone to investigate he found himself genuinely starting to believe that there was something much bigger going on.

"BENJ!" Parker yelled louder than he had down in the basement "BENJ GET UP HERE!"

Immediately he heard the sound of quick footsteps scrambling up the stairs and then saw Benj appear in the doorway, slightly winded.

"Where's that case? The one you said was Mad Mike's" Parker said frantically.

Benj pointed to the kitchen table where the case sat in plain view bearing the exact same logo Parker had just seen on Mike's container. Itinerant Solutions.

Parker wanted the case to answer questions. To tell him why he watched a man die. Maybe offer a glimpse into the reason why he had to spend the remainder of his days on this planet aware of the temperature of blood as it exits the body via a self inflicted throat wound. He was certain that whatever was inside would connect the dots to what exactly was going on, that it would unravel a mystery. So, quicker than you can say 'Reasonable Caution', Parker popped the latches and opened it up, but what he found didn't even slightly resemble what he'd been looking for.

"What is this? A joke?"

It was a cell phone. The same sleek, touch screen device that had reached its visual zenith in the early 2000's and hadn't changed since. Parker picked the phone up up and examined it. Down to the single push button on the side for power it was just like the ones he saw glued to the palms of every person in America who could afford be connected to the internet. With the exception of a distinct golden rim around the screen it was mundane and unremarkable, not something anyone would have cause to slit their own throat over.

Parker had never owned a cell phone, the cost of keeping one running was inconceivable. During the

winter months there were days when money got so tight he would be forced to choose between food or heat. The concept of paying money for the ability to tend digital crops or post photos of his day to day disparity was absurd. Even if he could afford it he wouldn't have wanted one. Parker harbored his own personal resentments against the devices for all the times he had to compete with the little glowing tile for Nina's attention.

He pressed the button and the screen illuminated with the ouroboros symbol, the same one on the box. The same one on Mad Mike's shipping containers. He knew the story now. It seemed so simple that he felt a twinge of embarrassment creep over him for beginning to believe there might had been something more fantastic at hand.

This, was a stolen prototype and Itinerant were tech company protecting their intellectual property. Mad Mike was drug addict who had wound up dead because of a cell phone.

Parker didn't say a thing. He just tossed the phone back down into the case and turned to stare out of the window at the Mike's empty lot. He'd watched a man kill himself because he didn't want to give back a stolen cell phone. Sometimes the state of the world really got to Parker, and this was definitely sometimes.

Behind him, Benj was checking out the phone for himself. He was always inquisitive when it came to tech like this.

The home screen only had one app that he tapped to open up a camera. The UI was simple and self explanatory; There was button labeled 'send' which he assumed took a photo, another button that switched to a front facing camera, and a drop down menu that for some reason contained a list of locations all over the world. Currently It was set to "PIN:Las Vegas 1".

Benj quickly found himself impressed with how advanced it was, when he pointed the phone at something the camera detected it and its edges lit up in neon

green. He scanned the room watching Parker, the table, the chairs all light up on the screen. Eventually he stopped at the fridge, closed one eye, and clicked to take the picture. It was one of those things he'd seen photographers do on television as a kid and adopted himself. The phone made a lo-fi sound of an analog camera winding to the next exposure and at the very same instant the entire fridge was perfectly removed from the on screen image, but that wasn't all that had happened.

Benj noticed something had audibly changed in the kitchen and when he opened his other eye he saw that the fridge had completely vanished. There was so little pageantry to the fridge disappearing that he didn't immediately register what was wrong. But the fridge was gone.

The sudden change in the rooms white noise caught Parkers attention causing him to look back over his shoulder at the empty space where a refrigerator had been standing for the better part of 20 years.

Benj dropped the phone down onto the kitchen table like it had suddenly turned into spiders.

"What just happened?" Parker asked, looking to his friend for an explanation.

Benj began backing away from the table. Slowly shaking his head from side to side as Parker inquisitively looked around the room like he'd had somehow hidden a 5 foot tall household appliance.

"Benj... where's the fucking fridge?" Parker said with a sliver of panic in his voice.

Benj continued backing away and lethargically raised a hand to point at the phone. His brain was in free fall, completely unable to quantify what was happening.

Parker quietly picked up the phone and looked at the screen. The image displayed was just of the neon green outline of where the fridge had been standing. The text along the bottom still read PIN:LASVEGAS1, but the shutter button now displayed the image of an arrow

turning back on itself and read 'return'. Cautiously, Parker jabbed at the symbol with his index finger and a fraction of a second later the fridge reappeared exactly where it had been. However, If the adjectives used to describe the fridge vanishing were 'subtle' and 'unceremonious' you would use whatever the polar opposite of those words are to elucidate the manner by which their refrigerator re-entered the kitchen.

It BOOMED back into existence, dropping to the kitchen floor from nearly 2 feet in the air and was nearly folded completely in half. It rocked precariously back and fourth on its now very uneven base giving a haunting motion to the ghostly plume of smoke that was rising from the rear of the appliance.

The trapdoor of reality had opened beneath Parker and as his brain began to melt as he frantically scrambled to anchor himself in a world he knew and understood. A world where things made sense. Having no way of knowing what an appropriate reaction should be, Parker said the only thing he knew to be true in that moment

"My sandwich was in there."

* * *

Dennis Johnson. Las Vegas. 2076.

Dennis's day had started like any other day.

He woke up at 6:45am but, for the first time in several weeks he decided to forego the usual 15 minute snooze and got a head start on the day. It's not like he had any real reason to be excited, in fact the he hadn't even gotten a good nights sleep. For some reason he just had the overwhelming feeling that it was going to be a great day!

He'd slipped carefully out of bed, doing his best not to disturb his wife, and jumped right into the shower. Dennis felt so great he even spent the extra \$3 for hot water! They didn't really have much in the way of extra money but this month's government stimulus package was paying out in a couple days and he figured he'd just have a few cold ones next month to make up for it.

At 8am, now 20 minutes ahead of schedule, Dennis sat down at his kitchen table mixing a packet of caffeine powder into a mug of water. He sipped and thought about the last time he had actual coffee, trying to pay more attention to the memory than the gritty metallic taste in his mouth. He thought about what he could do with the extra time he'd found himself in possession of but eventually settled on just getting to the office early. After All, today was an important day for Dennis.

The drive to work was smooth. It was November, so tolls were doubled on any cars that weren't entirely solar which made traffic manageable. Dennis had been a big proponent of the tollbooths and saw them as a win for everybody. Stimulating the economy while discouraging driving and keeping congestion to a minimum. He did wish his good will towards them could occasionally buy him a free pass though. Even in a solar vehicle he was on the highway for three exits which cost him \$50.

As Dennis pulled into the parking lot at work he was met with what could be described as the beginning of the end in regards to the days pleasantries. In his happy complacency Dennis realized he'd left his briefcase on the kitchen counter and would have to head home to retrieve it, paying tolls for an extra trip and ruining the lead he had on the day. Normally he'd have just done without it as the case was mostly for show. Today however it was integral. Dennis was giving a presentation to his floor managers and the briefcase

contained all of the necessary paperwork for his proposal. If that went well he and his wife would finally be able to put down a deposit on a studio in one of the high rises, and that had been their dream for as long as he could remember.

When Dennis arrived back home he was forced to park in the street. Their single car driveway was occupied by a car that he recognized as belonging to his older brother Thomas. They were a close family, but he thought its presence was a little unusual given the time of day.

Turns out Dennis' family was a lot closer than he had ever realized.

The noises polluted his ears the moment he entered the home. Screams of passion and pleasure filled the hallways of their small 1-bedroom home. Despite the sounds of dirty talk and skin slapping against skin Dennis tried to convince himself there was an innocent explanation all the way up to the point where he opened the door to the bedroom and saw for himself.

His wife leapt up trying to cover herself with a pillow like he hadn't seen her naked every day for the past 11 years.

"Oh my god, Dennis! oh my god! What the fuck have you done? What are you doing here?" her guilty reflex immediately trying to push the blame onto him. Trying to make this horrible situation somehow his fault.

Dennis' head began to feel hot right at the temples and he found himself looking down at the carpet, silently speculating to himself about one particular burn mark. Was this from the time he'd knocked a candle over or was it from where Francine had set the iron down forgetting it was still switched on?

"Will you just say something?" Dennis' contemplation was interrupted by the sound of his brothers voice "Dennis, fuck! say something!"

"Oh...I'm sorry. you guys just... just... yeah..."

And with a dismissive wave of his hand Dennis left.

He walked casually through the house and grabbed his briefcase off of the couch.

Instead of going through the front door to get back to his car, this time he cut through the kitchen which led to the garage, making a stop at his tool bench to retrieve a small axe he usually used to cut firewood.

Out on the drive way Dennis approached his brother's car. He was still wearing the dumbfounded blank face he'd had back in the bedroom. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel and continued to mull it over as he raised the axe high above his head and brought it down again, burying it to the hilt in the fiberglass hood of the battery powered vehicle. He glanced back at the house to see his wife and brother looking on in horror, still undressed in the bedroom window.

This years Morrison family Christmas was going to be very, very awkward.

The drive back to work was quiet; somehow he was able to keep his mind clear and focused only on the presentation he had to give that afternoon.

When Dennis made it into work he slumped into the chair in his cubicle and tried to maintain that focus. If his bosses liked his proposal he'd get moved off the phones be one step closer to the financial freedom he'd longed for. Dennis was never going to be what anyone might consider rich but getting off the phones meant a few more luxuries to help ease the pain of the times. Luxuries, it suddenly occurred to him, that his soon to be ex-wife would never get to enjoy. He thought maybe he'd treat himself to a little get away, an idea he and Francine would never have entertained due the cost. Now that he would be traveling alone he thought about updating his passport and visiting Kentucky; he'd always wanted to try bourbon.

As Dennis day dreamed about his futures new freedoms the round head of his cubical neighbor Terry appeared over the divider in front of him

"How. are. you. feeling?!" He said, clapping along with every word.

Terry was always a very excited person especially when it came to other peoples business.

"Quite big day for you, isn't it?" He continued "I bet you'r head's just ready to explode!"

Terry then mimed his head exploding with elaborate detail while Dennis looked up and tried to force a smile through the insurmountable awkwardness.

"Yeah Terry, uh, yeah it is. You know, it's been kind of a rough morning. I forgot my briefcase and had to head back home to get..."

before he could finish his sentence Terry had interrupted.

"Oh my god Dennis I'm so, so sorry" he said.

Dennis was a little puzzled; he hadn't even gotten to the shocking details yet.

"What are you talking about? It was just my briefcase." He asked

"I mean, I know Gary and you are good friends" Terry replied.

"Gary? Mail room Gary? What does mail room Gary have to do with anything?" Dennis found himself quickly transitioning from genuinely confused to suspicious and assumptive as pieces of a puzzle began falling together in his mind.

Terry, being a heavier set man, usually had a certain sheen to his pink skin but by the time Dennis had finished his question he'd had gone from glistening to noticeably sweating.

"Wait... nothing, forget I said anything" Terry said attempting to retreat behind the cubical wall back down into his chair.

"Terry..."

Dennis stood up, now looking down on his neighbor "where is mail room Gary?"

Terry looked up at Dennis feeling the figurative foot beginning to fill his mouth.

"He's gone on his break... he's at your house."

After what Dennis had learned about his wife that very day he didn't need Terry to exposit any further. He Knew exactly what was going on.

Dennis' stomach turned and forced him to head in the direction of the restroom as nausea took hold. He shuffled inconspicuously through the busy office, ignoring the sound of Terry's voice calling after him. He dashed through the bathroom into the nearest open stall and began to throw up.

On the most important day of his career he had found his wife sleeping with his brother then, not an hour later, he discovered she was also sleeping with one of his friends.

Dennis continued to throw up until there was nothing left inside him. He stared into the mess, breathing heavily as he watched a long thick rope of drool steadily descend into the toilet bowl. It was in that moment, for the first time he could recall, Dennis thought about the tools he had at his disposal that might aid him in ending his own life. There wasn't much available apart from the toilet paper dispenser but that started charging after the 6th square. Thanks to that hot shower he'd taken earlier Dennis didn't think he could afford enough of it do himself any real damage. The feeling was fleeting but Dennis took note of it passing through his mind and started to cry.

10 minutes of sobbing quickly passed and after the last salty drops of water had joined his vomit in the toilet bowl Dennis stood up, straitened his tie, flushed away his discarded fluids and left the bathroom to go and give his presentation.

The members of the management team starred down the long table at Dennis. He took note of the telephones stationed in front of each of them. There were 12 telephones, 5 on the left and 7 on the right. Dennis was confounded as to who may have thought this

arrangement was sensible. There wasn't any more room on the right side of the table; he quickly concluded that those 7 just didn't want to sit with the other 5. Dennis absently speculated on what circumstance had led to this segregation.

"Mr. Morrison?" Said one of the managers impatiently
"Would you like to begin?"

"Oh...oh yes, of course" he replied

Dennis organized his thoughts, opened his briefcase and looked down. Where his notes and print outs were supposed to be sat a zip-loc bag that contained a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on whole wheat bread, it was cut diagonally. There was a note in the bag written on a ripped piece of brown paper that read..

For Thomas
Love Francine

In the eleven years he and Francine had been married she'd never once made him a lunch to take to work.

His world collapsed.

"Who cuts peanut butter and jelly diagonally?"
Dennis said aloud, but not really for anyone to hear.

"I'm sorry Mr. Morrison, we didn't quite catch that"
spoke another impatient floor manager.

Dennis closed the brief case and looked up at the 12 men sat before him and did everything in his power to fight back another outburst of tears.

"You cut that across, not diagonally." He said as all 12 members of the management team stared at him, dumbfounded.

Dennis stammered out some kind of apology before briskly exiting the conference room, leaving both the briefcase and that treacherous sandwich behind.

He Power walked down the hall and passed up the corridor that would have led to his cubicle, catching the attention of Terry who immediately gave chase.

Dennis flew out the side door of the building, and no sooner had the cold November air hit his skin he found himself face to face with Gary from the mail room.

His Janus-faced friend looked as though he too was having a less than first-rate day and wore what looked to be the humble beginnings of a glorious black eye.

Dennis' body language told Gary from the mail room everything and the man immediately began pleading for forgiveness. Every word went completely unheard though, Dennis just stared at the man and thought about how the bruise was on the right side of Gary's face. The right side would mean he was punched with someone's left hand. Dennis' brother was left-handed.

His imagination wandered momentarily and suddenly Dennis found himself slightly inspired. He clenched his right fist while the white noise of Gary's pleas washed over him, cocked his arm back and swung as hard as he could, connecting knuckles to Gary's face and adding a certain symmetry to the progressing bruises. Gary dropped to the floor and dissolved into a blubbering mess while Dennis just walked past him to his car.

It didn't feel as satisfying as he'd had hoped and now his hand hurt.

The police camera flashed as Dennis blew past the tollbooth and got on the highway. He was headed south but didn't really have any destination in mind. The plan may as well have been to drive until the car died and then walk until he did the same.

Sadly, the universe had one last trick to play on poor Dennis Morrison.

About 45 minutes into the journey, Dennis was quietly cruising down route 15 south when a refrigerator appeared, seemingly out of complete thin air, right in front of him.

He attempted to swerve and avoid the kitchen appliance but it was no use. Dennis hit the fridge at 65mph causing it to practically explode.

With a windshield covered in condiments Dennis soon lost all control of the vehicle. He pulled the hard to the right and then again to the left. The tires lost traction and the car went into a spin before eventually flipping over once, twice, three – three and a half times, before coming to rest on its roof.

Dennis, somehow unharmed by the crash, pulled himself from the remains of his vehicle. His head spun and his blood pumped full of adrenaline. He didn't see the fridge anywhere.

Where had a fridge come from? And where was it now?

His eyes searched across the highway looking for it but all he saw were broken fragments of Toyota Solarus glittering on the road as cars sped by in the opposite direction.

When emergency services arrived on the scene Dennis told them exactly what he saw but aside from what appeared to be ketchup on the asphalt there was no indications that there had ever been a refrigerator on route 15 south that night.

Parker & Benj

Parkers mother had been an outspoken vegan long before the necrotic virus that poisoned the worlds livestock pushed others to similar dietary decisions. She went to protests, she threw paint at people wearing fur, and from the moment he was old enough to understand the phrase "Meat is murder" she pushed all of these beliefs onto her son. The trouble with Ms. Ludere was that she was a complete hypocrite. She drank milk, ate cheese, and on the rare occasion that it was available would always use butter before the many

substitutes on the market. This was local gossip known to everyone in the neighborhood except Parker himself who believed every word of his mother's rhetoric.

At the age of eleven Parker, as most children around that age do, began to rebel. He was tired of the rules set for him by his mother and declared to a group of his friends at school that he wanted to eat meat, cheese, and all of the things that he would never be allowed to eat at home. The other children all looked at him in shock. They were aware of Mrs. Ludere's volatility when it came to the rules surrounding Parker's diet as she had been very publicly escorted from school grounds that previous spring following an altercation with the vice principal over Parker somehow receiving milk with his lunch rather than the juice box she had specified.

They warned him that he'd probably wind up grounded for the rest of his life if she caught him and that even if she didn't, stories about friends of friends of cousins of distant cousins were apparently irrefutable evidence that he'd get unimaginably sick from the first time he ate meat. Parker didn't care though, that weekend at a cookout he and Benj hatched a clandestine plot for Parker to "break veg" that found him encircled by his classmates looking at the most intimidating hamburger any of them had ever seen.

"Eat it! Eat it! Eat it!" The kids quietly chanted, trying their best not draw any attention while simultaneously bathing Parker in an audible deluge of peer pressure.

He looked nervously at Benj, who even before rescinding his desire to speak was an incredibly expressive child. After receiving an affirming look of encouragement Parker took the biggest bite he could from the sandwich and everything in parkers life changed.

The sentiment may seem a touch dramatic but if you ask him, Parker will tell you that the bite he took

from that burger was like dragging his fingers across the foggy glass of reality itself. He'd never felt so many conflicting emotions at once before. His preteen mind couldn't begin to fathom how something could make a person feel so good and so bad all at once. All his life he'd been programmed by his mother to believe that eating meat was the biggest crime a person could commit against nature, but as the pleasure centers in his brain exploded all of his mothers speeches that usually echoed so prominently in his mind began to hush.

Parker ate every bite and somehow the only repercussion was shame. He could barely look his mother in the eye. He had nightmares where the earth literally swallowed him up in retaliation but the entire time he just wanted another burger.

In the weeks that followed he would trade anything he could with children at school for non vegan treats. Chocolate, cheese, chicken, he had it all... until 6 months later when the virus struck, and all Parker could do was blame himself. He thought the world was suffering because of what he'd done.

The following year Parkers mother was found to be terminally ill. On her death bed Parker sobbed and confessed to her about the burger and the school lunches, and that the virus was because of him. Weakly, she took his hand, squeezed it the best she could, and in her delirium absolved him of all his guilt.

"Parker, sweetie, all of the things I said about eating animals was nonsense" She'd said "Just the kind of thing you say to look good at PTA meetings."

He'd peered into her tired eyes quizzically as she drifted off, now washed with the mounting confusion surrounding right, wrong, and complexities of social performance.

Needless to say Parker began taking food very seriously from that day onward which is why it's hardly surprising that, despite what had just taken place, it took barely a minute for him to begin digging around in

the twisted and mangled wreckage of their refrigerator trying to recover the sandwich Rusty had given to him the night before.

Obviously he had a lot of questions, but Parker wasn't going to be able to focus on any of them until he had some food inside of him.

He'd followed the threatening directions Rusty had given and when the little toaster oven dinged to signal it was done cooking, Parker marveled at sandwich.

"Look at it! I think the toaster actually improved on Rusty's work. It's like someone saw a Choe, or a Banksy in a gallery and thought 'i can do better than that', but they were right, AND everyone agreed – Everyone being me, you follow?"

Parker looked for a response in Benj who absolutely wasn't listening.

Benj was busy.

Due to Parkers rather immediate preoccupation there hadn't been much talk about what had just happened. It was blatantly obvious the device that they assumed was a cell phone was something significantly more advanced. It was able to transport their fridge out of the kitchen in the blink of an eye and just as easily bring it back. Though, any thought about whether or not it could do the same thing to a person was mired by the detail that, while the device had done something quite incredible, it had also completely destroyed the thing it transported. Whether this was a symptom of the transportation process or an environmental factor is what Benj was busy trying to figure out.

While Parker prepared a meal, Benj was sat at the table using the silver attaché case as a disposable litmus strip to gauge danger before they proceeded to human testing. When he had initially opened the app it had been set to "PIN:Las Vegas 1", but using the drop down menu he could see there was also a "PIN:Las Vegas2. He already knew PIN 1 could destroy a fridge so he moved right onto two. The silver case blinked out of

existence just like the fridge had, but unlike the fridge, the case returned each time without any damage. Pin 2 was deemed safe.

After the Las Vegas Pins the locations became more exotic. There was Pin for Dallas Texas which also passed the danger test, returning the case to the kitchen without a scratch. After that was Cleveland Ohio, which passed, but it's inclusion intrigued Benj. It was baffling that something so futuristic would have anything to do with a place like Cleveland.

Ohio, along with much of a lot of its surrounding areas, were known as The Black-Out States. Sometime in the 20's there had been a series of earthquakes that had detached the area from the national power grid and left it bereft of electricity. Aid could have easily been provided to the region but the political system, being what it was at the time, inexplicably failed to act. With the people making the decisions about the crisis ultimately unaffected by it and mostly using it as a means to push unrelated agendas, the residents of the midwest were left without power for nearly a year before agreements on how to help were reached. By this time something quite profound had happened; The citizens who survived the disaster came to the conclusion that the earthquakes had themselves been the words of god punishing them for their use of electricity. There isn't a lot of definite information about what happened during this time, but when assistance did arrive The Black-Out States quite aggressively refused it in favor of their dystopia.

Benj sent the case, waited a few seconds, then brought it back. Just like Dallas, it hadn't been touched. It was cold, but it hadn't been touched.

While Cleveland was intriguing, it was the next city that really took Benj by surprise.

He turned the phone to show Parker, distracting him from taking his first bite.

"New York?!" Parker replied with eyebrows raised "No

way! Not unless this thing's a time machine too."

They paused and thought about the suggestion, feeling the ripple effect of their discovery. If teleportation was on the table now, why couldn't time travel also be? The problem there was that if they were wrong it would probably kill them both as New York City had been an irradiated wasteland since the end of the war in 2044.

Just like world war 2, the use of nukes brought a close to world war 3 at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives except this time they were dropped on U.S. soil and it was almost infinitely more deadly. If they sent the case to modern New York it would likely come back glowing green and leave them both riddled with tumors by midnight.

"Not worth it..." Parker declared "...what's next"

Benj tapped and the screen displayed North Korea's capitol, Pyongyang.

Parker rolled his eyes. North Korea was almost as pointless for them to attempt a visit as New York. At least they knew what terrible things waited for them on the Atlantic coast, North Korea was a total mystery.

"Let me know when you've figured out if this thing can teleport people without blowing them up" Parker said apathetically "Until you know that, all I care about is this"

Parker pointed at the sandwich, which sat steaming in front of him, and gave it a look that made Benj feel sincerely uncomfortable. It was passionate, verging on sexual but clearly not for the purposes of comedy. If Benj could have administered some sort of truth serum to Parker at that moment and queried whether or not he'd thought about fucking that sandwich, There wasn't a shred of doubt in Benj's mind that Parker would have responded with something to the affect of "Absolutely", then produced evidence that the truth serum hadn't taken effect and he was just proud of his unholy impulse. He had been rattling on about this sandwich

with barely a deviation since the fridge had reappeared and Benj was sick of it. So while Parker stared lecherously at two pieces of bread, pepper jack cheese, and bacon, Benj held up the phone, or whatever it was supposed to be called, focused it on the sandwich, and pressed send.

It vanished in a way that a persons brain might add the comedic sound of a cartoon soap bubble popping when recalling it from memory.

Parkers head turned to look at Benj with such ferocity it looked as though it might have snapped off.

Benj, wearing a smug and satisfied grin, jumped up, pushing the chair away behind him.

"Benj I swear to christ if that sandwich comes back exploded I will feed you to FUCKING BEARS!"

Parker lunged across the table to grab the device from Benj who ducked back further out of reach, grabbing his chest and silently pantomiming raucous laughter. Parker looked at him as if fire were about shoot from his pupils.

"Benjamin. Do you really want to be the second man to die on this property today?"

Benj composed himself, calling a truce by holding up his hands in submission before tapping the return button to bring the sandwich back from the North Korean capitol of Pyongyang, where he had sent it.

Thankfully for Benj the sandwich returned to the kitchen completely unaltered, but it was now held in the hands of a young Korean girl who, after taking a second to process what had just happened to her, began screaming in a language neither Benj nor Parker understood.

Never the most delicate in the art of communication Parker also began to scream, which of course this did little to calm the poor girl who was clearly scared to death and only responded by screaming louder.

"BENJ! MAKE HER GO AWAY!"

Benj wasn't listening. In the midst of the

escalating cacophony that was filling the kitchen Benj was having a moment of clarity.

The device worked. It could move human beings across vast distances in fractions of a second.

Just moments ago this child had been in Pyongyang, nearly 6,000 miles away from Nevada and now she was there, perched on a kitchen table in their little corner of the world.

Life as they both understood was now forever changed.

Suddenly realizing the excessive noise level of what was happening Benj snapped out of his contemplation, tapped a button on the device and girl vanished, along with Parkers sandwich.

"What the fuck are you doing!?" Parker snapped
"She's got my..."

Benj rolled his eyes knowing exactly what Parker was about to say and tapped the phone again.

The girl reappeared. Now looking even more bewildered than before.

Parker reached out and, in what he almost certainly believed to be a friendly tone of voice, demanded she hand over the sandwich. The girl refused and in response to his outstretched hand hopped down from the table and backed herself up into a corner of the kitchen holding it tightly against her chest.

Parker looked at Benj helplessly as if Benj could somehow solve his problem. Benj Shrugged. There were more important things he wanted to focus on.

"Hey little girl..." Parker said delicately "That... That thing you have doesn't belong to you..."

The girl snarled at Parker who tried not to look as exacerbated as he felt.

Before he could make another attempt at appealing to their guest the tension between them was interrupted by three assertive knocks at the door which drew the attention of all three of the. It was the kind of unmistakable knock that could only be delivered by a

member of law enforcement. Apparently a universal with the girl looking just as nervous as the two of them.

There were three more knocks followed by a woman's voice.

"Parker I don't want to fight with you. Can you please come to the door."

It was Nina.

Ji-Yunn. Pyongyang. 2076.

Ji-Yun, at 10 years old had lived on the streets of Pyongyang for most of her life. Practically blind, she saw the world like she was seeing it through frosted glass, only able to see shapes and shadow. Thanks in part to her poor eyesight Ji-Yun's other senses had become razor sharp, particularly her sense of smell. It wasn't uncommon for her to be awoken by stray scents drifting past on the breeze as she slept.

Despite her inability to see nearly as well as some of the other street children in Pyongyang Ji-Yun survived pleasantly enough and some cases even better than the others. They were almost always hungry though.

Despite managing to steer clear of the world conflicts erupting around them The Hermit Nation was unable to avoid the virus that was killing livestock world wide and lacked the infrastructure to provide disease free bubbles to raise cattle for food.

Livestock was just one of several challenges. With the planets climate now altering at such a rapid pace crops and harvests became wildly unpredictable from season to season.

starvation was a major crisis that had effected even those lucky enough to have a roof over their heads. For

the people who lived on the streets every day was a life or death struggle.

During one of the colder months Ji-Yun was hurrying through the streets to secure her favorite place to sleep.

Lots of children would sleep on roof tops near electrical transformers to stay warm but it was relatively common for them to get too close and be zapped by the electricity. Ji-Yun knew of one particular transformer that was surrounded by a fence that prevented you getting too close but still let you feel its warmth. It was also close to one of the small Buddhist communities in Pyongyang who were still quite generous with food despite the nationwide famine.

Somehow this location stayed closely guarded secret between only a handful of children. More often than not the others would give up the space should Ji-Yun happen upon them already there. They all knew she was differently abled. Ji-Yun always felt so awful when this happened she couldn't sleep at night which is why she was always in such a hurry to get there before anyone else.

In her rush she took a sharp corner without the usual care she would and slammed into a tall man, bouncing off him and falling onto the floor. Ji-Yun looked up and it barely took her a second to realize who she had run into.

She recognized the particular shade of green the man was wearing, the familiar way he held his posture, and She could smell the strong scent of gun powder mixed with canola oil emanating from his rifle. Ji-Yun had run head first into two KPA soldiers and would likely suffer severe consequences for her carelessness.

"geol-le-gat-eun-nyeon! (you whore!)" Yelled the soldier then spat at her.

His companion laughing in amusement.

Ji-Yun tried to shield her head with her arms and braced for a beating but in some twist of fortune

before the beating could commence there was an explosion nearby and the sounds of sirens quickly filled the air.

"guwon...(salvation)" The soldier growled at her before delivering a sharp kick to her midsection.

The universe had given her a reprieve and although the soldier made sure she didn't escape without something to remember him by, it was stark comparison to what she would have endured otherwise.

The smell of smoke was beginning to grow more present and Ji-Yun could hear the caterwaul of panicked voices coming from all around her. She was becoming lost in the sensory overload until something stood out through it all, the smell of food. Delicious and savory like nothing she'd ever smelled before. She used it like a beacon, something to focus on while the rest of the world sought to disorient and disarm her. When she found her way off of the street and to the entrance of an alleyway.

There was another explosion and Ji-Yun took deep startled breaths, tasting the acrid fumes that laced the air around her. People were running all around her now so she felt her way into the alley and tried to focus and the delicious scent through the racket. It was like nothing she'd ever smelled before and couldn't bare the thought of losing it so Ji-yun hurried down the alley in its direction.

She worried her mind was playing tricks on her. That maybe she'd hit her head after running into the soldier or maybe the strange smell had been a poison weapon? A noxious gas designed by enemies of Korea to effect its victims minds?

There had been a growing military presence in the city for weeks now and she had felt that something was going happen. That many soldiers gathering never meant anything good.

Ji-Yun sat down and lay her head upon her knees longing for whatever was causing the amazing smell of

food she'd been chasing. She hadn't eaten yet that day and had been hoping the people at the Buddhist center would have vegetables to spare this particular night. She was in no way picky about the food she was given and would eat anything that came her way but she liked vegetables especially.

Ji-Yun began to feel the prickly feeling in her nose that always preceded tears when her fingertips brushed something that was sat on the ground beside her. Fumbling it into her hands, she felt crunchy toasted bread and the smell of pork but right as Ji-Yun was about to take a bite she all of a sudden found herself somewhere else. No longer in the alley way.

Now she was on some kind of table in a bright room with two men. Not soldiers, neither of them held themselves with that kind of pride.

There was a chill in the air and she no longer felt the humidity she was used to.

Startled she began to shout.

"Na dae-ryuh-gi ma-say-yoh! (please don't hurt me)" Pleading over and over again.

One of the men, he was the taller of the two with lighter skin, began to shout as well. She couldn't understand his words but noticed that he had a stressed and panicked tone to his voice. The man waved his hands wildly while the smaller of the two stood very still and composed.

"yeogiga eodiyeyo(where am i?)" She shouted.

Before she could be given an answer Ji-Yun found herself back in the alley way. Once again the smell of smoke surrounded her. She was confused and felt nauseous. What had just happened to her? Ji-Yun felt certain she must have somehow been poisoned. She still held the food in her hands though, and even with all the smoke in the air, it still smelled heavenly.

Ji-Yun went to take a bite but, as she brought it to her mouth it happened again, and she was back in the cool room with the two men.

In panic she hopped clumsily down onto the floor, backing up into a corner of the unfamiliar room clutching her prize against her chest and baring her teeth. Trying her best to seem intimidating.

Without warning she and the tall thin man were silenced by a loud knocking sound, the kind of knocking she associated with soldiers before raids. Everyone was silent until 3 more knocks boomed and were followed by a woman's voice.

The two men seemed scared. Ji-Yun also began to feel fearful.

The tall man whispered to the other who didn't say a word in reply then he looked at her and made some kind of gesture with his hands before leaving the room.

The smaller man approached her, he didn't appear to be threatening but as he got close she could sense his apprehension. He beckoned for her to follow him and Ji-Yun clutched at his loose baggy clothes for fear of getting lost in this strange place.

He lead her down a claustrophobic stairway into a small dark room where the only light seemed like it was coming from a single hanging bulb in the center of the room. The small man still made no sounds but gestured in a similar way as the man upstairs but now she could make out that he was putting his hand to his mouth in what she recognized to mean "Quiet".

Ji-Yun was scared. What horrible thing could these men be hiding from?

She could hear the man upstairs talking to the woman. Ji-Yun liked the woman's voice. She couldn't understand any of the words but she thought the woman sounded kind. The man on the other hand sounded like he was lying. Grown ups often tried to lie to her and she'd gotten very good at being able to tell when they were doing it.

The man down in the basement with her seemed lost in thought and she wondered if she should run. Maybe the woman upstairs would help her?

The room was a mess. There were things thrown everywhere. It reminded her of an abandoned building she would sometimes sleep in the warm months. It had been a factory but now was just forgotten and decaying.

Ji-Yun heard a door close loudly, and aggressively then the tall man shouted. She did not like this man, and while she did not get the impression either men meant to hurt her, she did not want to be in their company and wished she'd tried to escape to the kind voice of the woman she'd heard upstairs.

The smaller, dark skinned man waved unusually at her, then said more words that she couldn't understand and without any warning she found herself back in the alley. Still holding the source of that delicious smell.

There were still alarms and yelling all around her but she was able to block all of that out as she took a bite of the most delicious, wonderful thing she had ever tasted in her entire life.

PARKER & BENJ.

Parker could almost feel Nina's eyes glaring at him through the front door. He could feel her annoyed and uncomfortable stance, arms folded, weight shifted to one side of her hip. He took a deep breath, opened the door and saw exactly what he'd been imagining.

"Hi" he said.

He stood awkwardly, using as much of his body as he could to prevent Nina from looking inside the house and seeing the destroyed fridge and asking questions. There was nothing even remotely natural about his posture, he just looked guilty.

It probably wasn't one of Parkers more positive personality traits, but he was usually a very good liar. Nina however, was always able to disarm this

particular super power and cause him to throw out tells left and right. So when she looked him dead in the eye and saw his pupils dart in opposite directions Parker knew she'd know there was something going on.

She examined him. Pale as always, but with the tell-tell gleam of cold sweat dewed across his skin. The giant bags under his eyes read like the rings on a tree stump of alcohol poisoning, almost allowing her to count exactly how much he'd had to drink the night before.

"Looks like you two left us a pretty hefty tab to pick up. My bosses will be thrilled" Nina said with a short-lived perfunctory smile.

"Yeah well, I'd just been dumped by my girlfriend..." Parker replied, trailing off but meeting her eyes again.

"You think I broke up with you? You think that was me breaking up with you?" Nina shifted her weight off of her hip, standing up straight now.

"You threw me out of your place covered in blood, without any shoes, it seemed pretty definitive"

Nina glanced down at his clothes to see that he hadn't changed and was still covered in the same blood.

"We've been together for six years and you think that's how I'd end things?"

"you looked at me like I was something you'd scrape off of your shoe!"

"You committed a felony, Parker! I work for the police! How do you expect me to react? I turn a blind eye to so much because I know what life's like down here but seriously..."

"So what? I'm supposed to live in poverty because of how it might make you look?" Parker interrupted, unsure why he was escalating things when he needed her to leave.

"Can I come inside? If we're going to fight, I don't want to fight out here."

He didn't want to fight. He hated when they were at

odds with each other. On any other day he would be perfectly happy to bring her inside and quietly listen to her tell him all about what an irresponsible man-child he was, take his licks, and avoid the conflict. But if selling liquor to Rusty had been such a big deal, how was she going to react to the unexplainable but very real teleportation device or Korean child he'd accidentally just kidnapped.

"Inside? Inside the house, this house?"

Parker did everything he could to not look back over his shoulder.

"Yes Parker, this house. Your house."

"Now's not a good time" He said.

Nina rolled her eyes.

"It's never a good time is it? Because it's always gotta be all about you. When will it be about us? Is whatever you and Benj are doing in there more important than you and me?"

Parker didn't know what to say. Or rather, he did, but he couldn't help listening to the selfish Part of him that thought, In the grand scheme of things, yes it was more important. The device in the kitchen, the thing that could transport a person across the world in a second was infinitely more important than another textbook Parker and Nina fight. He could make her understand later and then this squabble wouldn't matter. Once he and benj knew how this device worked he could tell her everything. He'd bypass the dick-head doorman in the lobby of her building and appear in he room, literally out of thin air with peace offerings of champagne and roses. Everything in all their lives would be fine. Right now though, she wouldn't understand.

"Yes. What's happening inside is more important than us."

Nina's eyes went wide and her mouth hung open, tears immediately began to well up in her eyes.

"I..." she stammered "... this was a mistake"

Nina quickly turned and walked back to her car, stumbling slightly to avoid the crimson stain in the middle of the path.

After he watched her car disappear down the street Parker turned and walked back inside the house, slamming the door behind him.

"FUCK!" He barked

Benj was sat at the table in the kitchen holding the device looking inappropriately excited. Parker let out a long, exhausted breath.

"Where the kid?" Parker asked.

Benj shrugged. It wasn't callous, the kid just wasn't an issue and could tell Parker didn't need the details.

"You let her have my sandwich huh?" Parker said with a little mirthless laugh.

Before Benj could try to apologize Parker waved his hand dismissively.

"Forget about it. I'm not hungry anymore – she looked like she needed it more than me."

He paused for a second, contemplatively.

"So we have a teleporter?" He queried.

Benj nodded with cautious enthusiasm.

"Well, I guess we better do some teleporting then."

Nina

The Las Vegas Police Department took up 10 entire stories of the 70 story municipal tower in downtown and that didn't include the 8 stories above it that the inmates of the city jail called home. It did include 5 stories of parking garage which is where Nina had been sat for the past 30 minutes trying to reapply her

makeup without crying. She was upset. Which was, if Nina was being honest, a little out of character.

She and Parker fought a lot and while she never enjoyed it in the slightest, a certain performative aspect to their quarrels had taken shape over the years which she had grown accustom to. There was order to which their blow outs had begun to follow where an inciting incident would occur, usually Parker screwing up in some way. She would yell, he'd yell back, in extreme scenario's such as the night before one of them would storm out and they wouldn't talk for a day. When that happened Nina would get a lousy nights sleep, lose her appetite, and feel terrible until one of them, usually Parker, inevitably reached out to apologize and before she knew it they were having fantastic make-up sex somewhere outrageous like the kitchen or the bathroom at Rusty's, Completely forgetting there had ever been an argument. It hadn't gone at all like that this time and it had left her a total wreck. He hadn't called, he hadn't shown up in the lobby of her tower. Instead she'd gone out of her way to go to his house and instead of make-up sex he'd basically slammed the door in her face. Nina knew she shouldn't have gone over there, Parker was the one who had lied, had put her reputation in jeopardy, she just didn't want to have to go into the station with this fight still lingering over her, and now she was in even more of a state

The touch screen that encompassed the entirety of her cars center console illuminated to display a text message.

Ramirez where the fuck are you? That vein in El Tee's temple is doing that thing. I don't think he's fucking around.

It was from her partner, Detective Doug Logue.

The two of them had been working a pretty cut and dry child abduction case. They'd found the missing kid and were in the final stages of pinning it on the father, who had blatantly done it. Nina thought she'd be stopping by the station, picking up Logue and heading off to get their confession but shortly after leaving Parker's house her Lieutenant had informed her that two federal agents had arrived asking questions about the incident from the night before. Mad Mike's suicide.

She hoped it had nothing to do with what they'd found in Parkers basement. Sure, she was mad at him about it, but she hadn't intended him to suffer any real consequences. Nothing outside of being in her bad books for a few days. Nina wondered what else it would be about? Dead bums rarely came across her desk and she doubted it would get the attention of the FEDs.

When Nina finally picked herself up and walked inside she found her partner leant up against the front desk of their floor looking about as much of a police stereotype as a person could look. In one hand there was a to-go cup with steam rising out of it and in the other, his round fingers clutched some kind of deep fried pastry. The man wore the grin of an older brother who knew his sibling was in deep shit.

She waved him off before he could make any of the remarks she knew he had been dying to make.

"Get off it Logue, El Tee's a big boy, he'll get over it."

Logue took a bite from his glazed confection and responded, talking and chewing all at once.

"They've... been in there a while... You might wanna go in with a peace offering"

Logue nodded at a drinks carrier with 3 steaming cups just like his. Each with a little sachet tucked next to it.

Not even the police could get ahold of coffee anymore so just like everyone else they settled for

caffeinated powders that added the flavor of coffee. If you closed your eyes and thought about it hard enough sometimes they actually did.

"What do I look like? The fucking maid? What room are they in?"

Logue pointed indistinctly down the hallway towards the conference rooms.

"They're in C4. Whats this all about? Peter Pan shit the bed again?"

Peter Pan was the insulting nickname Logue often used when referring to Parker. She hated it.

"I told you not to call him that" Nina snapped back

People weren't shy about letting Nina know what they thought about her boyfriend. It always felt like they were desperate for Parker to prove them all right. Someone who made the kind of money Nina made didn't usually mingle with the people of Lost Vegas. She probably let more of it slide than she should for the sake of keeping up appearances but she hated hearing it come from her partner.

Logue snickered to himself through another mouthful of donut as Nina gave him the finger before disappearing down the hallway and into conference room 4.

Two men in identical black wind breakers and identical haircuts sat at the table across from Lieutenant Albie Ritter, or El Tee as he was known around the station. She got the impression she was ending a silence that been anything but brief.

"Gentlemen. Sorry to keep you waiting" she said, playing up her urgency and receiving a death stare from the Lt.

The two agents only moved their eyes up to acknowledge her.

Ritter was a military vet who wasn't satisfied with the amount of action he'd seen in the war and had entered the police force immediately following his term. Unfortunately for El Tee his celebrated

performance in the armed service helped to quickly propel him up through the ranks and poor Albie had spent more time behind a desk than out on patrol where he wanted to be. He didn't really care about law and order, he just hadn't gotten to shoot enough people during the war and was hoping to spend his days in Las Vegas thinning out the homeless population without repercussion. Now he spent his days taking out frustrations on his subordinates and making life as miserable as possible for new recruits or technicians.

"Detective Ramirez, nice of you to fit us into your busy schedule"

The lieutenants teeth didn't separate throughout the entire sentence.

Nina knew that there wasn't a single excuse that would make the man any less angry but she also knew that she needed to offer something and that 'relationship troubles' didn't cut it. She remembered a call coming over the radio on her way to Parker's and hoped abnormal nature of it might ease some of the tension.

"Very sorry sir! Assisting with an accident. Some tweaker flipped his car on the 15, says he hit a fridge which of course is nowhere to be found now."

Nina looked to each of the three men for a response and after receiving science from all parties, pulled herself into the chair next to El Tee. Both of the agents were as still as statues and looked as though they could have been brothers. Nina reached out to shake their hands but neither of them responded the courtesy.

"Ok..." Nina felt a sudden pang of guilt for leaving Lt. Ritter alone for so long with these federal mannequins "...I hear you gentlemen have some questions about the suicide last night?"

The agent on the right produced a tablet that he turned towards her, swiping as he did to display the mugshot of sickly looking old man.

"Detective, could you tell us everything you know about this man?"

The photo on the screen was of an older man, probably in his late 50's. He was clean shaven and wore his silver hair back in a tight pony tail. Nina narrowed her eyes at the image unsure of who it was she was looking at until it suddenly clicked.

"Is this Mad Mike?" Nina asked.

The two agents glanced at each other but didn't speak.

"...The suicide from last night. This is the guy?"

Nina pulled the tablet closer to get a better look.

"I've never seen him look so... so..." Nina struggled to find an adjective that didn't make her feel as though she was speaking ill of a dead man "...So clean"

Once again the only response from the agents was a glance at each other as though they were passing telepathic notes.

The agent on the right pulled the tablet away from Nina and swiped to another photo of the man, now looking like the unstable vagrant she'd seen whenever she'd visit Lost Vegas. He was disheveled, filthy, and digging through a trash can.

"Yaaaaaaah..." She said in response to the image
"Thats the Mike I know."

The agent on the left raised his eyebrows and turned his ear slightly towards Nina. A gesture she interpreted as wanting to know more.

"He's a local bum. Screams a lot. Drugs, alcohol, you name it. He lives, sorry, lived in a shipping container in Lost Vegas... what's to know? Was he somebody important?"

There was a part of Nina that couldn't help but ask questions. Sadly her questions would be completely Ignored.

"Why did you call him that?" The agent on the left inquired.

Nina furrowed her brow.

"Mad Mike? I guess I never thought about it. It's just what we called him."

It had never occurred to her that he could have any other name.

"And when you say we..." The agent swiped at the screen again and the image slid over to two mugshots "...you are referring to Mr Ludere and Mr Cave?"

Nina closed her eyes and sighed when she saw the photos. Parker had been arrested during a week where he had decided he would look good with a mustache – he didn't. The charge had been disorderly conduct, but from the mug shot anyone without that information would have easily assumed he was some kind of predator. Nina had nearly died when she arrived to collect him and benj up from lockup. Logue had thought it was exceedingly hilarious and had printed off a seemingly infinite amount of the picture and tortured her for weeks with it.

Nina composed herself and responded.

"Yes I am referring to Mr Ludere and Mr Cave."

"...and what is the nature of their relationship with the man you all call 'Mad Mike'?"

Nina tried with all her might to prevent her eyes from rolling. She'd been through this before. The assumptions, and insinuations. The previous spring she'd taken Parker to a holiday party where a wallet had gone missing and, of course he was immediately accused of having taken it. The scene escalated all the way to Parker being cuffed and sat in a squad car until the wife of wallets owner, and the loudest of all the accusers, found the wallet in her purse where she'd been keeping it the whole time. If something happened while Parker was near by he was always quickly implicated.

"Relationship? There is no relationship." Nina straight up in her chair.

folding her arms and sucking her teeth as she tried pass her own telepathic note of 'go fuck yourself' to the robotic agents that sat across from her.

"Detective, were you aware of the illegal still Mr Ludere and Mr Cave had been operating on their property?"

Nina had sat on the other side of more interrogations than she could count. She knew what he was doing. As long as these two could affirm Parker's turpitude they could pin whatever they wanted on him.

"What the fuck does that have to do with a dead tweaker?" Nina snapped.

"Ramirez!" Lieutenant Ritter barked her name, reigning her in before her temper could get the better of her "Answer the question!"

Nina's nostrils flared and she felt the heat in her cheeks.

"No," she said calmly and with as little attitude as she could managed "Until last night I was unaware of the still".

The agent smiled. It was the first time Nina had seen his facial expression significantly change. The agent on the left stayed as stoic as when she'd entered the room.

"So..." He continued "...would you say it's reasonable to assume that Mr Ludere may not have been entirely forthcoming with you about his involvement with the deceased?"

Nina glanced at Ritter who mentioned sternly for her to answer.

"Yes," she said begrudgingly "that would be reasonable".

Everything inside of Nina's head tried to direct the anger she could feel welling up inside her at the agent and his self satisfied smile but she knew he wasn't at fault. He might be an asshole but Parker was the criminal, the liar, and once again his actions were casting a dark shadow over her.

The agent on the left reached for the tablet and swiped to a new photo.

"Have you ever seen this item before?" He said in a cold and mechanical tone.

On the screen of the tablet was a photo of a small silver case baring the image of a snake eating its own tail. The small silver case she'd seen Benj leaving with the night before.

For a split second Nina froze. She froze and she could immediately see the agent on the left had clocked it.

"No." She said with a betraying confidence "I've never seen that before in my life".

I wouldn't have mattered what she'd said or how she said it. The agent noticed her hesitation and knew that she was lying.

Nina didn't even know why she lied? A knee jerk reflex to defend the reprobate she called a boyfriend.

"What exactly is it you think Parker and this Mad Mike guy are involved in?" She asked.

Nina knew the question was pointless. These two weren't going to tell her anything but she still felt the need to try and find out exactly what kind of trouble she'd just made worse for Parker and Benj.

The agent on the left picked up the tablet and put it away in his case. Both agents stood up, suddenly seeming more casual, loose, more like humans than they had been through out their questions.

"I think that's all we needed here. Thank you for your time." The agent on the right said as he buttoned his jacket.

Nina wasn't satisfied and also stood up.

"You didn't answer my question. What is Parker involved in?"

"Rameriez! Drop it!" El Tee interjected a second time.

"But sir..."

Lieutenant Ritter rose to his feet, standing nearly an entire head over Nina.

"I said drop it!" He growled, immediately rescinding Nina's outburst.

Ritter turned his attention to the agents and softened, even letting something that may have been considered a smile creep onto his face.

"Gentlemen, Please excuse the detective."

"Not to worry." The right agent said "We appreciate your time and honesty."

The agent reached out and shook hands with Lt. Ritter then offered his hand to Nina who was in no position to refuse. She shook his hand and the agent gave her the same self satisfied smile as before. It made Nina want to explode.

When the two agents ha left the room Lt. Ritter turned to her with fire in his eyes.

"What the fuck was that Ramirez?" He'd removed the gravel from his voice now but his intent to intimidate hadn't diminished even slightly.

"Sir, those men were out of line..."

"Out of line to point out that stray mutt you keep is nothing but trouble?"

Nina looked for words but couldn't find any that would do any good. She wondered if this was how Parker felt most of the time.

"What you do on your own time is your business, I know where you come from." Ritter said ADJECTIVELY(?) "But you better wipe your fuckin' shoes before you tracks anything from those streets onto my carpet. Do I make myself clear?"

Nina steadied herself and brought herself to attention. The Lieutenants metaphors were often witless but his delivery was still soaked in military discipline.

"Yes Sir."

Ritter maintained the eye contact for a second, daring Nina to show any signs of defiance, and when he

saw none he turned and opened the door to reveal detective Logue who had apparently been eavesdropping. Ritter shook his head as he walked past the rotund man, continuing to speak and expecting them to follow.

"You two are working the Peterson case?" He said.

It was a question, but neither of them responded. Nina had just been chewed out and Logue was still trying to gauge the mood. Ritter stopped and turned back to them.

"Yes?" He said clarifying his desire for a response.

"Yes sir." Nina said "We're on our way to pick up the father now"

"No you're not" Ritter said calmly then resumed walking down the hallway.

Nina and Logue exchanged bewildered looks.

"But sir," Logue said "he's about to confess"

"Then Pattinson and Conroy won't have any trouble coaxing it out of him"

A PA approached the lieutenant, handing him a file with stacked papers that required his signature. Ritter signed them and handed them back.

"Sir, Pattinson and Conroy are morons" Logue said brazenly "They're gonna fuck it up".

Nina stayed quiet. She knew she had no pull with Ritter at that particular moment and she was always fond of watching Logue dig his own grave.

"You let me handle Pattinson and Conroy" Ritter said reassuringly "You two are gonna take over on CVS."

"The Pharmacy? Sir the pharmacy is a stakeout. You may as well give us traffic duty!" Logue protested.

Ritter lowered his town again, leaning in a little closer to ensure nothing would be lost in the distance between the two men.

"Do you want traffic duty, detective?"

"No, sir"

"Then you'll stake out the CVS and fucking love it, am I clear?" Ritter turned to Nina who hadn't spoken

since leaving the meeting with the two agents "Ramirez, am I clear?"

"yes sir" she responded without hesitation.

"Good" Ritter allowed himself a moment of content dominance over his subordinates and walked away without saying a word.

Logue looked at Nina with his mouth hanging open.

"What did you do in there?"

"Shut. up." Nina said, now allowing her frustration to surface "Just... Just shut up and meet me at the car in 15 minutes"

Nina turned and walked away, doing her best to ignore the sounds of Logue calling after her.

"I can't wait to spend 8 hours in a car with you!"

Parker & Benj

Dallas, Texas was the closest thing to a 'city of the future' America had seen since it became 'the future'. It had been shaping up to be just that even before the war. The city and its governing bodies had seen the paradigm shift approaching and were one of the few areas of the world that realized the 'business as usual' method of handling things wouldn't sustain them for very long. While everywhere else began to wither, Dallas prospered.

They had started by phasing out the cars. by 2035, the closest you could get to the center of the city with anything that ran on a fossil fuel was 3 miles. The only vehicles used were small, driverless electric carts provided by the city that were scattered around for public use. The carts weren't free and definitely not cheap but if you could afford to live in Dallas you had no problem with the cart fees. As the interest in Dallas grew, so did the prices.

They were the first city to fully adopt the high rises, and when those caught on they were the first to model the tower blocks after entire neighborhoods so residents never had to leave the building. These structures redefined the idea of sky scraper while being the first to actually live up to the mental image the name conjured.

Benj stood staring in awe at the distant towers that made up the Dallas skyline. Their highest stories were so tall he could see them disappear into clouds then reappear on the other side. The towers in Vegas were tall, but these had to be seen to be believed.

"Yeah, this is great..." said Parker "...but we're not in Dallas."

He was right, They weren't in Dallas. They were basically in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by miles and miles of empty plains that at some point in the past had been lush and green. Now the only colors left were over cooked straw yellows and browns. A cold blue midnight sky sprawled above them adorned with an infinity of glimmering stars, a stark difference from the thick brown smog that perpetually hung over Las Vegas.

They'd been, wherever they were, for nearly 20 minutes now and the fact that they weren't actually in Dallas had been the only thing Parker could talk about. Never mind the fact that all of his molecules had been broken down and transported 1200 miles in under a second, Parker was upset that something had been mislabeled.

"It's like 60 fucking miles away!" He continued complaining, pointing in the direction of the skyline "I swear we're closer to Waco!"

In moments of frustration Parker had a habit of making big deals out of little details, and today had certainly been a more than slightly frustrating day.

It wasn't so much the suicide he'd witnessed, the break up, or even the nagging hangover that still

hadn't quite dissipated. By this point in the day all of those things had been mentally filed a section of his brain labeled "trivial things that happened before teleportation". What was frustrating Parker now was that the new times, the times after teleportation, were turning out to be a bit of a let down.

After the incident with the girl from Pyongyang had shown them that the device could transport people, they hadn't wasted any time in trying it out themselves. Due to the condition of the fridge they were still a little wary of exactly where the Vegas destinations might take them. So those were skipped in favor of places more interesting, and the first stop had been Cleveland.

The Black-Out States had fascinated both Parker and Benj since they were children. Benj's father had a satellite photo of North America framed and hung in their dining room which was still there to this day. As a kid he would look at the inky lake of The Blackout States surrounded by glowing lights of nearby towns and let his imagination run wild. Just the idea of a region that survived without the use of electricity was unfathomable to him.

Interstate segregation had progressed rapidly post war, and with luxuries like the internet reserved for those far more well-to-do than the residents of Lost Vegas it was easy for the happenings in somewhere even as close as Arizona to go completely unnoticed to those not online. Cleveland had been disconnected for nearly 60 years now, to a hard up resident of the southwest it may as well have been another planet.

"It's cold there, right?" Parker had asked.

Benj replied with something between a shrug and a nod that Parker interpreted as confirmation which prompted him to gather a few essentials. Benj had been quietly impressed with parkers out of character display of forethought but the moment quickly passed when instead of jackets, Parker appeared from the hallway

closet with a bottle of their moonshine he'd hidden away for a rainy day.

"Cold won't bother us now" He said, then knocked back a mouth full of the clear liquid and snarled as it assaulted his esophagus.

Parker offered the bottle to Benj who initially declined but after considering the reality of what they were about to do changed his mind and took a sip to calm his nerves.

They both leaned in close like tourists taking a selfie. The image on the screen washed out with the orange light from the cheap bulbs that illuminated their kitchen.

Parker took one more sip from the bottle before Benj tapped the screen and sent them both, in the blink of an eye, to Cleveland, ohio. The epicenter of the black out.

It didn't hurt, but the process wasn't without its own particular sensations. When it happened Benj felt like he'd grabbed an electric fence but without any of the pain. A faint tingle washed over his whole body then quickly dissipated. There was a feeling of something that approached nausea but never quite arrived there. It was memorable, and thankfully not so unpleasant it would make either of them apprehensive to go through the process again.

"Jesus Christ" Parker exclaimed as he hopped up and down, shaking the tingle out of his fingers "Feels like I'm getting a handy from a ghost!"

Benj cocked his head to the side and gave Parker a look of confused disgust.

"What? It does!"

For what felt like the thousandth time that day Benj shook his head disapprovingly at Parker who, as per usual, was unaware that he'd done anything to warrant the response.

"What? Seriously what'd I say?"

Parkers voice had a metallic echo to it that drew attention away from lewd similes and onto where exactly they had found themselves.

Parker looked around the space and found he recognized their surroundings.

"Are we in shipping container?"

The container was completely empty with the exception of a single dim construction lamp that hung in the corner of the room giving off a similar warm orange glow to the lights back in their kitchen. The light was about the only thing that was warm, the container was freezing. Sips of moonshine hadn't been quite as effective as Parker had hoped and when he noticed he could see his breath he cursed himself for not bringing the bottle along with them.

The plywood boards beneath them sat unevenly on the metal floor and rocked beneath Benj's feet as he followed scuffs and foot prints in the direction of the door. Even in the sub-par, muted lamplight he could see the chains and padlock. He gave the lock a tug and the industrial echo of metal on metal hummed through the walls of the claustrophobic space. It was sealed tight. They were going nowhere.

Benj turned back to Parker and signed by waving his right hand into a fist then tapping against his left. Parker bounced on the balls of his feet and hugged his body trying to keep warm.

"Yeah no shit it's locked. What are we supposed to do?"

Benj pondered briefly then touched his thumb and fingers tips to his lips, drawing them back across his cheek to his ear.

"Home?" Parker responded, scanning their surroundings uneasily "Yeah. This is kinda giving me the creeps."

Then, in less than a second, they were back in the warmth of the kitchen.

Parker shivered, trying shake the sensation of teleporting away.

"That," he said taking a sip from the bottle "is gonna take some getting used to."

The picture show of his overactive imagination was playing a double feature of his atoms separating in slow motion. In his mind he was sat with a fist full of mental popcorn hanging inches from his face as he stared, wide eyed and petrified by the images of molecules slowly being torn apart. The thought of what was actually happening to him made his ears ring.

As Benj scrolled through the list of Pins stored on the device he noticed the abrupt change in smell between the kitchen and the place they'd just been in. he'd never noticed how much the house smelled like garlic. In a normal functioning household that had regular meals sat around a dining room table this wouldn't be such an unusual thing to notice. In this house though, home cooked meals that weren't microwaved were a thing of legend. They Just didn't happen. The smell brought back memories from his childhood, of dinner with his parents, and his younger brother. Benj realized how little he thought of them anymore, and how much that bothered him.

Parker rubbed his palms together still trying to bring some warmth back into them.

"Ok, not a good start. Maybe this time let's try somewhere warm? Yeah?"

Benj flipped the device around and showed Parker the screen. He'd selected "PIN:Cairo".

There had been a lot of places to choose from. He recognized places like Los Angeles and Seattle straight away but couldn't immediately pin names of places like Tharsis and Ba'het Montes to locations on the globe.

He remembered learning about the pyramids in school and while they hadn't struck him with the same sort of dystopian curiosity as a place like Cleveland, he thought they probably worth checking out.

"Sure, fuck it! Sounds like a rager!" Parker had said when he looked at the screen. Several more sips from the bottle had significantly diminished his instinctual sense of caution.

"Whats the worst that can happen? We wind up in another locked shipping container?"

Once again they leaned into the fame of the camera, for some reason both smiling as Benj tapped the screen despite not actually posing for a photo.

"Oh you gotta be fucking kidding me!?" Parker said as he rattled the chains of another locked container. The only indication that they weren't in the exact same shipping container was all the sand that had been tracked in from the comings and goings of whoever had the keys to these locked doors.

Benj scanned the room with his eyebrows raised before finally looking back to Parker. He brought his right hand to eye level making the shape of a C then tilting the shape downwards.

Parker scoffed.

"It's not so much weird as it is completely on brand for us. I don't know why I thought this would be remotely different from any of the other too-good-to-be-true-things that have happened to us."

Over the next hour Benj and Parker tried half a dozen other destinations and each time found themselves teleported into different shipping containers or storage units, each one chained and locked, all until Dallas.

The Container in Dallas had immediately been different. For a start it wasn't empty. There was a small folding table in the corner under the light and a shelf on the wall.

"Well, I never thought I'd see the day when I got excited about a shelf." Parker said with over exaggerated sarcasm.

The shelf was old and the brackets holding it up looked older. On it were old spray cans so worn by time

the colors were no longer identifiable. Parker picked one up and gave it a shake, the rattle of the metal ball echoed inside the shipping container.

"I guess I never thought I'd see a man slit his own throat though, you know? Definitely didn't think I'd ever see a fridge vanish, or a girl teleport into my kitchen..."

Before Parkers lackadaisical musings on the impossibilities and unlikelihoods of the day could gain any real momentum behind them he was interrupted by the screeching sound of metal grinding against metal as Benj pushed the doors to the container open. For the first time that night they could actually explore the destination the device had sent them to – sort of.

"I don't know why you'd label something Dallas, when it's not Dallas." Parker continued "I just feel misled."

Benj noticed a car in the distance heading in their directions and pointed at it with his thumb.

"Hitch hike? At midnight in middle of nowhere Texas!? Are you crazy?!?"

Benj didn't really care about hitchhiking, or Dallas at all really. It was the first time either of them had been any significant distance away from the city since they were children and it felt as though they were on an entirely different planet. He was happy to just be somewhere new. The air felt crisp and clean. Both of them had taken huge exaggerated lung fulls as if the experience could end at any second, but as refreshing as it was to be somewhere new, they were just in the middle of nowhere.

After a couple more minutes of looking at the city in the distance Benj tapped the screen and sent them back to the kitchen where Parker poured himself another drink and continued to complain.

"Well! This is amazing!" He proclaimed sarcastically clapping along with each syllable.

Benj rolled his eyes and tried to tune Parker out, focusing instead on the screen of the device and the list of destinations they could teleport to next.

Parker complained a lot, so much so that most of it was just white noise to Benj. Today though, it was as though he'd somehow managed to change the frequency and turn up the volume. Benj had cut him a generous amount of slack because of the day he'd had, but by this point it was really starting to be unbearable.

They were teleporting! A button had been pressed and their bodies were instantaneously transported from one location to another! Sure, the reality of it wasn't perfect, but it worked! Benj was so excited he was the closest he'd been to uttering a sound since he was 13. He couldn't understand why there was anything to complain about.

Parker picked up his glass and knocked what was left back in one with barely a frown. Swallowing the spirit was becoming significantly easier.

"we can teleport to locked shipping containers all over the world!" A slight slur was becoming audible in his words

"It's fucking incredible! Christmas and birthdays are ruined from now on. I mean, what do you get the guys who have every—"

Parkers tirade was interrupted by Benj vanishing in front of him.

" –thing"

Quietly, Parker sat down at the kitchen table feeling all of a sudden very unsure of himself.

He wiggled his toes in his shoes and thought about his boots. Thinking about his boots made him think about Nina, and thinking about her made him think about being alone.

"I didn't want to go anyway..." he muttered as he poured another drink.

BENJ.

Benj felt guilty about ditching Parker. He couldn't help it, that's just who he was. However as he found himself once again on the wrong side of locked door, he wasn't sorry he'd done it. Now six locked doors on, Benj could only imagine how insufferable Parker and his complaining might have become.

All together that day He'd been to 15 different places and thus far Dallas had been an anomaly amongst the plethora dead ends. Every location had been so diligently locked that Benj put the open container in Dallas down to sheer negligence. Mad Mike must've just forgotten to lock it. Maybe that's where he'd been coming from before they happened upon him in the yard last night?

He wondered what was on the other side of those locked doors, and what their strange neighbor had been doing with this unbelievable piece of tech. Thinking about the way Mike had ended his life made Benj think that maybe it was a good thing him and Parker couldn't get out of these places. It was unfathomably frustrating though, they'd been given the means but not total access. The idea wasn't lost on him that maybe they were being watched. After all these places were deliberate landing pads for each destination. There was a system in place, and it seemed elaborate enough to assume that it wasn't just being maintained by one single 7 foot tall meth addict. Benj checked the containers, storage lockers, and even one room in England that looked like a single car garage, but didn't find any blatant evidence of surveillance.

As he went further down the rabbit hole Benj tried not to get his hopes up for something other than locked, empty rooms. While that was all he'd been able to find he still couldn't help his fingers crossing right before he tapped the screen and teleported away to the next destination.

The feeling of teleporting was becoming less and less jarring. What had felt like nearly puking was turning into a brief shiver that he barely even noticed. He'd begun to grow accustomed to the warm orange glow of the construction lamps that were hung in the various containers and storage units he'd been finding himself in. Each one made a continuous electrical hum that was consistent from one location to the next. This new room however, was dark. Very dark, and very quiet.

Before Benj had a chance to panic was struck by the feeling of the entire room lurching which sent him completely off balance and crashing to the floor. There was a shooting pain just above his right eye and a bright flash of white as his head collided with something on his way down. Benj lay on the floor with his cheek pressed against carpet and felt the thin trail of blood begin to make its way across his forehead.

He wondered if this had been some symptom of using the device? If he'd teleported too many times and it had fried his central nervous system?

Benj rolled onto his back and looked up. There was a small circular window that allowed a beam of white moonlight into the gloom. As the swaying sensation continued Benj suddenly realized that He was on a boat.

His eyes began to adjust and he was able to make out the layout of the cabin. A chest of drawers to his right, a bed directly in front of him, and a bedside table with the lamp which he crawled towards, fumbling for the on switch. The small metallic button depressed and the room was flooded with a familiar orange light. Squinting through the sudden brightness Benj was able to see that the cabin he'd teleported into was quite lavish. Decorated in regal reds and polished wood grain surfaces, everything dressed in an even layer of dust. It had been quite sometime since someone had been in this room. All of the fixtures were plated gold. The

Lamp, the round porthole window, even the door handle. A stark difference from industrial settings of the past several places he'd jumped to.

Immediately he decided Parker needed to see this and reached into his pocket for the device. By this point in the night Benj was handling the thing with the same nonchalance as any high-rise teenager, tapping the screen and opening the app like he was checking one of the many attention demanding social networks. But as Benj moved his thumb over send button something terrible suddenly occurred to him. In his rush to escape Parkers incessant complaining he'd overlooked the fact that he could only travel to places that were stored in the device, and his house in Las Vegas wasn't one of them.

A bolt of panic shot through Benj and presented itself in the form of fight-or-flight movement which caused him to stand up and rush towards the door of the cabin. He stopped with fingers wrapped around the golden handle and tried to get a grip on some more rational thinking. This was bad, very bad, but he wasn't completely screwed.

With a small twinge of embarrassment Benj walked back to the bed and sat down. The bed was soft, so soft that he never quite stopped sinking into it. He wondered how someone could sleep in it without the constant feeling of being entirely swallowed by it and suffocating. Just like Parker dealt with stress by focusing on small frustrating details, Benj's mind dealt with it by leading him to harrowing worst case scenarios.

He drummed on his legs and tried to assess the situation he was in.

he was on a boat in Long Beach California and he could travel between there and his previous Pin, a shipping container in Kazan Russia, which was locked. He might have been able to get off the boat, but that still put him 5 or 6 hours by car away from Las Vegas,

and it wasn't like he had his interstate passport handy to get back across the border if he could even find a way to get there.

Benj stood up and began to pace the tight space between the door and the dresser trying to come up with a plan that didn't involve walking home. Several half baked ideas passed through his mental periphery before he remembered there had been 2 other Las Vegas Pins saved to the device! One had destroyed a fridge but the other had passed the case test before being overlooked.

Now with a renewed sense of caution towards teleporting Benj took a deep breath, and with his eyes closed tapped the screen and left the cabin behind.

Benj felt the tingle and waited with his eyes still scrunched closed for something terrible to happen, but nothing terrible came. Wherever he was, it was cool and quiet. He could feel the artificially cold breeze of an air conditioner blowing a chill across the back of his neck. He could tell through the slight translucence of his closed eye lid that there was no construction lamp, this room was dark.

Slowly Benj opened his eyes and on a day where he had seen the impossible become reality, he still had to pinch himself to be sure he wasn't dreaming upon seeing where the teleporter had taken him.

Dennis Morrison.

a short anecdotal story where Dennis has refused medical attention and has been camped out on the side of the highway waiting for something else to appear there. Eventually Benj does and Dennis gives chase.

PARKER.

A thick rope of drool hung from Parkers chin, descending towards his chest at the rate of pitch. To save on electric most homes installed timers and motion detectors on the interior lights and it had been hours since he'd moved enough to trigger them. With the exception of lifting the orange plastic cup to his mouth once or twice, Parker hadn't moved since Benj had left.

It'd had been a long time since his body had achieved a state of genuine rest and it had seized the chance to shut down and to recharge the moment Parker no longer had the stimuli of another person around to distract it.

Despite the less than desirable positioning of his body Parker slept deep and hard. His breaths were reptilian. Huge inhalations that his lungs clung to and shook down for all the oxygen they could hold before slowly reintroducing them to the world as carbon dioxide.

He dreamed vivid and wild dreams. In them he was with Nina at her apartment indulging in the oxytocin soaked, post coital confidence that only exists between the moments following climax and when clothes are reapplied. The kind of confidence that allows you to bare every inch of your dark, tortured soul to another person with the certainty that your partner will still accept you afterwards. Parkers version of expressing this confidence was standing on the bed with his dick and balls tucked between his thighs impersonating some kind of bird. Nina could barely breath she thought it was so hilarious. unquestionable proof that he was dreaming.

In the dream, Parkers lewd display of avian affection was interrupted by the sudden and constant sound of someone pounding on the front door. Parker knew that sound all too well as the polices first form of communication to let someone know exactly how fucked

they are. He knew this wasn't the police though. He knew because the dream editor cut to a shot of the hallway showing him 6 members of the Korean Peoples Army kicking in the front door which, thanks to dream logic is in the bedroom, and opening fire on them both.

The first bullet landed dead in the center of Nina's forehead, killing her instantly and sending her body slumping over the edge of the bed.

The dramatic score of the dream grew in its intensity as another bullet grazed Parkers arm and provoked him to dive for cover behind the couch which, like the front door is also in the bedroom. Covering his head he heard 8mm projectiles wiz past him and ping against the reinforced floor to ceiling window that soared 28 stories above Las Vegas. The gunfire was deafening, only matched in volume by the degree of pain he felt as a bullet ripped through his shoulder and another through his chest. Slowly bullets started tearing him to pieces until the sound of gunfire changed into something new, morphing into the sound of someone frantically pounding on his front door.

Parker woke up with a jolt and triggered the motion sensors on the lights. Ignoring the door for a moment he explored with his fingers the bullet holes that now only existed somewhere in his subconsciousness.

Wiping the drool away from his mouth Parker shuffled lazily to the door and opened it to see a very out of breath Benj, who appeared to be vibrating. Since ditching him hours earlier he had now acquired a small head wound and the golden shine of a developing black eye, both of which Parker ignored.

"I'm very upset with you" he said with little inflection.

Benj pushed something into Parkers hands and then with audibly grinding teeth, disappeared into the house.

Parker looked down and found he was holding a large bottle of pills. He squinted through dim porch light at

the label on the orange cylinder and eventually made out the word Dexedrine, a prescription stimulant.

"Well..." Parker said tilting his head from side to side "...this, certainly eases the hurt."

He popped the white cap off and shook a couple pills out into the palm of his hand, dry swallowing them before yelling after Benj.

"Where have you been? Any and why do you have all this speed?"

Benj reappeared with from back of the house with a bandaide now covering the cut on his head and holding a roll of black trash bags.

He seemed excited but also very serious at the same time. Jokes aside, Parker was a little concerned.

"Seriously what the fuck happened to you?"

Benj pulled the device out of his pocket and tapped the screen a couple times before holding it up and angling the screen to capture them both in the cameras view.

"Oh... More of this? Did you find something?"

Parker's interest once again piqued but couldn't help but frown when he saw himself displayed on the screen. He really looked terrible. There were thick dark bags under his eyes and his beard had begun to get to the stage where it loudly reminded him that he was unable to grow one and needed to shave. He didn't want to go anywhere other than back to sleep but before he could protest Benj had tapped the screen and they were both no longer in the kitchen.

Parker shivered off the tingle of the jump, something Benj no longer even visually responded to, and couldn't help his jaw from hanging wide open when he saw where they'd landed.

"Benj, this is..." he said, but couldn't find any more words.

There was a gigantic smile of success painted across Benj's face as he nodded slowly, confirming the words Parker didn't need to say out loud.

"This is a pharmacy" he couldn't believe it "We are inside of a pharmacy."

They weren't just inside of a pharmacy, they were behind the counter! Behind the reinforced glass in the room that everyone from dope sick junkies to mothers to can't afford their children's insulin wish they could spend just a couple minutes to fix a few of life's many, many problems.

Whether people want to admit it or not, if you ask anyone what they'd do if they suddenly found themselves in possession of a teleporter, the first thing on everyone's mind is "do a crime". Bank robbery is probably the most common thought. Slip into a bank fault under cover of darkness and line your pockets with the cash of all the useless, do-nothing, upper crust who probably couldn't spend all their money in a lifetime. 10 minutes of morally questionable behavior to change your entire life. A life that is now, thanks to your handy new teleporter, completely without consequence.

It's the life that Parker and Benj were thinking about before this realty fracturing device that had landed in their laps destroyed their refrigerator. The life that seemed to get further and further away with every locked shipping container, remote Texan field, and derelict cruise ship the thing had led them to – but now it had led them to a pharmacy.

Parker was beginning to feel the initial come on of the two pills he'd taken as he looked around the room with the same wonder and amazement someone might be possessed by if they were surrounded by mounds of solid gold coins.

It wasn't a bank vault, it was better.

Benj excitedly ripped off a bag from the roll and offered it to Parker who needed no instruction, he knew what to do.

NINA.

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" turned out to be an aggressively ironic slogan for a city that's love affair with ephemera has been going on for over 100 years. Some things stick though, they slip through the cracks and the wrecking ball of progress somehow misses them.

This was exactly the case of one particular Walgreens pharmacy that stood on the corner of Charleston and Las Vegas Boulevard. Opened in the summer of 1997 it seemed like the store was almost immediately given a historic building accreditation. While nearly all of its neighboring buildings were repeatedly bulldozed and rebuilt, the Walgreens stayed exactly the same. It survived through riots, a pandemic, economic downturn, and even a world war! The chain pharmacy stood strong for the better part of a century until the land it stood on was purchased by the Siegal Corporation who leveled it to make way for construction on what would become the 8th high-rise tower erected in downtown Las Vegas. All was not lost for the spirit of this particular Walgreens though, as it appeared someone involved with the planning of The Siegel Community Tower was slightly sentimental about its demise and instructed the architects designing the facility to include 15,000 square feet of retail space between floors 3 and 4 of the lower level parking garage.

When the tower opened in 2058 long time residents of the area were excited to find the space had been used to resurrect the pharmacy location with so much attention to detail you might assume they had just built around the original store.

It was this particular pharmacy that detectives Logue and Ramirez had been instructed to stake out in

hopes bringing an end to a recent run of robberies that had been occurring at the historic location. The thefts themselves had been relatively minor and weren't the point of interest for the police. Small amounts of cash were taken along with small selection of prescription drugs. What had caught the attention of the LVPD was that there was no sign of forced entry and the perpetrator had managed to execute the robberies without triggering the buildings security systems.

By 2076 the cost of data storage was astronomical, even a corporation with the Resources of the Walgreens/Boots Alliance couldn't afford to keep cameras recording 24/7, so the store employed motion triggered CCTV. The system was as sensitive as it got and would regularly film an errant cockroach looking to exploit the laziness of the Tuesday night cleaning crew, but to keep these instances to a minimum the system allowed for 30 seconds of constant movement before it began recording. If motion continued for an additional 15 seconds after that an alarm was triggered and the police were automatically called.

An inside job seemed obvious but there were no records of the alarm being deactivated at any point and a previous team of investigators had determined that it would take even the swiftest of criminal more than 30 seconds to get in, take what they wanted, then vacate.

Even with all the technology available to the police, sometimes the most efficient way to catch a crook is to lie in wait and catch them red handed – and that's exactly what Logue and Nina were there to do.

It was approaching hour four and Nina's mood hadn't improved even slightly since her meeting with the FED's. She was known around the precinct for being very no-bullshit kind of detective, so stoicism on the job wasn't unfamiliar territory for Nina, but this was something noticeably different. Usually on a stakeout like this she would never have allowed Logue to highjack the cars HUD to watch movies, but there he was

watching an elderly action hero shoot up an office full of terrorists while she stared vacantly out the window trying to convince herself that the longest relationship she'd ever had wasn't falling to pieces.

The on screen action Relented to give the viewer a moment to breath before it pulled out all the stops for the climax and for the first time since they'd arrived Logue attempted to engage Nina in conversation.

"I don't get it Ramirez. Is the sex really that good? Does he have some monstrous cock that does things no other men can?"

Nina turned to her partner wearing a face that looked so disgusted you'd have thought she was responding to him shitting in his hand to throw at passing cars. The large man chuckled to himself as he sipped from the silver hip flask he kept stashed in his jacket.

"Hey! I get it!" he continued, unfazed by Nina's blatant distaste for the topic "You know I like to go down to the streets and play in the dirt every now and again. Hell, Street level girls are a riot. They really go for it! Girl from the upper stories isn't gonna..."

Nina couldn't bare to hear anymore.

"Would you please stop! Jesus..."

Logue laughed, entirely amused with himself.

"All I'm saying is this. I go down and have some fun but I don't feel the need to take any of 'em home! I'm sure what's his name..."

"Parker..." Nina snapped before he had a chance to use some derogatory nickname.

"I'm sure Parker is a lot of fun..." he said the name with a mocking tone "but why don't you get ya'self a man that I'm not gonna have to lock up some day, yeah? It's a city full of street rats Ramirez, plenty of fun to be had. But you're never gonna get any of 'em to stop shitting on the rug"

Nina folded her arms and let out a long frustrated breath.

He'd put it in the most deplorable way possible but, did Logue have a point?

Being with Parker was fun and exciting but she'd worked her whole life to get out of Lost Vegas and to where she was now. Did she love him enough to jeopardize all the work she'd put in? A few hours ago Parker been a person of interest to a pair of federal agents! She didn't want to admit it to herself but if there was one thing that could bring everything crashing down around her, it was Parker. The more she turned it over in her head the more obvious it became to her that the life she wanted and her relationship with Parker were two opposing forces that would eventually collide, and when they did, she would be left with nothing.

"Ramirez! Are you listening to me? We got action!" Logue said, snapping her away from her thoughts.

She'd been miles away.

The HUD on the windshield now displayed the feed from all 12 of the cameras inside the pharmacy. It was dark, but on the 3 that were focused on the store room, the room with all the drugs, two shadows could be seen piling everything they could into big black bags.

She moved to get out of the car but Logue stopped her before she could race into the building.

"wait, wait, wait... They just got started. Lets let 'em commit a crime, yeah? Then whadaya say we got take these pricks to jail?"

Logue winked and smiled, It made Nina smile too.

Suddenly Parker was out of her mind and all thought of him had been replaced by something she loved, the job. Which was exactly how Nina liked it.

PARKER

Parker had asked Benj to send him back to the pharmacy for 10 more minutes so he could give it one last look and make sure they hadn't missed anything of value. Looking at it made that very hard to believe, the place looked as though wild boars had rampaged through it. He and Benj had been anything but delicate. He knew he probably wasn't going to find anything else worth taking, this was more or less just a victory lap. A Solitary moment to soak up what he considered a real triumph.

Parker leaned against one of the now very bare shelves of the pharmacy store room and couldn't help but laugh to himself. It wasn't really because anything was particularly funny. Ok, yes, he was highly amused by the entire scenario but this laugh wasn't about that. This laugh was what his body decided on as an analog for a sigh of relief. It wasn't loud. It barely amounted to a few quickly staggered exhalations through his nose followed by a deep breath drawn between lips that wore one of their biggest smiles to date.

Things were going to be different now.

Obviously things were going to be different the moment they'd found a piece of technology that allowed them to teleport, but that didn't come with any guarantee of good or bad. Like everything in life that was just another unexpected thing that happened in a series of other unexpected things. What they'd just done though, while leaning towards being morally questionable and probably beyond that, it was going to make life a whole lot easier for him and Benj. In the grander scheme of things its was going to make life easier for a lot of folks, even if it was just for a little while.

It was a feeling he couldn't put into words, so Parker did what he always did when he didn't know what else to do, he laughed. He laughed and then from a bottle he'd stashed in his back pocket, he tapped out two football shaped pills into his hand.

Parker looked at the pills and deliberated on whether or not he should take them. In normal situations he wouldn't have been quite so indulgent. Inebriating treats like these only came around once every couple of years, usually in the form of long expired prescriptions someone had dug out of an old dentist studio or a vacated house. He'd developed a frugality towards them that in most cases led to him squirreling away things like pills until they were so old they lacked even a whisper of their original potency.

He really didn't need to take anything else. The 2 he'd taken when Benj had arrived back at the house were already doing a great job, but need and want are two very different things and Parker wanted very much to take them.

In performance for absolutely no-one, Parker slapped his forearm and sent the two pills into the air, cascading with perfect precision down into his mouth. He bowed, crunched down on the two pills, then looked for something to wash them down with. There was nothing. He'd made a terrible mistake.

As Parker's mouth filled with the chalky bitterness he ran to the door that led into the main area of the store in hopes of helping himself to some sugary treat, but as he pulled down on the handle he was met with the crushing reality that it was locked and he would either have to spit the chalky sludge out or convince his body to swallow it, something he wasn't sure was possible.

Parker shook the door defiantly, kicking it repeatedly in what he knew was an entirely futile attempt at gaining access before finally admitting defeat and pressing his face against the small square window that looked out into the store. Parker glowered at a dimly lit drinks cooler that was so close he could hear its low mechanical hum. He wasn't sure if it was the drugs he'd taken, but it sounded like it was mocking him.

He knew there was literally an entire Pharmacy's worth of drugs he could pick from back at home but he hated the thought of being wasteful. Parker swirled the lumpy mess of amphetamine slurry around in his mouth and was about to make one final go at swallowing, but before he could even attempt it Parker found himself enveloped by the awful feeling that he wasn't alone.

Parker spun around genuinely expecting to see Benj but was instead met with the last person he could have ever hoped to see there, Nina's partner, Detective Doug Logue, and clutched in Logue's fat, sweaty fingers was an old silver revolver leveled right between Parker's eyes.

His heart jumped into his throat and Parker gulped it back down, taking the bitter sludge he'd been planning to spit out along with it. His eyes scrunched and his lips quivered as he felt it all descend inside of him like he's swallowed wet sand.

"What's the matter Pan? You forget how to fly" rogue says with a sneer.

For a moment, the detective appeared delighted with his quip, but his expression soured after a quick glance up and down at Parker taking note of his filthy, blood stained jeans.

"Jesus Ludere, you look like shit."

Logue had always hated Parker. He'd assumed it was because the man had a thing for Nina, something that was never going to happen whether or not Parker was in the picture. As far as he could prove though, it was solely because Parker didn't live in one of the towers. The detective made use of every opportunity to bring up Parkers street level status and was always so obnoxiously amused with himself for doing it.

It wouldn't have bothered Parker quite so much but he knew that Logue burned most of his salary away in illegal casinos and lived in a low level studio in the Rio High Rise. He'd seen those places, they were

smaller than his living room, for some reason the marginally elevated proximity of Logue's bed to the streets gave him cause to think he was special.

Parker's thoughts raced. Partly from the adrenalin surge but mostly from the Dexedrine he'd eaten that was now suddenly speeding through his blood stream. It was as if they'd seen how hard the ones he'd taken earlier were working and had gotten right to it not wanting to look like slouches. His mind moved so quickly he couldn't immediately focus on any single thing. From one fraction of a second to the next Parker pondered everything from his current predicament to a joke Rusty had told him that he only just realized was funny. Absentmindedly his face twitched in the earliest stages of laughter before being distracted by the scent of canola oil coming from Logues gun. Is that what you use to clean a gun? Parker brain didn't give him a chance to explore the question before moving onto the startling realization that if Logue was here, Nina would more than likely be here too. Would Nina help him? Probably not. This was all very bad. He felt great. But this was all very bad.

He felt like his eyes were spinning and squinted trying to slow them down.

Logue gave him a look that was somewhere between confused and repulsed.

"What the fuck is wrong with you" The detective asked, nervously adjusting his grip on the gun.

Parker shook his head hoping to knock one consistent thought into place.

"Logue, I am very, very high right now."

It was probably the wrong thing to say.

Detective Logue, enraged by Parker's lack intimidation, grabbed him by the arm and spun him around, pressing his face flat against the door. Pain shot through Parkers shoulder as it twisted under Logue's leverage.

"You think you're so fucking funny don't you?" Logue growled through gritted teeth as he clipped an old 2020's set of hand cuffs around parkers wrists.

The detective had a significant weight advantage over him and Parker could barely even begin to struggle. He could taste Logue's rank breath. It smelled of liquor and years of skipped dentist visits.

Parker couldn't help but scream as Logue leaned more of his weight into the hold. uncontrollable tears began welling up in the corner of his eyes. As Parker tried to push himself up onto his tiptoes, into a position that might reduce the bigger mans leverage, he noticed the stores large digital clock on the wall through the doors tiny window. Four big digital numbers reminded him that in two more minutes Benj was going to press the return button on the device and rescue him. All Parker needed to do was somehow get Logue off of him and prevent the detective from teleporting too.

He went limp, raising a physical white flag he hoped would trick his attacker into think he'd won. It worked and Logue let go, shoving him down to the ground.

Parker tried to count backwards, keeping track of the time he had left.

"118, 117, 116..." he muttered through ragged breaths as he felt the blood run back into his cuffed hands.

"Would you shut up!"

Logue tucked his gun away and looked as though he was about to wind up and deliver a kick when...

"PARKER!?"

He looked between Logues legs and saw Nina standing in the doorway of the rooms fire exit. She wore what was quite possibly the most horrified look he'd seen in his lifetime of knowing her.

98, 97, 96. The numbers kept ticking down in Parkers head as he looked sideways at her from the floor.

"Oh hey honey!" He said, then immediately regretted it when Logue kicked him.

A punt right to the jaw that caused his teeth to smash together. The power surprised him. Parker had always just assumed Logue was made out of fast food but apparently there were some real muscles hiding in there.

The metallic taste of blood coated his tongue and mixed with the terrible flavor of the pills to create some new hybrid flavor that was somehow a million times worse.

He just couldn't stop himself from talking.

"Logue was just showing me some self defense techniques. He's a really patient teach-OOF!"

Parker received another kick. This time to the chest which knocked the wind out of him. He wheezed trying to hold any oxygen in his lungs.

"LOGUE! STOP!" Nina commanded, screaming at her partner.

Parker raised his hand like he was about to say something else but Nina stopped him before he could utter a syllable.

NINA.

"PARKER SHUT THE FUCK UP!" She yelled.

The two men both looking at her as if they wanted to say something to the effect of "I thought you were on my side?!".

She'd seen Logue be vicious before but the kick had seemed so laden with spite, like he'd been waiting a long time to do something like that.

Parker looked pathetic. Dark red blood drooled from between his lips as he writhed around on the floor like a seal pup trying to get himself upright. '

"What did I tell you Ramirez? What did I..."

"Logue!" She cut him off, no longer shouting. Nina's voice was assured, authoritative.

"go to the car and call this in." She said.

Nina was having enough trouble organizing her own thoughts on what she was seeing, she didn't need Logue's too.

"Leave you alone with him? With this asshole?" Logue stabbed a finger in Parkers direction.

"That's not very nice." Parker muttered.

"I said shut up!" Nina snapped, then began talking to logue like Parker wasn't there "He's cuffed. He's not going anywhere and he's more likely to give you trouble than he is me. Go call it in."

Logue stuttered over a protest that was stifled by a glare from Nina and then stomped out the back door, leaving her alone with Parker.

"I guess you probably wouldn't buy that this is all a huge misunderstanding, eh?"

Parker laughed, just a little. It was kind of laugh he'd used way too many times to break tense moments. He could always inject the right amount of humor into any situation to make even the worst of times feel not so bad. His secret weapon when it came to making her forget that she was upset with him. Alone with him in that room though, it had no effect. Like some spell she'd been under was finally broken. He had no power over her.

"Do you have the keys to that door? Because there's no way Biggie-Two-Shoes out there could catch me on foot"

She stared at him for a few moments, felt the final remnants of panic racing around her in her mind stop and crystalize. All at once she felt six years of loving this man turn to stone then crumble into dust. Seeing him there with all his disguises torn away made Nina feel like the stupidest person in the entire world. Everyone, every single person had been right about Parker and she'd ignored them, clinging to the idea that they were all wrong. That he was a good man trapped in a bad life, a bad world.

She'd been such a fool.

"Nina, I know, this is fucking wild, and I promise I can explain everything but, right now I need you to undo these cuffs and let me get out of here before he comes back."

Nina sunk, like her body suddenly weighed a million pounds. She'd felt like this before other times when she'd thought about life without him, life after Parker, but she'd always backed down. Slipped back into his comfortable embrace instead of facing the storm ahead. Taking that leap and moving on was always going to be hard but he'd just made it so much easier for her. Nina buried her face in her hands and all at once came to terms with reality and what she had to do next.

"Nina..." He said

But she wasn't listening to him. Not anymore.

Nina was suddenly so aware at how much time she'd spent listening to Parker instead of listening to herself. It was hard for her to look away when her memory presented her with all the opportunities she'd missed out on because she put him first. Always Parker and his attachment to the streets, to burnt out street lights of Lost Vegas.

"Nina I'm..."

Instead of focusing on what she'd missed all these years she looked forward to all the wonderful things that were to come, starting of course with what was about to happen right there. Through the bright lights of her mind she walked herself through it. Picking him up off of the floor, tuning his voice out as she marched him out of the building. She could already see the smug look of satisfaction that would undoubtable be covering Logue's face as she pushed Parkers head down into the back seat of the car. She'd feel good about it too! Because she'd finally be free of Parker and all of the ways he held her back.

"Nina I'm so..."

And then Parker disappeared.

Right before her eyes. Before he could give her another of a million empty apologies, he vanished. Dematerialized. It was as if he'd never been there at all.

Nina felt dizzy trying to comprehend what she had just seen. What had she just seen?

"Logue!" She yelled.

Her voice lacked all of the authority it had when she was demanding he leave her alone with Parker. Now it was full of uncertainty, of fear. Nina realized that for the first time in as long as she could remember, she was terrified.

With clumsy steps Nina slowly began backing away towards the door, keeping her eyes on the place on the floor Parker had been sitting.

"Logue!" Nina yelled again, and then ran to her partner to try and explain something completely and utterly impossible.

Parker & Benj

"...sorry" said Parker.

But it was too late for an apology. It had probably been too late long before Nina had laid eyes on him in the pharmacy, handcuffed and higher than hell on pills. The only person who heard him was Benj, who appeared over the top of several black bags that now occupied their dining room table.

He'd brought Parker back to the house before the situation at the pharmacy could escalate any further but the damage had already been done. He was still sat with his legs straight out in front of him and his hands cuffed very securely behind his back. He couldn't stop thinking about the way Nina had looked at him as he'd tried to apologize. The shame. He slumped over as

far as the restriction of his cuffed wrists would allow and let out a long frustrated sigh. Things were definitely going to be different now.

He wanted so badly to just walk to his bedroom and spend several days in bed feeling sorry for himself but after what had just happened, taking some time for himself wasn't an option.

He could feel Benj looking at him and pivoted his head away from his knees to meet the glassy gaze of his friend.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Parker said sarcastically.

Benj slowly raised his right thumb, then index finger, then tapped his wrist with his left hand.

Parker rolled his eyes.

"A lot can happen in 10 minutes Benj." he said "I'm fine by the way."

He wasn't fine though. On top of having several loose teeth Parker was on the cusp of a rather significant panic attack.

"It was Nina! and that fucking dickbeast Logue!" He explained as Benj helped him up off the floor "just came outta nowhere!"

Benj took a moment to examine his friend and then just shrugged, returning to his seat at the table to get back to what he was doing.

"AHEM!" Parker cleared his throat.

"Would you mind?" He asked turning around and waving his cuffed hands.

Benj just stared back at him, expressionless.

While Parkers brainwaves felt like they were performing freeform jazz, Benj's looked like they were barely managing nursery rhymes. The lights were on, but adding to Parkers growing list of concerns, he wasn't sure if there was currently anyone home.

"The Garage. Bolt Cutter. Jesus! What did you take?" He asked with more than a slight hint of agitation.

As Benj's brain finally brought him up to speed he signaled his understanding with two feeble finger guns, then with his eyes barely open he got up and lethargically began to make his way towards the garage door. His shoulders hung like there were 50lb weights attached to his arms. It was all he could do to keep his feet from dragging with each step. Parker watched with wide eyed amazement wondering whether or not he'd actually make it.

He wasn't upset with Benj, if anything he was jealous. All he wanted to do was slow down, he just didn't want to be quite as slow as Benj was. He was stuck trying to figure out what their next move was while the pills he taken turned his brain a mental flip book that forced him to think about everything at once.

As slowly as he was capable, Parker tried to lay out the situation in hopes of coming up with something that, at the very least, sounded solution adjacent.

He'd been caught. Thanks to Benj he'd managed to escape, but he'd been caught and it wouldn't be long before Nina and Logue came looking for him.

"Nina saw me teleport" He called to Benj as he eyed the labels.

He didn't think Benj was listening but hearing his own voice externally seemed to quiet the 15 he could hear internally.

On the table, there was a veritable cavalcade of pharmaceuticals. There were orange pills, purple liquids, even syringes that appeared to be preloaded with doses of god knows what.

"I don't know what she plans on telling Logue..." He continued "...but there's no way he's gonna believe her if she tells the truth."

It wasn't lost on Parker that what happened had left Nina in a less than desirable position. Her partner and their superiors were never going to believe that her boyfriend had just disappeared after being caught in the act of grand theft. They'd think she'd let him go

and, as selfish of a thought as it was, he knew that would buy them some time to make all of the evidence disappear. The problem that Parker now faced was how exactly he and Benj could make that happen?

One idea pushed its way to the front of his mind and presented itself, Parker recoiled at what he was suggesting to himself and did his best to repress it.

What they'd taken from the pharmacy was way to big of a score to flush and just the thought of doing it almost made him puke.

Parker knew while they'd been loading everything into bags that it was all worth an absurd amount of money. They had everything from opiates to prescription deodorant which could all be sold relatively cheap and leave them free of financial woes for years to come. There had been no thought spent on the fact that they'd have to make it all immediately disappear. Parker needed a solution and he needed one fast.

The idea reared up again, louder this time.

"No, definitely not that" He muttered to himself.

But much to Parker's dismay, he knew it was the only idea that could get the job done.

He tried turning his head, as if he could look away from the thought but only wound up making the thing more plausible. Sitting next to a pile of purple pills was the device. The amazing thing they'd found, conspicuously disguised as a cell phone.

"BENJ!" He called "Does this thing make phone calls"

The sound of clumsy rummaging ceased and Benj's bloodshot eyes emerged from the darkness of the garage.

"You're not going to like this, but I think we need to get ahold of Lenny."

There was a small processing period but when Parker's words finally registered, Benj threw the bolt cutters on the floor, spat, then receded back into the garage, shutting the light off behind him.

Lenny.

To stop at any red light in Las Vegas usually meant dealing with someone begging for money, but the deluge of unfortunates that crowded around the highway off ramps were enough to make a person consider staying on for a few more exits. No matter the weather, the lines of cars waiting to pass through the toll booths would be swarmed.

Some were the weather worn, sunbaked statues that stood out there every single day and others were weekend warriors. Employed types who knew they might be able to score some tax free income on a spare Sunday.

Some would hold cardboard signs decorated with a scribbled plea for sympathy. 'Anything helps', as long as it can be pledged in the form of cold hard cash. They'd slowly amble up and down the lines of cars on the toll roads trying to make eye contact with every driver who passed. Hoping to wring out a single drop of guilt that might materialize into a dollar bill. These types were easy to deal with, you just look away and pretend they don't exist. Then there were the entrepreneurs who knew damn well a sob story wasn't going to convince you to part ways with your hard earned cash. These people were out there to provide you a service or sell you their wares, some of them even tried to put on a show for you. From woven palm frond sculptures to broken cell phones or even quick window wash that left your car dirtier than it was before they touched it. In Las Vegas, any time a car wasn't in motion, it was an opportunity for money to change hands. Some of these people even took credit cards.

Lenny couldn't stand it. Most days he would slump in the soft leather seats of his vehicle, turn up the tint on the windows and hope no one would approach. Other days, he chose violence.

"Hey buuuudy!" He called out the window of his brand new, all electric SUV at man wearing nothing but a loin cloth.

The mans head slowly turned and looked towards him. It was as if he'd been so still for so long his muscles had atrophied and could no longer move with the speed they once possessed.

"Yeah, you. Buddy c'mere" Lenny said as he hung a \$100 bill out of the cracked window.

The leathery man's eyes scanned from side to side, making sure no one else had taken note of this kind samaritans generosity and then began to approach.

"That's a good boy, come 'n' get it" Lenny taunted.

The man was smiling. It might well have been the first time he'd smiled in months as the streets of Las Vegas left little to be happy about. Unfortunately for this poor soul his joy would be short lived and ripped away as Lenny quickly pulled the bill inside the car before he could take it. Replacing it with a chubby middle finger pressed firmly against the glass.

While Lenny doubled over with laughter inside the ice cold interior of the car, the victim of his cruelty stood, once again frozen, staring in disbelief. He stayed that way for the entirety of Lennys drive to the toll booth. Eyes locked on the car the whole time.

"Ticket." Said the uniformed attendant flatly.

Lenny had purposefully hammed up his laughter in hopes of being presented with an opportunity to recount the prank, but much to his disappointment she didn't seem remotely interested in engaging with him. He rolled his eyes at her as he handed her his ticket and watched her feed the heavy paper slip into a machine.

"\$18.50" She said.

Her hand blindly reaching to receive payment.

Prices for the toll booths had always been outrageous. It had been a minimum of \$15 to travel on any Nevada highway since before Lenny had been old enough to drive but that didn't stop him from shaking his head in pantomime protest of the charge. Being upset about toll prices was just a thing people did.

"Declined." The attendant said, her arm extending back towards Lenny with the ferocity of a switchblade.

"Thanks" he replied absently

He hadn't been paying attention to the woman. Lenny tried taking his card and pulling forward, but hit the breaks sharply when the barricade didn't raise and she didn't release the card.

"I said, your card was declined." She reiterated.

The toll booth attendant was looking at him now, and she wasn't amused.

"That's impossible..." He said "Run it again"

"I'm sorry, but are you suggesting that I, the person who sits here for 12 hours a day keeping this endless line of cars moving efficiently, somehow lost my mind during the interim between you and the last customer causing me to forget how to tap one tiny piece of plastic against another? Thats not what you're suggesting, is it..." She looked at the card for a name she could use "...Susan?"

Susan was his mother's name, the benefactor of the card.

Lenny's nostrils flared as he rolled his lips inwards briefly entering into a staring contest he had no hope of winning.

Behind them, cars honked and expletives were hurled out of open windows. The agitation of people desperate to get out of their cars was beginning to boil over.

Eventually Lenny aggressively flipped open the center console of the car and took out the \$100 bill he'd used to taunt the man in the loincloth.

The Woman smacked her lips.

"You know I can't break this, right" She said.

Lenny let out a throaty grunt of irritation.

"Buddy, You're fucking kidding, right?"

The toll booth attendants eyes went wide as she mimed faux offense.

"Heeeeeyyyyy. No need to start cussin' at me. I don't make the rules here."

The woman was happy to point out that she had nothing to do with this particular policy, but at the same time seemed equally pleased that she, at this particular moment, got to be the one who enforced it.

"Just take the money" Lenny said and the woman happily snatched the bill out of his hand.

"So you'd just keep a buck fifty if all I had was a twenty?" He asked while he waited for the barrier to raise.

"MmmmmmmHm" she replied dismissively.

"So why not just make it twenty?"

She sighed, letting her posture sink as she turned back to look at him.

"Because everything in this terrible fuckin' world is designed to torture us. To make sure we're aware of how unwanted our presence on this world is. From our very first breath until our very last."

The woman's candidly bleak response shocked him, stealing any snide retort he may have had chambered. All he could do was slowly nod in agreement.

Maybe things were different in other places? But she'd just summed up exactly what life in Las Vegas was like.

"Now please pull forward so I can get to all the people who are pissed off and late because a spoiled little shit made my day more difficult than it had to be."

Lenny's eyes narrowed to a scowl as he pressed his foot to the gas pedal and peeled away from the woman and her toll booth.

"Hey Siri..." his voice cracked as he yelled to

activate the cars voice recognition "...Call Bitch-Ass-Susan".

Surface streets of Vegas were a mess. Unlike the highways, there wasn't any money in repairing streets like Washington or Carson. They were left to decay for years, eventually devolving into a minefield of potholes that forced motorists like Lenny to zig zag all over the road trying to avoid bottoming out or blowing a tire.

The ringing tone hummed out over the cars speakers as Lenny waited anxiously for his mother to answer the phone. He was furious about his card getting declined and wouldn't be able to calm down until he'd given her a piece of his mind. His frustration only grew when she didn't answer, instead letting him go to voicemail.

"Fucking Bitch!"

Lenny stabbed the End Call button on the cars touch screen so hard the entire LCD screen rippled.

Lenny Came from money and had spent his entire life being babied and spoiled rotten by both of his parents. As far as his finances went, they payed for absolutely everything. From his phone bill to his health insurance all the way his property in the heart of the Lost Vegas neighborhood of downtown. The latter being a rather large source of contention.

Moving out of their grandiose high-rise home was his final impotent act of teenage rebellion. He wanted to live on the mean streets of downtown but had somehow never taken into consideration what life was going to be like once he was no longer attached to the financial umbilical chord of the families money.

Lenny didn't last a week. He had zero experience living surrounded by poverty stricken and desperate people. The foolish boy hadn't made even the slightest attempt to hide his wealth and privilege. A crew of movers proudly hauled in lavish furniture and high end electronics in plain view of people who hadn't eaten in days, dangerous people.

The neighborhood was surprisingly forgiving. They probably thought they were being set up. But on the third night Lenny awoke from dozing off on his couch to the sensation of crudely sharpened steel pressed against his throat, and then his jeans soaking with his own piss.

They weren't even wearing masks. They didn't need to. It wasn't like this soft, spoiled child was going to do anything in retaliation, and the police would have laughed him out of the building.

To Lenny's credit, he didn't tuck his tail and run back to the security of high rise living. What Lenny did was bring the security of high rise living to Lost Vegas.

His initial announcement that he was leaving home to live among the common folk at street level had ended with his parents cutting him off, but being the push overs that they were, they responded to the news that he'd been robbed and still intended to stay by offering to support him whatever capacity ensured their baby boy could sleep safe and sound. An offer Lenny eagerly accepted.

Security gates went up around his home. 7 foot tall fences topped with woven razor wire that, even in the crude industrial dystopia of Lost Vegas looked absolutely ridiculous. Every inch of the property was covered by a collection of security cameras. His car was fitted his car with bullet proof glass equipped with auto-tint and he began stashing weapons everywhere one would fit. After all that he started throwing his weight around the community and getting to know his neighbors. His money allowed him to get his hands on things no one else could and after a couple months he'd firmly positioned himself as a necessary evil. Lenny didn't care though. Not only had he shown everyone they couldn't scare him off, he'd made it so they needed him.

The entirety of Lenny's house looked like the bedroom of a 15 year old. There were video games in the kitchen and bathroom, posters fixed crookedly to the walls with duct tape, and with nary an adult in sight, everything was filthy.

He'd had tried to call his mother 15 more times before arriving back at his house and each time the call had gone unanswered, picked up by voicemail. As he walked through the front door he was looking for any excuse to treat someone like his personal punching bag.

"Fuck Ally! This place is disgusting!" He yelled into the house.

Ally was Lenny's girlfriend but it wasn't like there was much in the way of romance going on between the two of them. She was barely 18 years old and had already managed to acquire a rather healthy pill problem that of course, Lenny kept fed. In return she was basically his live-in maid.

Lenny mumbled obscenities at the girl who eventually appeared in the doorway to the bedroom where she spent most of her time nodding out. To call the girl slender was an understatement, she was a skeleton someone had draped skin over the top of. She wore children's clothes, when she wore clothes at all, and years ago had decided to permanently commit to fresh-out-of-bed as a hairstyle. Ally had been gorgeous, but now she looked like a malnourished barbie doll someone had left out in the sun.

"Relax." She said through a yawn "I'll get to it later. Did you pick up from Angel yet?"

Lenny had plugs for all kinds of things scattered all over town but Angel was the one he was most proud of. Angel was big time, but the other side of that coin was how dangerous that made him. The majority of his business was done within the walls of high rise towers. It wasn't that he didn't want to move product at street level, it just wasn't worth the inevitable trouble that

would come with it. The streets were full of desperate people, and as Angel regularly tried to remind Lenny, desperate people were unpredictable, and that made them stupid. Lenny wasn't from the streets though, and he certainly wasn't desperate. Angel knew where the kid was from and that any trouble Lenny might run into dealing with the streets could be covered with a quick call from Lenny to his mommy and daddy. So Angel put him on, letting Lenny deal with all the types of people he preferred not to be associated with.

"No, Ally, I didn't" He said to her condescendingly "You know, buddy, the world doesn't revolve around you getting high!"

Everything in Ally's world revolved around getting high. It's why she put up with Lenny speaking to her the way he often did and was quick to stop putting up with it if he ever hindered his ability to use.

"What the fuck Len'!? I've been waiting all fucking day! I'm gonna start getting sick in a couple of hours!"

She knew her habit very well.

"Buddy, that's not my problem" Lenny said, trying to sound intimidating.

Sooner than later though, it would become his problem. Ally would make his life a living hell before she dealt with getting sick and he knew it. Last time he'd made her wait she started a fire in the front yard with all of his sneakers. He hadn't even done it intentionally. Rush hour had collided with a single lane construction zone on route 15 and turned a 20 minute drive into nearly 3 hours of stop and go. He'd seen a plume of smoke rising from the direction of Lost Vegas while he was still on the highway, even commented on how shitty it must have been for someone. It wasn't until he finally got home that he realized that someone was him.

He had been planning on using his card to cover his pick up from angel but as he discovered at the toll

booth, that wasn't going to be an option until he figured out why it wasn't working. He'd need to figure something out quick before Ally became an issue.

"TV, POWER ON" He said as he stomped through the living room and threw himself onto the couch in front of a huge LED screen.

The clever thing to do would have been to continue trying to reach his mother and solve his current cash flow problem. But Lenny wasn't clever, he was lazy. Instead, he cued up a playlist of his favorite cartoons and quickly fell asleep.

Several hours later Lenny awoke to the a repeating chime of an alert coming from the television set. He opened one eye and squinted through the digital light trying to see the screen. In the bottom right hand corner of the screen there was a little envelope, illuminated in red and desperately bouncing up and down hoping someone would notice it. Slowly he sat up, glaring at the alert suspiciously, no one had his home number. No one except...

"TV, PLAY MESSAGES" he demanded, now at the edge of his seat.

The window for a video message appeared on the screen and showed a confused older woman whose eyes tracked back and fourth as though she was reading something to herself, unaware that her device had begun recording.

"Lenny... Lenny honey. It's your mother." She said after a few moments of silence.

She spoke loudly, in the way that people sometimes do when talking to a person who doesn't speak the same language.

Honey, I hate to do this over one of these things but me and your father have been talking and we love you, but we can't enable this sort of behavior anymore. If you're going to continue to live down there on the streets we're not going to support you financially like we have been. Your great grandfather worked very hard

to keep your sisters and you from living like that. We love you honey. Please just come back home."

There was a few moments of stillness. Lenny took a series deep and controlled breaths, in then out. It was just the calm before the storm, before he exploded

"FUCKING ASSHOLES!" He screamed, then launched the nearest solid object he could grasp at the television set.

A half empty 32oz Miller Highlife bottle exploded against the screen splintering the image into little geometric rainbows. He ripped the baseball cap from his head and bit down on the brim, growling like an animal.

Ally's head peaked around the corner from the bedroom to see what the commotion was all about right as Lenny kicked the coffee table and sent the collection of dirty cups and dishes crashing to the floor.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" He yelled when he noticed her staring.

With shaking hands Lenny pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed the number to his parents home phone. Just like before, the call went unanswered and eventually to voicemail. This time he left a message.

"FUUUUUUUUUUUCK YOUEEEEEEUUUUUUUUU!"

Lenny roared into the phone with the lung splitting ferocity of a 12 year old who'd been grounded for the first time in his life, then pitched the phone across the room.

His face had turned bight red and channels of scarlet glowed through his thinning hair. There were tears in his eyes as he stood panting through gritted teeth. He saw tiny fireworks in his periphery and felt the throbbing in his temple throughout his entire body. Then, from the other side of the room, in the direction of where he'd thrown the phone, he heard a noise.

My anaconda don't...

My anaconda don't...

My anaconda don't want none unless you got buns hon'

A Remix of sir mix-o-lot's "Baby Got Back" from the early 2000's that he had set as a ring tone. It was the perfect soundtrack to punctuate how ludicrous his tantrum was, though it did little to settle Lenny's anger as he marched across the room ready to give one of his parents a piece of his mind. However when he picked up the phone and looked at the screen, he saw a number he didn't recognize. It certainly wasn't a local number.

Lenny steadied himself before he tapped the screen to answer. Doing his best to throw a figurative damp towel over his stove-top fire of rage.

"Hello?" He said, angrily.

"Hey, Lenny, this is Parker Ludere I had a question for you."

"Who?" Lenny replied.

He knew exactly who Parker was, but he didn't want him to know that.

"Parker Ludere. We've met a few times. Mostly at Rusty's Nightbar"

There had always been something about the Parker that Lenny just couldn't stand. He was one of those people that everyone liked and that drove Lenny crazy because – Lenny thought the guy looked like a junkie. He dressed like he pulled his clothes out of a dumpster and despite the fact that he was almost always broke, he somehow had this cop girlfriend that was a literal 10.

"Ohhh, yeah. I think I remember you." Lenny replied with an emphasized lack of enthusiasm "You're the moonshine guy, right?"

"Yeah! Thats me... well, I used to be. Now I think I might be doing something thats more you're wheelhouse."

Parkers voice was casual and friendly. He spoke to Lenny as though they were old friends which just added

to the dumpster fire of anger that was burning inside him.

The reason that Parker had called was because he was in need of some help moving, what he described as a significant amount of pharmaceuticals that he'd somehow found himself in possession of. He hadn't gone into elaborate detail about what constituted as a "significant amount" but he promised Lenny it would be worth his time.

Parker Ludere was one of the last people Lenny had any interest in helping but as he listened to him ramble on and on he got the impression that Parker was a little desperate, and that got Lenny thinking. He remembered something that angel had taught him about desperate people being stupid – or something like that. He shook off his initial reflex to leave Parker high and dry to deal with own problems and decided that the universe had presented him with an opportunity.

"Uh huh? Ok. Yeah, I can help. I'll be over in 15 minutes"

When Lenny turned around he saw Ally creeping cautiously across the living room towards the front door. She was holding her bag and a pair of tennis shoes.

"Where the fuck are you going?" He said to her.

His voice was low and serious. The outburst that had nearly sent him on a course to destroy everything in the house appeared to be over, but he did seem any less angry. It was as if he'd somehow learned how to wield the negativity over the course of the phone call.

"Nowhere. Out. I was gonna go try to score a little hit" She said, fumbling over her words.

Lenny never hurt Ally, but in the same way she could be irrational, he could be scary. His mood swings were unsettling and even though he'd never done anything, she never trusted that things wouldn't eventually escalate.

"You're not going anywhere." He said "I'll be back in an hour, clean this place up"

Lenny waited until Ally signaled her compliance then picked his hat up off the floor and walked out the door.

Parker's house wasn't far, but in recent years the streets of Lost Vegas had started to become increasingly more difficult to navigate by car. Gargantuan sink holes and overgrown camps that had begun to overtake the roadways and blocked several major streets. It would have been faster for him to just make the trip on foot but Lenny knew better than to wander through the neighborhood at night.

As he weaved quietly through the maze of Lost Vegas Lenny tried to make a decision on how he was going handle this meeting. The transactional details of the whole thing had been kept vague and he didn't know if Parker was expecting him to walk in with a brick of cash to buy everything on sight. Obviously that would have been the preferred option for all parties, but thanks to the perceived treachery of his parents he no longer possessed the super power that was being wealthy. He knew Parker needed things to disappear and he'd called Lenny to make that happen. This made him think that he was probably Parker's only option, and that put him in the position to set the terms.

A confident smirk appeared on Lenny's face as he rehearsed. It didn't matter what Parker expected. He'd tell him point blank that he was walking out there with whatever he wanted and that he'd pay for it all whenever was convenient for him, if he decided to pay for it at all. Lenny glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror and nodded slowly to himself assuredly. Parker couldn't tell him anything. He was in control.

Lenny liked control. If he was addicted to anything, it was feeling powerful. He wouldn't admit it to anyone but it was why he was so hell bent on staying on the

streets. Up in the towers he was just the next in a long line of inconsequential heart beats sustaining themselves on the generational wealth earned from work other people had done. Living on the streets didn't change that, but pressing himself against backdrop of poverty and suffering helped Lenny convince himself he was special, not just another spoiled rich kid.

"Gross" Lenny said aloud to himself as he pulled up to Parkers house.

The Place was a dump. Lenny thought that it might have been relatively nice at one point, but that was a long, long time ago. What stood there now was the reanimated corpse of someone's dream home. The fence around the outside of the yard was tangled with yellow police tape and it looked like someone had emptied a dumpster out where a lawn should have been. Screens haphazardly hung from window frames and the roof above the garage sagged like an old midwestern barn under the strain of time. It looked like it needed to be condemned. Before he got out of the car, Lenny reached behind the seat and after fumbling for a few moments eventually retrieved a small plastic case that contained a .22mm pistol. If there were any cracks in Lenny's confident demeanor, having this tucked in his waistband sealed them right up. He'd never actually fired the gun before but he'd spent a lot of time playing with it, posing in front of the full length mirror in his bedroom deciding which stance made him look the most intimidating. The gun was a last resort, but he was always waiting for the opportunity to pull it on someone and test those poses out for real.

Most of the street lights around Lost Vegas were busted and the ones that still worked were covered in decades of grime and dirt which gave a creepy orange tint the light that they emitted. The Cul-de-sac looked like a scene from a horror movie and Lenny couldn't help but feel like there was some kind of jump scare waiting for him as he walked between the car and the

house.

After climbing up the steps to the front porch Lenny found two bare wires where a doorbell would have been. He wondered if he was maybe supposed to touch them together for the bell to work but decided against it and knocked instead. The last thing he wanted to deal with today was getting electrocuted.

There was a noise from inside of the house followed by some colorful swearing before the silhouette of a man appeared through the frosted glass of the front door.

Parker looked decidedly taller than Lenny remembered. In his mind he'd clocked them at relatively equal heights, 5'8 or 5'9, but he was easily over 6 feet.

As the door swung open Lenny greeted Parker enthusiastically but that enthusiasm tapered off aggressively when he got a look at Parker.

"Hey Buuuudddy!"

He looked worse than the house. His lips was split pretty badly and there was blood smeared across the patchy stubble on his chin that ran all the way down his neck to the collar of his t-shirt.

"Hey" Parker said.

Lenny didn't think it was possible to emote so much exhaustion in one syllable but Parker had somehow managed it.

"You ok man?" Lenny asked, he was genuinely a little concerned.

"Oh, this" Parker said, waving his pointer finger in the direction of his mouth "This is all totally fine"

He seemed shocked Lenny had even noticed.

Around his wrist was one half of a set of old school police handcuffs that didn't look like they were being worn as a fashion statement.

"Come in!" He said then turned and walked inside.

Parker led Lenny through the house. It was one of those old Vegas homes that was deceptively small from

the street but became cavernous when you walked inside. It felt warm, lived in, and surprisingly homey. It was nothing like the exterior had suggested. The decor gave off the heavy vibe of being at someones parents house, the total opposite of Lenny's place which had a new wave lord of the flies look to it.

Parker pushed through a set of saloon doors into the kitchen. Now in better light Lenny could see that Parkers jeans also were also stained with something dark and crimson. He immediately began to feel a little unnerved by his surroundings, a feeling that multiplied ten fold when he passed over the threshold into the kitchen.

Parker waved his arm as if he were introducing someone.

"So... yeah. This is all of it".

Lenny's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates. There was barely a single clear surface in the entire kitchen. Everything was covered with medical supplies. Some of it had been bagged up, the rest was loose and strewn about the place. This went beyond a significant amount. This was spend-the-rest-of-your-life-in-jail. Lenny felt like he could probably have been considered an accessory to whatever this was just by answering the phone. this was dangerous.

"Basically I need it all gone, like, 20 minutes ago."

The magnitude of what Lenny saw was apparently lost on Parker who picked up a small orange capsule from the kitchen table and offered it to him.

"These are good." He said "I've had a couple of these."

Eventually he took the pill from him but just stared at it. He felt nauseous.

Lenny had seen large quantities of drugs before. Once, he'd arrived at Angels place 45 minutes early and walked in on a transaction involving a kilo of speed. The look he'd received from Angel haunted him for weeks

and he made sure he was neither early or late to a meeting ever again. The thing that stayed with him the most though was how unimpressive it looked. The kilo was a long fabled achievement in the world of dealing drugs but the reality was that it was just a hefty bag. Something you could shove under a couch. What Lenny was seeing in that kitchen was beyond anything he'd ever imagined.

"I was thinking 3 grand up front and we'll call the rest a float? Sound good?"

As Lenny stared at the little orange pill trying to comprehend what he was seeing, something began to occur to him. Maybe nothing about this seemed real, because it wasn't. This was a set up.

It all made perfect sense to him. Parker wouldn't call him, of all people, out of the blue for help with something of this scale. No functioning mind would think a single person could take care of something like this. Then there was his girlfriend, she was a cop! A detective or something. This was totally a set up, and he needed to get out of there, fast.

"Lenny!" Parker said, drawing his attention.

He wore a dopey grin and was waving his hands in front of Lenny face.

"Ya in there? Does that sound good?" Parker tried confirming again.

Lenny finally made eye contact with him.

"What is this?" He asked

Parker snorted out a little laugh.

"Well, I guess if you want to get down to strict definitions, this would probably be considered a drug deal."

"Why did you call me?" Lenny asked.

He was speaking quickly and quietly.

"What are you talking about man?" There was a hint of annoyance to Parkers voice "This is what you do, right? You're the guy! When someone needs a guy, you're the guy! I need a guy Lenny, tell me you're my guy."

Lenny raised his finger tips to his temples and shook his head.

"No no no no no no. I gotta go. Yeah, I can't be here"

Lenny tried backing towards the door but stumbled over one of the many black trash bags and spilled several bottle of cough syrup onto the black and white tile floor.

"Would you calm down a second. This is a great opportunity – for everyone!"

Parker excitedly raised his hands into the air. The man looked insane.

"Buddy, I'm not your guy. Buddy, seriously. I'm not your guy"

"You gotta be the guy. Even if it's just for tonight." Parker persisted.

"I'm not the guy!" Lenny pleaded, quickly ducking around his deranged host.

"You need to be the guy!" Parker said wringing his fists together.

There was genuine frustration to Parkers voice now. He had begun slowly edging towards Lenny who instinctively backed away but found himself bumping into a large, unusually shaped object that was covered with a huge sheet. As he hit, whatever the thing was, Lenny was reminded of his pistol and without any hesitation reached to draw the gun on Parker.

Thats when the lights went out and Lenny felt a strange shiver travel through his entire body.

He held the gun out in front of him with a shaky arm, squeezing the grip against his sweaty palm. It was so dark he couldn't see it.

"WHAT THE FUCK BUDDY!" Lenny yelled.

His voice echoed as if he were in empty gymnasium. That's when the fear took over and Lenny fired the gun.

POP! POP! POP!

His ears rang but for the briefest of moments the muzzle flashes let him see the terrifying truth of his

situation. He was no longer standing in Parkers kitchen.

Lenny scrunched his eyes closed hoping that when he opened them he'd be back in that dingy kitchen but when he did, it was all just blackness. Infinite and terrifying blackness.

Out of the darkness came a sound, a scratching that echoed off to his left. Lenny turned and fired the gun three more times.

POP! POP! POP!

As the shots echoed in the giant empty space Lenny felt something strike him from behind. A blow from a blunt object sent him sprawling on the floor and dropping his weapon. The ground was wet and muddy. Lenny frantically felt around trying to find the pistol but without any light it was useless. Then Lenny saw something, his own shadow. Faint at first but growing in density and extending out in front of him. Lenny turned around to see the source of the light but quickly wished he hadn't.

Standing behind him were three figures. The two to the left and right were still shrouded in darkness but the one in the center, the one holding the source of the dim orange light, Lenny could see that one.

It was over 7 feet tall but stood with a hunch. The glow from what looked like a pretty average construction lamp cast shadows over huge, muscular broad shoulders. It wore clothes, a dirty tank top that hugged tightly to grey skin that was mottled with scars. Around its waste hung a loose belt adorned with all kind of instruments that didn't look like they could be used for anything other than harm.

It looked like a thing that used to be a man but had become something even more dangerous.

Lenny tried to crawl backwards away from the creatures and as he did, the one he could see began to smile. The kind of smile a cat gives to mouse, it's only purpose to show prey its fangs. Even in the poor

light there was no question in Lenny's mind that this thing had fangs. A mouth filled with carefully sharpened razors.

Then all three of the things began to laugh, and Lenny began to scream.

Parker & Benj.

Parker looked at Benj with both of his eyebrows raised as high as they could go. His lower eyelids felt like they were a moment from pulling away from his eyeball.

"What did you do that for?" He asked, exasperated.

In one hand Benj held the device and used it to point at where Lenny had been standing, with his other hand he made a finger gun.

"He did NOT have a gun! Are you high!?"

There was a brief moment of stillness before Benj's face erupted in an ear to ear smile and Parker roared with laughter.

Nina.

There had been a long and particularly awkward silence that followed Nina's explanation as to how her boyfriend, the man they'd just caught in the act of looting a pharmacy, had somehow evaded arrest.

She'd cried, almost the entire time, which was something she'd never done in front of him. She was confused, angry, upset, but all the while completely earnest in her recounting of what she'd seen while she had been alone with Parker. But all the while she could tell he didn't believe her. Who could blame him? It sounded like something from a bad science fiction

novel.

Logue was not a man who knew what to do around a woman in distress. Just last year she'd watched him slap a woman as a means of calming her down. They'd been responding to a call about the woman's husband attempting to set her on fire, she had every right to be hysterical! Nina didn't report it at the time, she hadn't seen the point given that the detective already had an Internal Affairs folder thicker than most English language translations of the Bible and, as he'd reminded her countless times, cops look out for other cops. Now she was the hysterical woman. Logue probably would have slapped her into silence as well if he didn't have quite so much respect for her. Instead he sat quietly in the police cruiser with her, staring off into space and probably hoping for a natural disaster to occur so he didn't have to tell her how stupid the whole thing sounded.

The sound of her saying the words looped over in her mind sounding more and more ridiculous every time. He just disappeared... It's what happened.

"Did you get my cuffs back?" He asked, finally breaking the silence.

Nina squinted, slowly craning her neck towards him.

"Logue! he disappeared! At what point do you think I had the foresight to retrieve..." She trailed off, realizing what he was getting at "... You think I let him go. Don't you?"

Logue's head bobbed back and fourth as he chewed on his words.

"I was just asking – It doesn't matter what I think. What matters is that I just called in an arrest we don't have, and the only explanation you got as to how the collar got away is that he disappeared into thin air..."

Logue gave Nina a chance to process it. A chance to experience how it sounded coming from another person. She scowled in reply.

Logue raised his eyebrows in a high arch and clicked his tongue.

"You wanna look El Tee in the eye and tell him that?"

Nina rummaged through her thoughts for an idea and to her own surprise came up with something relatively quickly.

"Punch me in the mouth" She said with an alarming amount of conviction.

Logue arched an eyebrow and shook his head slowly.

"Seriously, split my lip open. We can say the perp overpowered me!" The excitement in Ninas voice grew as she began to flesh out the idea. "He overpowered me and we didn't pursue because you were making sure I wasn't hurt"

"No one's going to believe your boyfriend roughed you up. Yeah he's street trash, but everyone know's he wouldn't lay a hand on you."

Nina rolled her eyes.

"They don't know it was Parker, Logue!"

Her partner winced as she said it.

Nina rolled her lips inwards and let out a long and dissatisfied breath through her nose.

"Logue... Please tell me you didn't get on the radio and broadcast to listening ear with a police scanner that you had my boyfriend down here in handcuffs?"

It annoyed her that she hadn't said ex boyfriend, but now wasn't the time to split hairs.

Logue just bounced his knee, pinching his plump lower lip between his thumb and forefinger.

"Logue..." she pressed.

"I was excited!" He tossed his hands up in defeat "The guys trash. I've always known he was bad news. Not a single person at the station liked him and..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" She yelled over him.

Nina scrunched her eyes closed and tried to think. This was a less than desirable situation to be in and as far as she was concerned, it was all Parkers fault.

She thought about how relieved she'd been when she saw him in handcuffs. She'd been looking for excuses instead of just ripping off the band-aid and for a moment it seemed like he'd done all the hard work for her. Then he went and spoiled it, making her look like a crazy person in the process. There was no way she was going to let him just get away with it.

Thats when Nina decided to stop thinking, and just act.

"get out." She said.

Logue looked back at her confused.

"What do you mean 'get out'?"

"I mean get out of the car Logue. There's units en route, right? Buy me some time. I'm going to get him."

"Go get him?" He asked "you basically said he got raptured."

"I know what I said. But if he's anywhere, I know where it'll be."

It was as if call the confidence that had been shaken off of her in the last hour had all of a sudden been replenished.

"Get out." She said, nodding towards the door.

"You better know what you're doing here Ramirez, or we both fucked." Logue warned.

She met his eyes with a smile and that was apparently all Logue needed to wave away his concerns. Logue stepped out of the car and Nina scooted over the center console into the drivers seat.

The tires squeezed as she pulled off of the ramp and onto the surface streets in the direction of Lost Vegas.

Parker and Benj.

There was an all but imminent police presence looming over them and, if anything, their situation had only gotten worse. Not only did they still have a kitchen full of stolen pharmaceuticals, but they'd now managed to lose the only person they knew who could help them get rid of it all. The seconds ticked away but for some reason Parker and Benj were both rather calm.

"Where is Tharsis anyway?" Parker mused as he tossed an empty pill bottle from hand to hand.

Tharsis was the location Benj had sent Lenny to. It sounded familiar but neither of them could place exactly where it was.

"It sounds like it might be Australian." He decided "He should be thanking us if you sent him there. I mean he's probably locked inside of a shipping container but, at least their economy isn't in the toilet. Am I right?"

He waited for some kind of response from Benj, who was laying flat out on kitchen floor making dust angels, but heard nothing. Benj had no idea where Tharsis was. He'd just selected the a random place as soon as he felt like the meeting was going south.

Parker was sat in the sink, long legs dangling over the side with his head leaned against the windowsill directly behind it. While his hands were busy with the pill bottle, his eyes were occupied following long dead hanging plant that swayed gently from side to side above him.

They hadn't done much since teleporting Lenny away.

"Bring him back. I'm sure we can work it all out" Parker said with surprising amount confidence.

He pushed himself up on his elbows to look at Benj who made finger guns and arched an eyebrow in reply. He hadn't wavered on his assumption that Lenny had been armed.

"I'm telling you, he did not have a gun!"

Benj nodded in protest, slapping the ground for emphasis.

It didn't matter whether he did or he didn't at this point, it was done. It had happened and the only two options they had now was to either bring him back or leave him there.

"He's probably losing his shit." Parker suggested with a little chuckle

He wished he didn't find it so funny, but imagining Lenny frantically trying to make sense of what just happened to him did bring a smile to his face. The guy just made it so easy to dislike him.

"ok..." Parker began "... Let's say he does have a gun. I can't imagine that he'll be too happy to see us. What do we do if we bring him back and he starts shooting?"

Benj pulled himself to his feet and started to pace. The suggestion of a mental exercise seemed to bring him back to life a little.

Parker set his pill bottle down and hopped up out of the sink to join Benj on his feet.

"Yeah! Thats the spirit. Get those brain legs moving!" Parker said encouragingly.

After just a couple moments of pondering Benj snapped his fingers and waved for Parker to follow him through the door that led to the dining room. Once Parker had joined him, Benj gestured for him to stand on the opposite side of the door way and then pulled out the device. Before Parker had a chance to register that his quiet friends plan was simply to hide behind the door then bring Lenny back, Benj had pointed the phone into the kitchen and tapped the button.

There had never been any indication that you needed to point the device at anything. For all they knew they could have stood out on the porch and pressed the button, which would have been entirely safer. But learned behavior being what it was Benj thought of the thing as a remote and considered danger just something you have to take in stride.

"Really?!" Parker mouthed to him as he glared with chastising eyes.

The two friends stood quietly waiting for something dramatic to happen, but all they heard from the kitchen was sound of slow, labored breathing.

"Hey, Lenny. Buddy? Look, I know you're probably not too thrilled with us right now and, Who could blame you? I'd be furious too. Benj here was just under the impression you had a gun and wanted to look out for me."

As he spoke he slowly stepped one leg out into the doorway. When nothing happened he cautiously began to move the rest of his body out from cover. On the off chance that Benj had been right about Lenny carrying a gun, Parker kept his hands up and his head down. He wanted to seem as non threatening as possible.

"What I want you to know is that the police are probably on their way here, so if you have a grudge you want to settle with us, is there any possible way you could save it until we've all avoided arrest?"

Parker, now a whole two steps into the kitchen, continued to stare down at the fading pattern on the linoleum waiting for a response, all he heard though was the same slow breathing he'd heard from the dining room.

Gradually Parker raised his eyes until he saw the horrifying reality of what they had brought back to their home.

"oh god..." he said through a whisper.

It was Lenny, but it looked as though he'd been beaten nearly to death. There was duct tape covering his mouth and his wrists had been bound. His face was purple from bruises that were so swollen they completely obscured his left eye and his arms hung at impossible angles caused by two very clearly dislocated shoulders. He was barely recognizable.

Lenny was no longer wearing the oversized 'rasta' hoodie he'd walked in with. Now the only things

covering his all but bare chest were bloody strips of the same duct tape that ran from the center of his ribcage to just above his navel. Blood could be seen oozing out from either side of the tape as if it had been used to close a wound.

Parker stared at him, petrified in terror until he was startled by the click-clacking sound of Benj dropping the teleporting device behind him. He turned to see Benj covering his mouth in shock.

Then Lenny made a noise. An awful, chesty, groaning sound that was muffled by the tape and forcing a bloody snot bubble out of his left nostril.

Parker could see Lennys single visible eye wince. He couldn't tell if he trying to communicate or simply crying out in pain. Anyone would be forgiven for assuming the latter given his condition but the former was proven true as Parker took a small step towards Lenny. He let out another pained groan and looked to be trying to shake his head – and then the beeping started.

It sounded like a digital alarm clock ringing in some other room of the house or as if it were cutting through heavens of a nightmare. Usually the kind of sound to signal the conclusion to a harrowing battle with ones subconscious, but this nightmare was real, and the beeping was coming from Lennys chest.

Parkers head snapped back to look at Benj who was equally as confused by the sudden and incongruous tone. The sound began to rise in frequency, getting faster and faster until it reached a silent crescendo and then with a wet popping sound Lennys upper half was liquified into a fine red mist that covered Parker, Benj, and everything else in the kitchen. All that was left of him was his legs, both of which had been vaporized down to the middle of his thigh. Two stumps briefly stood independently for a moment before giving into gravity and toppling over.

The only thing Parker could hear was the thunderous beating of his heart as he tried to wipe the blood from his eyes. Once he could see again he glanced around the macabre scene for the briefest of moments before he walked to the door that led out into their back yard. Benj followed right behind him and at almost the exact moment the door closed behind them the two men began to violently throw up.

"What the fuck just happened?" Parker grunted, wiping his mouth "Did he just..."

He trailed off, struggling for words and the balance to keep his feet under him as he looked back at the house in horrific disbelief.

The sheer net curtains that hung inside kitchen door, covering the twelve little panes of glass that made its windows had been soaked entirely in Lennys blood. It looked as though there was a dark crimson light glowing within the kitchen.

It was a twisted and selfish thought, but as he stared at the house Parker couldn't help but envy Lenny. Sure, he was dead, but at least it couldn't get any worse for him. Parker Ludere had always been the kind of guy who got away with it. Whatever "it" happened to be, a fortuitous twist of fate always allowed him to somehow skirt the consequences. There was even a running joke about a race of benevolent mole people living at the earths core moving giant magnets that somehow helped steer him out of harms way. That's not to say that things always turned out great, but as far as Parker was concerned it never wound up being as bad as it could be. Right now though, it was as bad as it had ever been and given the specifics of the situation it only looks like it was about to get worse. He thought about marching out to the front porch to wait for Nina and Logue to come, put another set of handcuffs on him, and send him to jail for the rest of his days. Admitting defeat wasn't really his style though and Parker suddenly thought he could feel a

certain group subterranean rodent people pushing their magnets around.

"Benj..." He calmly called to his friend.

He'd never seen him wear a look quite so hopeless.

"I got an idea." He said

Then Parker tried wink reassuringly but found sticky, drying blood made that impossible. Instead it just looked like a strange twitch, and the hopelessness on Benj's face somehow grew even more pronounced.