

THE COST OF FREEDOM AND OTHER STORIES

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
in
English

by

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who encouraged me onward

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To all who need a place to sleep or a meal in their belly:

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ABSTRACT

THE COST OF FREEDOM AND OTHER STORIES

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The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories is a collection of interconnected fictional short stories that turn the internal conflict into a tangible obstacle the characters must overcome. By exploring themes of escapism, obsession, and toxic patterns, *The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories* takes a hybrid approach to the genres of Cyberpunk and Fabulist Fiction. This hybridity allows the fabulist elements to take on a more active role in the plot of the story. The critical introduction discusses the craft elements of defamiliarization and characterization as they explore the fabulist elements of the stories. The authors discussed in the critical introduction are Kôbô Abe, Charles Baxter, John Ajvide Lindqvist, Gloria Naylor, Marge Piercy, and Victor Shklovsky.

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Development

My work always focuses on a character interacting with a fabulist element that brings to light their own flaws. This formula may take different forms, tones, and settings, but the formula remains the same. An earlier indoctrination into fantasy, science fiction, and horror provided the training for a dreamy-eyed, absurd-thinking, pessimist. This accumulation of interests and genres has led me to a hybrid approach to writing. I will discuss aspects of the fathering genre of science fiction and the developing Fabulist Fiction in *The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories*.

Science fiction always has an interesting balance between the science and the fiction. Several genres form around that balance, creating new genres such as Cosmic Horror, Science Fantasy, and Hard- and Soft Science fiction. In his article “The Boom in Science Fiction,” Kōbō Abe describes his balance of science and fiction as:

Of course, saying that science fiction is founded on pseudo-science doesn't make it a child's bedtime story... one might say that the active contemporary significance of science fiction lies precisely in that absurd fantastic quality. (343)

He uses science fiction as a platform for the fantastical criticism of the human condition as opposed to the optimistic and hard science fiction of the likes of Isaac Asimov. Where Asimov often sought to evoke the optimistic possibilities of the future, Kōbō Abe sought to highlight the absurd reality—or present—we lived in. This “absurd fantastic quality” often creates stories of isolation, transformation, and escapism.

In *The Cost of Freedom and other Stories* these transformations, while often negative, are tied to the character's personal journey. In Abe's *Secret Rendezvous*, a doctor becomes a human-horse hybrid to compensate for his sexual insecurity just as a girl becomes a pile of goo, moldable by the protagonist to represent the objectification that society has forced onto her. At times, the rational world distracts from the core of the personal conflict. It provides a desensitized view of the reality that we face every day. Just as Kōbō Abe turns a man into the beast he acts like, I seek to turn the internal conflict into a tangible element in the story to better refocus the reader's sense of importance. The strange must be anchored within the real, pulling and holding the real for the reader to witness its fullest extent.

Perhaps a more accurate title to put Kōbō Abe—and myself—under is the relatively new concept of Fabulist Fiction. Fabulist has become a developing third category of fiction to compete with genre and literary fiction that holds its roots from the fables of old. As a fable tends to be a moral lesson disguised as a fantastical story, Fabulist Fiction uses the unnatural elements of their stories to serve its themes. However, as such a new category, there isn't a direct consensus of what can be safely described as Fabulist Fiction. Some argue many titles under Science Fiction, Magical Realism, and Fantasy should be placed in the Fabulist umbrella or vice versa instead of their genre or literary categories. What can be agreed upon is that it holds too much artistic and oftentimes cultural merit to be safely placed under genre fiction. However, it also embraces absurd and unreal elements that make it hard to label it under a specific literary category. Fabulist will be what I label the supernatural, unnatural, and absurd elements in my work for better clarity and focus.

However, the greatest theft I have committed in Science Fiction is stealing the gritty aesthetic and themes of isolating from Cyberpunk. I love the work of Cyberpunk's founding

father, William Gibson. Cyberpunk, and by extension William Gibson, manages to craft an environment to make the reader and characters feel small in comparison to the powers that be. The world becomes bleak and hopeless and the characters are only able to survive within it. Rarely do they thrive even as they slowly strip away their humanity to move up in the world. His novel *Neuromancer* counteracts the squeaky clean feel of works like Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series. To be clear, I love Asimov's work as much as the next science fiction fan, but my more pessimistic views tend to lean toward Gibson's Cyberpunk.

Unfortunately, the gritty aesthetic becomes so stapled to the genre that I want to turn instead to Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* for exploration of themes. Her novel takes place far from the dive bars of a typical Cyberpunk novel and instead starts in a child custody hearing. Shira reflects on her failed marriage with Josh during their custody hearing and comes to several important points: "If [Josh] had loosed in their marriage the passion her leaving had provoked, they might have had a chance together. He fought her with full energy and intelligence, as she had wanted to be loved" (Piercy 132). Where a typical cyberpunk novel would start in a dive bar filled with mercenaries, barflies, and other unsavory characters, *He, She and It* starts with child custody, which can be filled with equally unsavory characters of a different shade.

Josh is no less amoral than the mercenary, while Shira is no less lonely than the barfly. The Court and Government are run by a corporation called Yakamura-Stichen that places a greater economic value on her ex-husband than herself. When Josh is awarded custody, it is an economic assessment as opposed to parental merit. The perspective has changed, but the oppressor remains the same, and the oppressed navigate the same powerlessness. The traditional gritty aesthetic does play a role in later sections, specifically the Glop (a poor district where people struggle to either survive through nefarious means or escape through the Network), but

this moment still channels the same socioeconomic caste system that drives the characters to desperate ends.

The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories is a loosely interconnected collection of stories. All stories are set in an unnamed but Fabulist city that forces each character to desperate ends. Each story in *The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories* embraces these desperate ends and their costs in a different way. To best analyze these differences, the remainder of this introduction will be split between the craft elements of defamiliarization and character.

Defamiliarization

My manner of addressing the fabulist connection to the plot is best described as “defamiliarization” as first mentioned by Victor Shklovsky in his article “Art as Technique.” He explains that, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 12). Shklovsky takes this implication and applies it throughout other authors and artists, most notably Leo Tolstoy. For Shklovsky, defamiliarization remedies the reader’s natural desensitization of word and context. For example, Shklovsky quotes Tolstoy’s description of a flogging as an act of, “[stripping] people who have broken the law, [hurling] them to the floor, and [...rapping] on their bottoms with switches” (13). This definition drags out the act of flogging, forcing the reader to participate in the dread with every word. When using the word itself—flogging—there is an emotional distance that allows the reader to tone down the bodily violation. Tolstoy’s description, however, embraces the bodily violation of the act. Through defamiliarization, flogging becomes a real and harmful act. This is a more literal and realistic example of the defamiliarization I use in my work.

Charles Baxter moves closer to my use of defamiliarization as expressed in his essay, “On Defamiliarization.” An example of this is noted when he deconstructs deeper and hidden connections in possibly contradictory terms such as, “Street gangs sometimes act like families, and families sometimes act like street gangs. The familiar gives way, not to the weird, but to the experience of a truth caught in midair” (Baxter 33-34). Baxter expresses defamiliarization in widely recognizable terms, family and gang. The ideal family expresses love and security, which adds a layer to gang that typically expresses violence and danger. Yet, a family can be a gang, or a gang a family. By defamiliarizing the term, the reader refocuses their understanding of both “family” and “gang.” The violent family becomes the gang and the compassionate gang becomes the family. While Baxter continues to address a more realistic defamiliarization, he does introduce defamiliarization relating to a hidden truth. This is a concept I make use of throughout *The Cost of Freedom and Other Stories*.

My use of defamiliarization is central to my story “Red.” The fabulist element is a red orb and the process of giving it offerings is the same as succumbing to a negative obsession. The Red becomes an obsessive habit that is represented, or metaphorically defamiliarized, as the color. Obsession is removed from the original context for a new perspective. In the first half of the story, Scarlet makes her way to her Red Shrine and grants it an offering, a man’s necktie she has stolen: “The offering was nearly forgotten until the orb started to pulse faster... It pulsed a bit as the tie drifted up and opened completely. It resembled a handkerchief” (31). This process also ties into the character’s identity as she struggles with her original name—Janet—outside the fabulist space of the city and her new persona within the fabulist space of the city—Scarlet.

When Janet first discovers the red orb in her possession, it is no bigger than a marble and she had not yet taken up her new persona. She feeds it and it grows. This is both the fabulist

anchored in the real and the metaphorical defamiliarization of addiction. Alone, this red orb means little more than a—hopefully—interesting visual. It floats in a sea of nothing, literally in this case, and would do so aimlessly without a plot to anchor it. However, it ties directly to Scarlet/Janet herself. It embodies her need to steal red things.

This kleptomania becomes the real that anchors the fabulist Red orb into the plot. There is a direct relationship between Scarlet's orb, her obsession with her Red, and the pocket space that defamiliarizes the concept of obsession. The more she gives in to this desire the larger the orb grows. Yet, no matter how large the orb, the pocket remains just as empty. When she finally defeats this urge and sends the orb down the dark abyss, the marble appears smaller: "The Red behind her looked like the ball she came to the city with. It drifted further and became even smaller until it was nothing at all" (36-37). As Scarlet rejects this persona in favor of her original identity—Janet—the orb regresses to a marble-sized state. Eventually, it becomes too small to see and Janet leaves her pocket space behind her. As Janet will always have the potential to revert to Scarlet; the red will always exist in the empty abyss. Janet's escaping the fabulist space parallels her growth past her obsessions.

From the example above, and the works included in this project, weirdness plays an essential role in how I evoke defamiliarization. In "Making the Extraordinary Ordinary," Benjamin Percy addresses how weirdness can be used as a means to artfully express normal aspects of the human condition. For example, Percy discusses a workshop draft by one of his students that revolves around a lazy protagonist given tremendous power, a magic pipe that could do almost anything. The man in the story doesn't use the magic object for grand things. He uses it for seemingly trivial things, like cleaning his yard: "The author doesn't fetishize the weirdness; he normalizes it, shaping a story about a small, sad man that has stayed with me all

these years” (Percy 71). I find myself drawn to this relationship between weirdness and defamiliarization. It is through mundane use that weirdness becomes anchored and normalized. Once normalized, the character’s use of the strange becomes an essential element in understanding the “what” that is becoming defamiliarized. This is the goal of my short story “The Cost of Freedom.” As a protagonist, Lammy initially has no desire or ambition. Instead, he prefers to exert minimal effort in life. Once given god-like power, he seeks to keep it to ensure that manner of life would be recreated.

Lammy has been given complete control over his life. Endless opportunity is manifested in the physical object of the paintbrush. He has fought and won this object and now it is his to squander or flourish with: “Lammy picked [the paintbrush] up and tried to make another bottle of vodka... Maybe, just maybe, he could take one little shot and go back. Or two. Maybe five” (79-80). Lammy has lived his life coasting off others and seeking escape when things become taxing. This is a person who is depressed, an alcoholic, and going deeper in his isolation is an excuse to avoid these issues. This escapism is presented first in the city itself—as all three protagonists have sought escape to some degree in the city—but the painting he enters becomes the final level of escape that he embraces. Opportunity is reintroduced to this character in the form of a tangible object, the paintbrush, to show the contrast between what he is and what he could be. He saw the city as a means of escape, but that escape breaks when it repeats his old life: working to make a living. As escape becomes his main goal, it also becomes the focus of defamiliarization in the piece.

This new environment holds the potential to satisfy his escapism with his ability to create anything. However, what he creates is alcohol, something he had just found himself recovering from. Despite the context, he repeats the same mistakes and patterns to no end. The strange

reality of entering a piece of art only reinforced the escapism. The painting becomes the symbol of his escape, while the paintbrush is the opportunity that he continuously drinks away. Through weirdness, these elements have been defamiliarized to evoke a hidden truth. For this, I see no better connection than that of Lammy and his dilemma with the paintbrush: “That brush really had made what he wanted, no lies or trick to it. Lammy squeezed the glass to see if it gave in” (72). It is a distraction from internal development and becomes a crutch for Lammy. Escape has become metaphorically defamiliarized. The city itself was a form of escape and traveling further into this pocket painting allows him to completely escape to his detriment.

Out of the three protagonists, Lammy is the one who does not progress. His change comes in his desire to escape, which will only lead to his destruction. Where he has failed, Janet and Alice develop in different ways. As such, a study of character is important in understanding how they function within my defamiliarized and weird world.

Character

Dynamic and static characters become the staple of conversation when discussing characterization. The dynamic character faces the challenges presented to them and develops because of it. They express agency over their actions and through those actions develop the story. Oftentimes this is for the better, developing past their toxic traits and becoming a more likable—or at least functioning—person. Sometimes these changes can be for the worse as they cave under the weight of their own toxicity. Static characters remain the same despite what faces them. The closest in my collection would be Lammy who decides to surrender to his toxic traits and escapes further. While this relationship between dynamic and static is important in understanding characterization, there is another aspect of character that haunts my work.

My characters typically have a façade that slowly unravels over time or is otherwise shaken to its core. Most have a façade they play on themselves more than on some other or society as a whole. A reader can usually tell there is a façade, though the details will unravel over the course of the plot. Charles Baxter’s essay, “Counterpointed Characterization” says it best when discussing the masks that all characters put on:

The mask over that personality (or any system) falls either temporarily or permanently. When the mask falls, something of value comes up. Masks are interesting partly for themselves and partly for what they mask. The reality behind the mask is like a shadow-creature rising to the bait: the tug of an unseen force, frightening and energetic. (88)

Baxter’s larger context in this discussion of character is mentioned as counterpointed characterization, which revolves around a character encountering a foil of sorts that forces or unravels this mask. This foil can be a person, but it doesn’t have to be. For this collection, I will focus more on the mask and the results of its unraveling within characters as discussed in the quote above. When the mask falls, and they always do, the character can either accept the reality they were trying to hide from or fight to put that mask right back on. Just as Odin sacrificed an eye for knowledge, enlightenment has a toll that demands payment.

Character is central to “The House of Blues.” The story follows a violinist named Alice Olegovna as she enters a contest with a mysterious stranger in the hopes of winning a Stradivarius. As the story unfolds, her Father’s abuse comes to light and forces her to fight through those issues as the stranger slowly reveals himself to be something far more than human. In the end, she leaves her compulsion and perfectionism behind in favor of a new role as owner of her favorite club, House of Blues.

Where Alice places her attention is important in tracking her development. As she analyzes her newest composition, she stresses over some minor flaw she cannot seem to fix. Her attention is focused on a flaw until it becomes an obsession: “She played her newest and most problematic composition and flinched at every hesitation and choppy transition” (38). This is Alice Olegovna with her mask firmly in place and her static persona established. It establishes her as a character who needs control to the point of obsessing over minor details. It is only when the stranger pulls out a Stradivarius that she falls victim to her imprinted obsession. The problem is that she’s trying to find a catalyst for her success just as her father had done before her. For both, success is tied to the Stradivarius. This brings to light a connection that slowly unravels throughout the story.

I went through a few names for Alice, specifically the surname. As her mask and what it hides became clearer to me, “Alice Olegovna,” stood out as a Russian patronymic name. Through this name, her father’s shadow becomes ever-present in her character. The inescapable nature of this patronymic name allows the mask she puts on to show hints of the past she tried to leave behind. She is still under his shadow and the name symbolizes that presence. However, I refuted the idea to change her name at the end—as I did in “Red” for Scarlet/Janet—because that would be an emotionally dishonest outcome. Yes, she moves past that lingering shadow, but it is a chapter of her life. Her father sought to live life through her. This pressure and domineering manner influence her life as mentioned during her interview: “She could play for the hiring committee. But not when her father glared in the crowd waiting for her to fail” (58). Her unthinking desire for the Stradivarius is a remnant of her father’s goals. When she runs away from her father and escapes to the House of Blues, she forfeits the chance to confront him for

closure. Alice progresses past her mask and her father's influence, but no one is above their own history.

A model for Alice's character is found in John Ajvide Lindqvist's short story "The Border." We find a complete outsider in the protagonist Tina who is unaware of the mask she constantly wears. As she tries to find her place and purpose in society and romance, she continuously finds that even her positive traits are treated as further proof of her outsider status. An example of this is found during her discussion of her job: "Customs offices across the country requested her services whenever a significant drug cache was expected... Her sense [of smell and intuition] was as good as 100 percent accurate" (Lindqvist 2). She holds real talent that puts her as master of her field, but her lack of drive has her doing the bare minimum to gain recognition. This career allows her to access a talent that fills a part of her emptiness but does nothing to satisfy that emptiness.

This is a talent as opposed to a purpose, a gift with no cost. In every other aspect of her life, Tina has lacked a significant something or failed. She plays a role that isn't hers. The more she plays this role, the further alienated she becomes. It is only after her discovery that she is adopted and was taken away from her strange parents at an early age that this alienation begins to make sense: "Tina had heard that people had been involuntarily sterilized far into the seventies. What was it that had been done to her parents? A mental institution" (Lindqvist 48). Her alienation is at the hand of trying to be something she is not. In this case, she is not human and even claiming her to be a woman is misleading. However, as this gender ambiguity is never given a definitive answer I will continue to use "her" as it is used in my translation of the story. Tina was told to fit a role that wasn't hers. Her parents were forced to submit to this same role and were put into an asylum as a punishment for their failure. This is taken as a form of a

supernatural creature, a discovery of complexity in her gender, and the revelation of her kidnapping. Now, the mask becomes clear to her, and enlightenment unravels her identity. The cost was her old, passing and passive way of life. She cannot fake humanhood or womanhood any longer and cannot stay in society with this knowledge.

In “The House of Blues,” Alice also possesses a talent she uses to satisfy her life without understanding how it is interwoven in her problems. She embraces her skills as a violinist, even creates an ego around it, despite it being a part of her father’s design. It is her frustration with a new composition that forces her down a negative spiral: “She played her newest and most problematic composition and flinched at every hesitation and choppy transition” (38). This causes the problem that leads to her desire for the Stradivarius. Without this one thing she excels in, she loses the one reliable constant in her own self-recognition. This was why later in the story she hid behind the dumpster and threw away her father’s violin. Part of this is development past her father’s influence, but she gets another violin and follows the same path only in the unnamed city instead.

Alice’s journey involves finding out who she is as opposed to what she wants to be. Where Lammy and Scarlet/Janet are escaping from their negative attributes, Alice is escaping from the oppression of who she is supposed to be in her father’s eyes. Yet, she does not escape from it completely. After her final confrontation with the creature with the Stradivarius, Alice notices that her violin has been damaged: “There was a new nick on [Lady’s] neck that interested Alice a great deal. It must have happened when she met the thing with the Stradivarius” (62). The cost for her enlightenment is the marks on her violin and her station in the city. Though, the House of Blues is better described as a reward instead of a cost. In her heart, she is a musician. She is drawn to music, and this is why she takes up the mantle of House of Blues owner. This

moment is her finding herself. When she plays for the last time, it's embracing a new identity as far outside of her father's influence as possible.

As stated before, escaping completely is impossible. She has her scars from living under her father's design. However, it is at this point she forfeits this design for something uniquely hers. Her final rejection of her old and controlled life is her acceptance of the House of Blues: "Her people. The House of Blues was her people and now there was an intruder harming them all" (60). This supports and builds the desire to seek a home for herself as well as remove the mask of the egotistical musician. Throughout, her only real home is this strange club. It isn't her company or even the place she lives in. Instead, she continuously seeks out the House of Blues as her own home advantage. When it is time to act, she chooses to save the lives of a room filled with mostly strangers, because they hold a similar strange family. A character truth has been revealed as the mask is removed.

When I think of authors that finetune this concept of desire hidden underneath a mask, Gloria Naylor is the first that comes to mind. Known for her Fabulist Fiction, Gloria Naylor was a titan of crafting an alien place realized by the characters within it. Her novel, *Bailey's Café*, presents beautifully flawed characters tormented by their own demons. Naylor creates a fabulist space—Bailey's Café—that chooses its inhabitants and tests them in personalized ways. It forces characters to test their masks against a world set on unraveling them. Some of these chosen inhabitants are good, bad, depressed, or suffering, but all are lost in some way. These characters don't simply defeat their demons and move on. Instead, Naylor crafts a beautiful fusion between character and internal conflict contextualized in her character development.

A perfect example of this is found in the character of Jesse Bell, who is a bisexual addict. She worked hard to get sober only to be sabotaged by Eve, a woman who continuously finds a

way to profit off others. Jesse tries to improve herself and overcome her demons but fails. Yet, she keeps trying over and over again. However, Jesse's addiction becomes the excuse to punish her for her sexuality. Her in-laws and their friends already pushed her friends and family out of her life only to push her out of their lives on learning of her bisexuality. Jesse Bell will have none of it: "I'm not making no excuses for becoming a junkie. In fact, I was glad I discovered heroin. Yeah, I was glad—do you hear me?—glad" (Naylor 1870). Jesse Bell declares her addiction and even claims ownership over it. However, as mentioned earlier, she has sought to overcome her addiction which leads to Naylor's true talent.

It is important to remember that her addiction is the excuse her in-laws used to remove her from their family. Their actual resentment is with her sexuality and the shame that brings them to their affluent circle. Thus, her ownership of her addiction is less about addiction and more about the personal attack on her sexuality she is rejecting. By refusing to be shamed in this underhanded manner, she expresses pride in her sexuality. Jesse Bell is only one example of the way these characters are lost and struggling to find themselves. They all seek some form of completion in a space that can either be a horrible enabler or opportunity for transition. Evolution becomes strange in this world. Some characters seem worse off or unchanged in the dynamic/static manner but all have their masks revealed to either themselves, the reader, or the world they live in. I had never seen this thought put to paper so flawlessly.

Gloria Naylor's complex characters influenced my creation of Scarlet/Janet and her battle against the obsession of "her red." The red most obviously stands in for a form of addiction or obsession as explained in her description of the desire: "It was that same deep need that had her hair stand on end and filled the empty. It was the same thrill that had her steal, that glorious warm feeling that filled the horrible empty" (33). However, there is something fabulist with my

design, as opposed to the more literal example of heroin used by Gloria Naylor. This allows for minimization to take place. It's not an addiction to a drug, just a color. The rhetoric is the same, but the item is replaced with something nonsensical. Janet centers her Scarlet persona in this addiction. The mask can be more firmly placed when allowing the fabulist lens to cloud reality but exposes the emotional truth.

There is also a clear need for these red items to be stolen. She explains the reasoning behind stealing the Red as a thrill: "It was the same thrill that had her steal" (33). Her red doesn't exist, at least, not in any color wheel. That is why something can be so clearly her red only for it to turn into something that "wasn't exactly the right shade of red after all" (24). It is a lie she is telling herself to give this pursuit some normalcy. There is clearly some recognition in the story. She hides the orb in her closet, which also builds on the idea of secrecy itself, but all of that falls short from actually changing her behavior. It is something that she's hiding from the world. Knowing one has a problem is a step toward improvement, but not the final step.

When Scarlet first enters the pocket with her offering she notices that, "The cold hit her before she realized it was safe to open her eyes to the black void of the pocket" (36). This makes a literal representation of the emptiness that her addiction is filling. No matter how large her red shrine gets, it will never be able to fill that empty space. When she enters, it is cold. This connects with how she feels after reflecting on the warmth of her stolen goods. It is only after letting go of the glove that she allows herself to escape the Red's hold: "She had to leave the glove behind. It was falling—drifting—further away. She leaped, pushing away from it all" (36). This was the moment she develops past her obsession and is the reason why she progresses past the city. While the possibility of relapsing back to that toxic behavior is always possible, she's shown the strength to let it go. There is hope that her change will remain for the better. By the

end of the project, she is the only character that escapes the nameless city. She doesn't defeat her obsession, however; no one truly can. Instead, she moves beyond her escape into a fabulist space and embraces the real world.

Lammy, on the other hand, is desperate for an escape from the emptiness he feels. Even when given opportunities for self-improvement, Lammy consistently falls short. This is made evident when he is given absolute power in the form of a fabulist world and a paintbrush to take control of every aspect of it. Yet, there is a cost to this power, feeding a furnace living people: "Was that worth it? Instinct said no, but the city was filled with selfish assholes. What were the chances that one of those bad people would wander in?" (81). The character has fallen short of salvation despite having the means to accomplish it. This cost burrows him deeper in that fabulist world. Lammy has changed for the worse as he embraces the cost of his personal freedom in: "The cost for that freedom was a long time away. Until then there were plenty of drinks to fill the day" (81). Lammy is a case of a person embracing the self-interest that a mask allows. He was allowed two opportunities to develop—first in the city and second in the painting—yet both achieve only temporary pleasure.

Even with creation in his hands, Lammy escapes to this new world. This also reinforces a cycle that Lammy has ignored. Chuck tells him, "You chose to drink and keep on drinking. The same thing happened to me when I first got here: the tour, the drinking, except mine was a knife if you could believe that" (78). Chuck killed a man to claim this world from another. Now, Lammy does the same. Lammy chooses escape rather than confronting his problems straight on, leading him further down a cycle of self-destruction and isolation manifested by the city and pocket he finds himself in. While he makes an active decision to defend himself against Chuck, he remains a static character by the end by escaping further.

For every writer, publication is the dream and I am no different. As I hone my craft, that dream becomes closer to reality. To conclude this study, I wish to discuss some of the magazines that evoke my imagination. These are the magazines in which I would be proud to find my work published.

Conclusion

The magazines I frequent are ones that openly embrace their oddities, strangeness, and weirdness. When surfing the web for magazines that might suit my tastes, I came across *Nightmare* and instantly fell in love. The brand of horror had spoken to me in a way that had never before. In *Nightmare*, I saw how the unnatural expressed our darkest fears, invoked our insecurities, or unraveled our masks. This is why they accept works in both fiction and nonfiction, dark fantasy and science fiction, real and unreal. Fears and horror transcend genre or field. In their mission statement, the editors state that “When you read *Nightmare*, it is our hope that you’ll see where horror comes from, where it is now, and where it’s going.” Nightmares separate us from reality, unravels our own masks, and forces us to face an emotional truth. Threads of my own nightmares bleed into my writing. As such, having my work displayed among fellow nightmares would be a fitting home.

Another standard for a magazine to catch my eye is hybridity such as *Apex Magazine*. The first sentence of their mission statement manages to convey their ideals better than I ever could: “an online prose and poetry magazine of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and mash-ups of all three.” Online publications are approachable and available for both readers and writers alike. While some may come and go, they utilize the platforms of today to raise their voice.

Recognition, such as winning the Nebula award, only adds credibility to the magazine. It would be an honor to count my work among their published authors.

Magazines that manage to publish fellow Fabulist writers are my next criteria such as *Uncanny Magazine*. With contributions such as A.T. Greenblatt's "And Yet," it becomes clear they aren't afraid to publish quirky oddities that make the reading experience so much more rewarding. This isn't to say that oddity replaces quality as the previously mentioned "And Yet" also went on to win the Nebula Award in 2019. These are magazines that publish both quality and bizarre tales that have me personally yearning for more. They build on my most beloved genres by both evoking the best and approving experimentation.

I plan to find a home in one of these magazines or the many others that hold similar sentiments. I will one day finetune my Fabulist Fiction, explore the extent and limit of suspension of disbelief, and craft stories that explore what happens when our masks unravel before us. When I can throw the Fabulist at a reader and have them understand the truth of that moment, I will know I have finally gotten the formula down. Through this project, I seek to fill up that empty that can only fill through writing. I thrust an anchor and bleed through the page in the hopes I will unlock that hidden truth.

CHAPTER II

THE COST OF FREEDOM AND OTHER STORIES

Red

The red of the mug was intoxicating under the coffee shop's light. Plain as it was it looked flawless, and it was in Scarlet's favorite shade of red. John set the red mug on the table. Scarlet couldn't help but stare. The only visible flaw to the mug was John's stupid lip stain. He was jabbering on and on about something that she could barely listen to, but she nodded when it felt appropriate and smiled to echo his. The mug, though, was all her mind could really concentrate on. When she was Janet, the mug wouldn't have mattered in the slightest, but for Scarlet, it was her next fix. Who would bring a mug to a restaurant anyway, she thought. It had to be her Red. Just like the city to make the worst possibility a reality. Cold sweat formed on her forehead, so she wiped down her forehead. It was humid tonight, though. It had nothing to do with that red, red cup.

"Are you okay?" John asked and broke her from the trance. He looked sincere enough, but that didn't mean much. The city seemed to attract people who were either exceptionally good at deception or marks for the others to con. Scarlet wondered what role she played in the food chain.

"Yes," she said, as she ran her hands through her hair to settle her nerves. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he replied, taking the mug as he leaned back for another sip. A drip started to run down the poor mug's side, which would likely dry and stain. All she could think

about was the lack of respect he had for that perfectly red mug. It wasn't right, not right at all.

"Lammy told me you were an introvert, but he may have understated it."

"I see," Scarlet said, checking her irritation. Introvert. Would anyone have called Janet an introvert? Perhaps, it was hard to say. Janet certainly wouldn't be staring at that perfect mug. No, she would be having some sort of conversation with this man. Good or bad, Scarlet couldn't really tell at this point. Putting on her old persona was like trying to put on socks: needlessly hard. No point dwelling on that when there was a perfectly Red mug to obsess over.

"Not that that's a bad thing," he said, leaning closer. "I'm just saying I feel like I'm talking your ear off over here. Why don't you tell me about you?"

"There isn't much to say. Is there a discount if you bring your own mug?" she asked. The mug seemed to shine that perfect hue. It made her uncomfortable.

"Oh no," he said, rotating the mug in his hand. "This may sound stupid, but it's my lucky mug."

"That doesn't sound stupid at all," she said, with a hard stare at the mug now that she had an excuse. "Actually, I have a lucky collection at my place."

"Really," he said, with a raised brow and jumped on an opportunity for more. "I'd like to see it sometime."

"Perhaps," she said, noncommittally. The statement wasn't meant to be an invitation. The only ounce of chemistry she felt all night was toward a mug, which didn't bode well for a future meeting.

"Right, will you excuse me?" he asked, but it was clear her opinion didn't matter as he stood up, eager to go.

"Of course," she said, hoping he would take the mug.

He did not. Part of her wished he would. It would mean he planned to slip away and she wouldn't have to stare at that perfect Red mug for another second. Instead, it was right there for the taking. She checked to make sure it was full only to find it empty. It was destined to be a part of the collection. At least, that was how it felt.

The mug fit snugly in her pocket and the dopamine rushed to her head. Her hand clenched on it as if it could float away as her heart thumped like a maniac. She looked at the bathroom just to make sure he wasn't coming out and then at the door to see what kind of obstacles were in the way. The host was there, busy as the dinner rush started to pile on, but that was it. Scarlet went for it. There were a few wandering eyes that seemed to take note of her. Maybe they had their own ideas or maybe it was just her vibrant Red catching eyes. She wished she hadn't brought the scarf but the feel of it on her skin filled her with courage. It felt warm as she wrapped it tighter around to ward off the wandering eyes and the bad thoughts they brought. The shiver ran down her spine; another theft to add to the collection. Not done yet, that was the only thought that kept her focused on the escape.

A man slid his chair in front of her and a waitress boxed her in. For a second, she thought they were on to her. The man slid his chair back, the waitress walked past her, and the bathroom door opened. He walked out and her heart pounding was almost too much to hear anything else. She quickly slid out of the way and looked straight at the door. If she didn't have this eye-catching scarf this would be less of a problem but she honestly couldn't have gotten here without it. It blocked her from the people around her.

The host looked at her and she at him. Her face must have betrayed her in some way because, as she was sliding past him, he took a step closer. Someone screamed. She could hear the sudden crackling of fire followed by new screams. The only important thing to come from it

was that the host turned to look and see what was wrong. His sudden shocked face made her hesitate, but if it wasn't now it may never be. She walked out the door. The scarf kept her warm as the mug kept her going.

The nearest metro station was a block away, but she couldn't stand the fare or the people. A few cabbies rode in and out of view. The urge to escape was almost enough for her to call on them, but just a look at the men themselves was enough to squash that thought. They always wanted to talk. Everyone in this city wanted to talk when trapped in a tiny space for any length of time. She too was uncomfortable in silence, unless she had some Red to hide away the fear. Perhaps she could make it to The Nest on foot?

How did she get in this horrible city anyway? It was a question she often asked herself. She suspected everyone in the city asked the same question at some point. For her, it was after a cat nap on a metro link. She woke to this strange city with strange people. Confused, alone, and afraid. It didn't seem fair. Everyone else in this city usually wanted to escape somewhere and wound up here. Not her. She was content with her tiny isolated life "across the valley" as the locals called it. What a narcissistic view to claim the rest of reality as some "other." She tried the call of The Crawl like everyone else did at some point. One bar after another, district after district, drink after drink, all to get to some supposed utopia. Like everyone else who tried The Crawl, she failed. She earned enough to make it to Centra and rent a place where people were a little less likely to stab you in the back. The Nest was about as good as one could expect in this city. Still, she never felt like she belonged there or perhaps the city in general. It wasn't a place to belong. Yet, here she was, trapped like everyone else.

When she reached a bench with some light, she looked the mug over and frowned. It wasn't exactly the right shade of red after all. A disappointment made worse by how easy she fell

back to old habits. The city always brought out the worst, and she fell right back into it. She needed to be stronger than that if she wanted to escape this city. The stains were small, nothing a good washing couldn't get rid of, but a chip was something else entirely. The man had called it a lucky mug. Lucky should mean nearly mint condition, but this was too much a flaw to be near mint condition at all. No other imperfections were visible. Still, the chip would not do, so she hid it under the bench for someone less critical to find.

Ruined a date and nothing to show for the trouble, typical. She held the scarf harder to purge the empty away. It warmed her cold bones enough, but it was old. Since the mug, she needed something new. There was also Lammy—their mutual friend—to consider. She'd have to avoid him for a few days. Lammy meant well, but he was a unique kind of idiot for this one. Setting her up with a man who carried around a Red mug for luck was practically a trap. He knew her obsession so he had to know that would be a problem. Speak of the devil. Inside the Nest, Lammy was drinking in the open bar and getting chummy with a new guest. When Lammy spotted her, he frowned and made his way over, concerned.

“I just heard what happened. Were you nearby?” he asked. His breath was heavy with some kind of alcohol. Vodka, perhaps? She couldn't go anywhere without someone downing vodka like it was stylish. Where did all the vodka love come from?

“What?” Scarlet asked, playing dumb. There had to be a level of ignorance that dumbed down the surrounding area with its sheer commitment.

“John? He died in the middle of your date, right?” he asked, taking a step closer with his phone in his hand. He showed her a text that simply read: Dude, John burned outside Zander just now! He's dead!

She stepped back in response.

Silence.

“Died? I just left him a few hours ago?”

“You didn’t know?” he asked. “Good. Ain’t no one needs to see a man burn. Right outside the Zander. Though I doubt you’re going to find someone with your unique tastes.”

“Wait. Are you saying it happened at the restaurant?” Scarlet asked, but Lammy didn’t seem to find it a particularly worthy note to dwell on. He must have thought the mug was a good reason to set them up. More importantly, how could he be dead tonight? Her deeds of the night lingered in her mind. She knew a reason but couldn’t bring herself to even think it.

“Yeah. Spontaneous combustion. Isn’t that crazy?” he said. Crazy was part of the routine in this city, Scarlet found.

“Yeah. Crazy,” Scarlet replied, looking directly at Lammy. She was so lost in the moment that his face faded into the discolored checkered carpeting of The Nest. Spontaneous combustion. The words coiled around her thoughts.

“Are you okay? You look... unwell,” Lammy said, adding some odd attitude to unwell that had Scarlet stare at him for a long time. He took a step back.

A lucky mug stolen, the owner burned alive, hard not to make some connections. It was the kind of connections that required a good, strong drink away from judgmental eyes. She walked away, clutching her warm scarf for comfort. Lammy walked and talked and lingered at her side. Only after they reached the staircase did he finally return to his new drinking buddy. That “unwell” comment Lammy made had her grind her teeth. All this was a wakeup call. Dating was overrated. Or, she wasn’t ready to date. One of those options or both.

Her keys were being difficult again. First, it was a struggle to fish them out of her purse. Then it was trying to slide it through the lock. Another sign? She still needed Red for the shrine.

The old empty already claimed her. A new Red thing would go a long way at filling that emptiness. She caressed her scarf and the thrill started to flood through the numbness. The scarf was a particularly hard theft. By the end of it, she found herself in this strange city. The better the theft, the longer that thrill lasted and satisfied her need. She decided on the fire escape to avoid Lammy. The call of The Crawl whispered in her ear and everyone seemed to follow. The one thing the city forced into her was acceptance of people when necessary. It was hard not to accept people when they seemed to ooze out of the walls. After following the call of The Crawl from bar to bar, she sat on a bench to rest her feet. It reminded her of all those other hunts. How long had she gone without hunting? She could never really remember. Those days seem to blur and disappear. Only the hunts themselves felt real. People walked aimlessly from bar to bar. No one ever heard of anyone who actually finished The Crawl. Another false promise the city whispered in their ear. The city was good at those. Yet, people followed them anyway.

There was no Red here. Lesser reds filled the area but nothing in her special hue. That's when a guy walked in front of her wearing a Red tie. He traveled with a pack of those "across the valley" enthusiasts wearing a suit and tie with a collar latched around their neck. Scarlet wasn't interested in the look, or the guy for that matter, but the tie was another story. It was the perfect red for her shrine. The lamplight only confirmed that it was no lesser, off-brand Red.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead before making a move. The man was with a whole gang of Suits headed for the House of Blues. Nothing needed to be complex: orbit around the group until they opened large enough for her to squeeze in. The group held tight, but patience would eventually prevail. She had done this long enough to know this city defied any safe space. When they finally opened up, she wrapped her arms around her mark before he could disappear in the crowd. It took the Suit for a loop, but he flashed a charming smile and led. The second she

touched that tie the warmth filled her fingertips. Pure, new, perfect. It was also ensnared around the Suit's collar, but she loosened it with only minor resistance. He didn't seem to notice. From the smell of his breath, he was probably too many drinks in to notice anything. Even undoing the tie didn't seem to alarm him, so she slid it off and pocketed it with him none the wiser. Riding the call of The Crawl sent her straight to the bathroom where she found a stall. Unlike that mug which had the trick of the light on its side, this was the Red. It had the scent too. The man's musk dominated the poor thing, but a hint of that Red smell she was most familiar with lingered if she concentrated hard enough.

She wrapped it around her hand and walked back to The Nest. The fire date was a thing of the past now that she could focus all her attention on her Red. Red always fixed everything in the end. The date, the lesser red mug, all would dissolve from memory once the tie was offered to her shrine. She forgot to use the fire escape. Lammy was waiting at the bar pounding a glass whiskey with vigor. If she sneaked silently enough, the city could give her its favor.

It did not.

"Dere yee're," Lammy shouted louder than necessary as he stumbled toward her.

"Where'd ya gooo?"

"I had to step out. Get some fresh air. You know," she said, moving toward the steps. He quickly cut her off from the stairs. Her fate was sealed by the time Lammy shouted over the barflies to get her attention. This was a full-blown, committed conversation: no escape, no salvation, only talking.

"Well, I found out more about poor John—"

"Poor John," Scarlet cut in and took a sidestep closer to the stairs. A few more steps and she'd be free today. From stairs to door to shrine.

“Yeah,” Lammy said, looking at her with a drunken expression. “He was burned!”

Scarlet took another sidestep and wiped the spittle from her face. Lammy always spoke louder and wetter than necessary when he was drunk. He was always drunk. Not only that, but he had to rub all the ill will in. She didn’t need reminders that ‘Poor John’ was burned. It was a hard fact to forget.

“You said that already,” Scarlet said, confused at just how surprised he looked. He was trying to torment her. It was the only possible reason he would bring that up again. He must have known the whole time that she stole the mug and now he just wanted to make everything harder.

“Na, sharry,” Lammy slurred. “I meant he was burned, as in dissssed. They’sh still tryin’a figure out what was responsible, but you know how theshe things go. There’sh no tellin’ how someone gets burned so bad they light up like that. Could ya imagine?”

“Not really.”

Why couldn’t she slip away from him just this once? She held the tie tighter to ward off the feelings. The smooth silk made things bearable. Where was the distance when a conversation could finally end? A few more steps from where she stood? Further? She took a few more as he was collecting his thoughts, but it still didn’t seem escapable distance.

“I know dis ish crazy but you-you didn’t have anything to do wit it, right? The burnin’ I mean. You couldn’t have known if you were. Some people can explode from the smallest, tiniest, and smallest ehr things—”

“I have to go,” Scarlet said, walking away despite Lammy tagging along. Only after she reached the steps did he turn back to the bar.

This time she opened the door with ease. Safe at last. There was whiskey in the cupboard for the ritual. She took it straight to settle her sore legs. A new bottle would be needed soon.

Wandering the city required a healthy gulp. What kind of hell was this city? A hell where doing a bar crawl was the same as moving up in the world.

She turned off all the lights, unhooked every plug, and opened the closet door to let the freezing cold in. Her breath crisped and frost bit her cheek. The shiver spread down to the toes. A pocket was a hell of an expense to keep up. She tried the first few months until she got the bill. When a four-digit bill had your name on it, you started to make changes. Her pocket, at least the pocket that hid her secret in her closet, was a freezing void of nothingness. She didn't exactly know where it came from, but it was a convenient place to hide her Red. Have a horrible secret? Get a pocket and watch it disappears from prying eyes. The first time she found her closet a near-vacant void she found herself floating for hours. It was hard to get her bearings when nothing was holding her down. She imagined it was like what space would feel like, minus near instant freezing and burning.

She took another swig and set the bottle in front of the door to keep it open. Her whiskey was less than half full. The door seemed to push against it, but if she wedged it between the door and the frame it should hold. It always did. She dipped into the cold, cold, pocket, and followed the light of her Red shrine.

It pulsed her Red as she floated. The only thing outside the darkness was an ever-shifting mass of Red. A blanket rotated around the mass. She grabbed it and pulled herself closer. A sound echoed. She looked back to find its origins: a floating whiskey bottle. She'd have to fish for the door like a blind idiot after the offering.

The red—her Red—pulsated through the offerings and called her. She tied her offering around her hand and plunged through. The offerings seemed to close in around her. She only

stopped to breathe, but the Red called her forward. It wasn't wise to keep it waiting. Past the layer of soft, the layer of trinkets, the layer of electronics, stood the Red of her shrine.

The sphere pulsed in a warm glow. Perfect in every way. Scarlet stared at it like a fly drawn to lamplight. The offering was nearly forgotten until the orb started to pulse faster. She placed the tie in front of the Red, warm, sphere. It pulsed a bit as the tie drifted up and opened completely. It resembled a handkerchief.

The sphere began to shake. That was a first. Scarlet tried to move away from the sphere, but everything closed around and trapped her. The sphere sizzled and fumed. The air became thin and humid. This was new and certainly not good. The unwoven tie flew at her and scalded her skin. She threw it away before noticing the culprit to this madness, a single coffee stain on the inner lining of the tie. All this for such a small flaw. She could have avoided all this if she only looked. Why didn't she rip the tie open to check for stains? It was one mistake after years of service before and in the city. All these years, she served the Red faithfully and one little drop of coffee ruined everything. The Red had to forgive her. It became too hot to breathe and the Red only got bigger. A pounding heart that usually shot excitement through her blood gave way to actual fear. It wasn't the shiver down the spine that had her thieving just to feel something. The Red didn't warm the numb away. The offerings closed in and fear started to replace the warmth.

...

Maybe it was the heat getting to her, but as the old offerings seemed to sizzle to nothing, flashes came to her. The first thing she stole was lipstick at a gas station. The name on the description simply stated red, but that was a lie. There was a vibrant look that sparked some reclusive section of her mind. It was intoxicating. With that one petty theft, that intoxicated feeling disappeared, and a wholeness took its place. Only a specific hue of red satisfied the

craving when it set. From the state of her shrine, it set just as often as not. It had no identifiable name so it became her Red.

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She came back to reality as the Red moved closer. Air seemed to evaporate in the heat. There had to be an escape. A scarf floated near her, so she used it to center herself. Her head was spinning and she needed an escape. The heat got to her first.

...

Before she fell asleep on the metro, she was following her Red. A woman wore a Red scarf. The problem was that the woman seemed to be going all over LA with no clear direction at all. It was only when the woman left the scarf on some metro bench that Janet was finally able to grab it. By then she was tired and lost. A quick nap would solve one issue. So, she slept.

“Fresh from across the valley?” a woman asked, waking her up.

She held the scarf close and looked for something familiar. The only familiarity was the woman herself. It was the scarf owner, but she didn’t seem to recognize Janet or her scarf. Still, Janet clutched the scarf even harder, ready to wrestle for it if need be.

“You can keep it,” the woman said, with a friendly smile. “But what’s your name? Figure you owe me that much.”

“Scarlet,” she said, without hesitation. Lying was an impulse just in case the woman did hold resentment. Still, Scarlet echoed in her mind. It sounded right. Something in her pocket illuminated Red, so she pulled it out to have a look. It was an orb of her beautiful Red as small as a marble. She rolled the orb around her fingers and pinched it as hard as she could. It was solid and slightly warm. Where did it come from? A chill ran through her fingertips as she rolled it in her hand. It was that same deep need that had her hair stand on end and filled the empty. It was

the same thrill that had her steal, that glorious warm feeling that filled the horrible empty. It, her Red, had come to life.

“Well look at that,” the woman said. “Suppose you should keep that safe.”

“Scarlet,” she repeated to herself as the Red became the only light she could see. It felt right. It all felt right.

...

She came too when the Red touched her skin in all its heat.

This was how Scarlet died? In a boiling hot Red mass of stolen goods? She almost thought there had been a reason she was brought to this city. Another city lie or maybe this was it. Her life’s goal: to be boiled alive by a red-hot sphere surrounded by everything she stole. The end of her life story, to be burned into her Red. Yes, perhaps Scarlet would die.

But, Janet would live. There was room for her escape. A little escape hole formed. She could see it now despite the sweat stinging her eyes. An opening revealed itself past the countless trinkets collected in her thievery. She flopped to it. The space was too small to stand, the heat made it too hard to think, but she could flop. A glove flopped before her and her mind dialed back to a simpler time. The lipstick was her first theft. The scarf brought her to the city. The glove, though, was her first theft inside the city.

...

With the sphere in her hands, there was little need to steal. If she needed her daily fix of Red all she needed to do was check her pocket. The problem came when the sphere started to get bigger. By the time it was the size of a baseball it was impossible to conveniently fit in her pocket. Eventually, not even her purse could hold it. She found The Nest, threw it in her new closet, and the city kept ticking. All fine, for a while. She just needed to come back home and

look at its beauty. However, she had to work, drink—Lammy liked to drink and she liked the company—and eventually, a group of friends started to emerge that always wanted to go somewhere. If one was busy there was always another, and another, like a snowball turning into an avalanche. She buried her Red but never really forgot it. All she could do was ignore it.

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The heat was rushing to her head, she realized after waking from the fever dream. She grabbed the glove and slid through the escape hole. Everything started to close around her. She used the glove to wipe the sweat from her forehead. It had been a month, but it was just lying there in the muck of a puddle: ownerless, filthy, and lost. It didn't have a tear, however. She couldn't help but laugh. There was a time she would have plucked all her hair out for a Red thing like that. Not anymore. She walked to the street corner and glanced behind her just to see if it flew off. It hadn't. Of course, it hadn't. It was soaked, filthy, and too heavy to fly away. The light blinked for her to walk and she did. She walked straight to that perfectly Red glove. It took nearly an hour to soak the glove through and get it clean, but she did. Then she just looked at it, Red and perfect. After examining it, she walked it over to the closet, just to get it out of her head. That was when she noticed her closet was looking less like a closet and her sphere was looking a lot bigger.

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She came back from the fever dream and grabbed the glove. Just the glove. If she could escape with the glove that would be enough. It seemed to snag on everything it touched. The scarf choked her as she pressed through the mountain of useless, but Red, junk. The heat followed behind. It was impossible to know how far she actually managed to scurry away

through all this junk. Was she going to be crushed in this pile of nothing? It was certainly possible. More than possible at this point.

Something caught her foot. She couldn't see what it was, but it scraped at her skin and took her whole sock. The sting of a fresh wound and the warmth to follow meant blood. It wasn't her Red, blood, not her Red at all. It would be unsettling to fixate on such a common red. The scarf got caught again. It ripped to something that was practically a rag. She threw it into the heat, and for a moment, she felt a cool breeze. It was enough for her to step further out of the mass of junk.

She pressed her gloved hand against the mass, but it would not budge. Instead, it stuck to the glove. With some effort, it pulled out of the forming muck. The glove was hers. No muck could have it. It would be the one lasting legacy of this obsession. It would end, too. The Red saw to that. Why praise a malicious god? It may be the god of this pocket, this patch of reality, but it certainly wouldn't be her god any longer. The heat started to pile in as she pressed through the muck head first. It was warm but not painful. The cold hit her before she realized it was safe to open her eyes to the black void of the pocket. She slid almost completely until her gloved hand anchored her to the melting Red shrine.

The bottle was still some distance away, but the glove wouldn't budge. She pulled harder, but the gloved hand was stuck. There was no guarantee the bottle meant the door was nearby even if she abandoned her glove. So, she would not take the chance. The glove would be a reminder. Inside the mass, she was boiling. Now she was freezing and the glove wouldn't budge. It was her only warmth, the only warmth in this entire place. This one glove was all she needed. She pulled as hard as she could, but nothing would release the glove from that melting shrine.

Nothing would work but letting go which meant no trophy. No reminder at all. She pulled at the mass over and over again.

“I just need to let go,” she said to no one in particular, but it echoed in the darkness.

Before she could commit, the glove slid an inch so she pulled. Leaving wasn't an option so long as she could free the glove. She had to free the glove... as a comfort. There would be days when that horrible emptiness would return and she would need her Red to fill it again. It always returned. If she had one thing—just one—she could fight it. The mass was boiling into a liquid-hot substance. She had to leave the glove behind. It was falling—drifting—further away. She leaped, pushing away from it all. The mass was fading further and further away, but she drifted to the bottle. From there she might find the door. The Red behind her looked like the ball she came to the city with. It drifted further and became even smaller until it was nothing at all. She drifted to the bottle and took what was left. Barely enough to wet her tongue.

Now, where was that door? She felt around the infinite nothing and something semisolid pressed back. It was the door, or knob, or something she could open. It did and warm air rushed her. When she stepped on tile floor, she realized this wasn't her apartment. A woman walked by and grazed Janet's shoulder rather roughly. More people started to come from a nearby escalator and it all suddenly clicked: a metro. No, the metro. It was the night she fell victim to that scarf. The door she escaped from was gone and in its place was a bathroom entrance. Nothing at all to suggest the place she had been in. Red fabric was wedged on the door as if to tempt her, but it no longer looked like her Red. A sharp pain reminded her of the cut on her one bare foot. Freedom. It was strange to accept it, nearly impossible. Only the pain kept her grounded. Freedom had to have a cost. Blood and loss seemed to be hers.

“Are you okay?” a guy asked, his hand hovering over her shoulder awkwardly.

“Yeah, actually, I feel great.”

Getting out of the metro couldn't happen soon enough. She was skipping to favor her shod foot. The newspaper across a bench caught her eye. The news itself didn't much interest her, but it said LA. That was enough for her. It had been so long, Janet forgot what home looked like, but as she looked around this was clearly it. Home.

The House of Blues

Alice Olegovna flinched at the sound of her own music, guarding herself against her father's switch that was no longer there. Her new—rather expensive—bunny headphones blocked out the sound of the world around her as she walked into The Nest. The neon name flickered and the “bar inside” no longer shone, but it was a nice enough place to live. Alice played her newest and most problematic composition and flinched at every hesitation and choppy transition. The self-critique gave her nothing to work with. All she could hear were the flaws with no solution in range. She turned the volume as high as her ears would allow, careful not to damage them, desperate to unravel some solution to her frustration. Lady, her violin, played in the back of her mind as she rushed to the elevator. Lady played as Lammy greeted her with his morning breakfast breath of pale ale. She heard his greeting just fine. However, there seemed to be a slight hesitation in her transition that occupied all her attention. Without knowing for sure, she skipped five minutes back and tuned the rest of the world out. When Lammy left, she finally remembered to press five. Lady played in the background until she finally made it to her room. The sound of her and Lady—now from her laptop—echoed throughout her apartment.

She prepared a small meal with a glass of wine to soothe her irritation, but every hesitation in her recording had her grinding her teeth. After a little prayer, she ate and let it settle under a new book. After the meal, Lady came out and they played. Lady moved at Alice's command: woman one with instrument, instrument one with woman. After the first ten minutes of her newest work that fluid motion died. There was a wall barring the composition in her head and the atrocity her hands seemed to create. It all sounded like that horrific switch crackling against the wind. Still, someone clapped respectfully.

She lived alone. Yet, a man stood across from her as if he belonged there. She could hardly believe her eyes. The man had a meager look to him, but he walked with all the arrogance of a man with means. That was all a side point from the sheer fact that there was a stranger in her apartment.

“Who the hell are you!” she demanded. Her anger nearly overwhelmed the sense of danger that started to sink into the back of her mind. The man—dressed in a worn and dirty ducktail suit—simply smiled. “Well? What are you doing here?”

“That was a beautiful composition.” The city had some weird habits, but there was still a line in the sand when it came to private space. This stranger crossed that line.

“Get out, out right now!”

“Of course it is a beautiful composition. You are Alice Olegovna after all.”

That small whisper of danger screamed at her now. The door wasn’t too far and the man happened to be on the opposite side. She could run. The voice of danger told her not to. She couldn’t exactly decide if the voice was a complete idiot or saw something she didn’t. When the man moved further away, Alice Olegovna held Lady like a bat, somewhat surprised by the instinct.

“Who are you?” she asked, since it was clear that this man wasn’t going away.

“This is a horrible view. Nothing but cars, people, and street filth. It’s a wonder you can compose at all in these conditions. Has the city been so unkind to you?” He looked out the window with a displeased expression. The act felt doubly insulting since it was her window.

“Answer my question or I’ll—”

“You wouldn’t hit me with Lady,” he said with a smugness that made it all the more tempting. He even had the nerve to smirk as he looked her in the eye. A cold chill came over her

as she swung as hard as she could. He was too far back, making the act look a little ridiculous, but it seemed to catch him off guard regardless. “Unexpected.” The word was more to himself than to her.

“If you take a step closer, you’ll not be expecting a lot of things.” The statement hardly came out as intimidating as it was meant to, but there were few vows she made in her life that she didn’t keep. This one topped the list. The man simply shook his head the same way her father did when she messed up a note: disgusted. It reminded her of Myra, that wicked thing. If she had Myra in her hand she wouldn’t hesitate to slam it against this stranger.

“You are certainly not what I expected,” the stranger said, with such an unwarranted judgmental expression that it only made her angrier.

“Who-who sneaks into someone’s house and starts judging them?” she asked. There was more she wanted to say—or perhaps fling—at the man, but something seemed to click in his expression. It made her hesitate.

“I suppose I have been a bit rude—”

“A bit,” she said, nearly dumbfounded. “Try a lot. A ridiculous amount, even. In fact, why don’t you try getting out of my house.”

“Your disgusting hotel room,” the man said, as a correction, pulling out a violin case of his own from his worn coat. It didn’t seem possible for that case to fit without her noticing, but that thought was on the backburner.

“Studio, mansion, house, hobo-box in the alley, it doesn’t matter. Just get out of my place!”

The man opened his case and she couldn’t help but move closer for a better look. Something normal like a violin might ground the strangeness better. However, in that humble

case rested a Stradivarius, making everything more confusing. The dense wood, that ancient but firm frame, she knew it to be a Stradivarius without needing to be told. Her mouth nearly watered at the sight of that instrument. The sense of danger was thrown out the window as every urge begged her to come closer to the Stradivarius. This had been the closest she'd ever been considering there was no protective glass to keep her from stroking its perfected craftsmanship.

To possess such an instrument and play it before a crowd? The thought was intoxicating. The Stradivarius had a rhythm entirely its own, making it more renown than any other instrument. There would be talks, whispers, gossip, but they would all come to see her play. Alice Olegovna and her Stradivarius. That was the missing piece to her composition. It wasn't her transitions or the barrier between her mind and hand, it was her instrument slowing her down. Lady was merely an instrument; a Stradivarius was a work of perfection. Glory and fame to match her talent and only a few steps away. A step closer, another, another, nothing but a touch could break her from her trance. Then the case slammed shut and she glared daggers at the stranger.

“Where did you get that?” she asked. The sight of the Stradivarius still echoed old memories.

...

It was an honest question to ask this stranger. The first time she saw a Stradivarius was at a party. The instrument was encased in glass. Mr. Hugo—her father's boss—invited the whole family to a celebration. House wasn't the right word for something that blocked out the sun from the street. Even then she knew that. Castle seemed to fit at the time, though that was too much a title.

Father was angry. The longer they stayed, the angrier he was. It was subtle anger that only she knew now that her mother was gone. She knew exactly why too. His boss's house, his family, their son, all of it was picture perfect. They glowed with a warmth that her family lacked. Alice waited close by because she knew that anything could set him off for later, her sudden absence included. She just had to follow behind and not make a sound. It was a sure plan until Mr. Hugo's son pulled out a violin.

Mr. Hugo wanted to show his son's talent, and out came a Stradivarius. Father's hand clenched on her shoulder the second that wooden frame was out on display. When Alice looked up, she saw his obsession. The violin reflected in his eye. Alice looked back but couldn't see anything remotely special about it. That ended when he played. The whole crowd expected the child to fail, at least she did. She hoped it, prayed for it. When bow pressed against string, however, her heart moved to the sound. It was beautiful. The boy she could barely remember but that sweet, heavenly music filled her even now. The only thing that kept her mind from the music was her father's hand clenched to her shoulder.

"You will play and be twice the violinist," he whispered so only she could hear.

...

The stranger squeezed the case. She could hear the case squeak in his grasp. There was no righteous world where a man wearing that cheap suit would own a Stradivarius through any legitimate means. It had to have been stolen, or maybe it was a forgery. A beautiful, convincing, intoxicating, forgery. Then she remembered how odd the situation was in general. Suddenly, it didn't seem so impossible.

"I won it," he said. "Which gets to why I'm here."

“Why are you here?” She might have meant, “how did you get here?” or maybe even, “get out but leave the Stradivarius.” Instead, she spoke unnecessary words from a muffled mind.

“Yes. I was getting to that,” he said, placing a possessive hand over the dinky little case. “I wish to play a little game.”

“A game?” The man couldn’t actually mean to gamble the Stradivarius. What kind of madman would do something like that? She held onto Lady as if it were a Stradivarius. “What kind of game?”

“The best of three wins. You’d pick the first test, being the challenged party. Simple and well worth the reward,” he said, moving the Stradivarius back into view.

“And I’d win the Stradivarius,” she said, more to herself than the stranger. The thought seemed to bring that beautifully crafted violin back into her mind. The fame tied to the Stradivarius was second only to the sound it produced. Needless to say, it would be well worth the challenge.

“Correct. Should I take that as a yes?”

“Wait.” Her mind started to work out the strange reality of a random stranger sneaking into her apartment, waving a Stradivarius, and challenging her. There was still one important piece missing. “What do you get?”

“You join my company.”

“I already have a company,” she said. The legal paperwork, specifically the punishments for a breach of contract, came to mind.

“Oh, that,” he said, waving his hands to dismiss the thought, “will be worked out by my legal team. The point is that if I win you join my company... after the lawyers do their work, of course.”

“But,” she said, as she eyed his cheap worn suit, “what if your lawyers can’t work it out?”

“Suppose I’d lose my one prize. Bad deals tend to happen in my line of work.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re saying that you want to challenge me to a competition in which you may lose a Stradivarius and may not even get the prize you want?”

“Sounds like a really good deal for you, doesn’t it?” he asked with a smug tone.

“No, it sounds too good to be true. It sounds like you’re trying to hustle me. That’s what it sounds like.”

“How can I hustle you when you’d have everything to gain and possibly nothing to lose?”

“I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” she said. Before she found the city, she learned the signs of a bad deal.

Resolve lasted until the strange man slid the Stradivarius off the table and back into his cheap coat. That instrument crossed her mind—the brand, the craftsmanship, and the beauty—with her as its owner. Lady was a beautiful violin. The two shared history and even a type of kinship that only a musician could have for her instrument. But comparing Lady to a Stradivarius was like comparing a dog to a god just because they had the same letters. There was only so much her humble violin could achieve and Alice had reached that extent. It was time for her to have an instrument that matched her talents. That could only be a Stradivarius. The man had almost left the room before she came to her conclusion.

“I’ll do it.”

She was just about to say it again when the stranger turned around and said, “In that case, the first challenge is yours.”

If she had the first challenge, she would make it a learning experience. There was always something to tell about how a musician tunes their instrument. Impulsive, methodical, careless, loving, all have a way of revealing themselves through tuning. It would be the best way to learn who her opponent really was. She looked that dingy coat over and the assumptions already piled in her mind. It was easy to think he was a careless and impulsive sort, but that was superficial.

“A tuning. Whoever tunes and reaches perfect pitch first wins.”

“Sounds fair.”

“Shall we begin?” she asked.

He nodded and pulled out a new violin from that worn coat. New was an inaccurate description. The violin was black, nicked in some areas, and worn just like its owner. He hunched over with his hands bound in a prayer. Pressed bow to string to hear what needed tending. He moved his hands across the G string and it seemed to slide out. The thought of that Stradivarius had her heart pounding as she tightened one string after the other. He moved to the D string. Her E string would not cooperate. The more she tightened it the more out of tune it sounded. The second she loosened it the string became limp. He slid a finger across his A string. She tested for tune. The E string needed adjustment. He slid his finger on his own E string and seemed amused. She tried again. The tune was better, but the A string was slightly off. He pulled the A string and ran his fingers from one end to the other. She pressed the bow and heard perfection.

“Done! I’m done, I won! I beat you!” She shouted as the chill ran through her. The endless loop of her failed composition made this victory all the sweeter.

He only nodded in response.

“Well?” She asked, irritated by his indifference.

Silence.

“Say something! You don’t get to sit there and ignore me.”

In response, a third hand emerged from his worn suit, stretched across the table, and pressed her face as if to shush her. She lost her voice as the third arm’s yellow nails seemed to shine in the dim light of her apartment. The arm slid back and disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. She remained silent until the stranger finished.

“It appears you have the first point.”

She tried to see the impression of that horribly long arm in that worn coat. No impression at all. No impression of a violin case. Nothing. The victory seemed such a meaningless thing when compared to this strangeness. With an arm like that he had to let her win. An unsettling realization.

“Ms. Olegovna?”

That hand. That suit. None of it made any sense.

“What are you?” she finally asked, though it was more of a whisper. She wasn’t even sure she wanted the answer.

“You can think of me as a talent scout,” he replied. The answer was brief and ominous, but perhaps that was for the best. “Since you are the winner, I think it’s only fair for me to pick the next challenge.”

No hand could fit in that suit, no matter how much she tried to make sense of it. There was no sense to make of it. It was troubling, unreal, illogical, nonsensical. There had to be a way out of this contest. A solution popped into her mind, an old solution.

“I already belong to a company, Centra Prodigies. I can’t be a part of your company if I’m already contracted into another. I. Am. Done.”

“There is no longer a Centra Prodigy Company,” he said, finally plucking his violin with a deep frown.

“Yes, there is. I literally just came from there.” How could he not know her company when he sought her out?

“Oh yes,” he said, undisturbed. “You did. And in the time since you left and this very moment, the Centra Prodigy Company has made public their final loan default. All contracts are null and void.”

There was no way that could happen so quickly. Her cell phone rang and she nearly leaped out of her skin. Unable to really understand the device, she just stared in silence as it rang. One problem at a time. This thing pretending to be a person had to be put in its place. She had to make some show of control.

“You’re lying!”

It wasn’t as strong as she hoped.

“You should answer that. I can wait,” it said, pressing the bow for a tune.

“I will,” she replied with spite. John H. Harper’s name—her agent—flashed on the screen. “Hello?”

“Alice? Are you okay?” Harper asked with a note of concern. “Did you already hear?”

“Hear what?”

“I’m sorry, you sound stressed. Are you okay?”

“Just irritated,” she replied, looking at the stranger.

“So, you have heard?”

“Heard what? What are you tiptoeing around?”

“It’s just I don’t want to upset you,” Harper said before he forcefully added, “but Alice, this can’t wait. You need to know that the Centra Prodigy Company went under. They just released a statement. Those bastards kept everyone in the dark...” Her heart dropped. The stranger finally seemed satisfied with his violin and started to slide it under that worn suit. “Alice? I know this is a lot to process, but I want you to know that your contract is null and void. I’m going to work night and day to make sure you join a company you deserve. You’re the hottest violinist out there, Alice. Finding you work will be a breeze. Hell, maybe we should be celebrating—”

“I have to go now.”

With that, she dropped the call and looked at the thing now finished with its tuning.

“He’s right, you know,” it said, with a halfhearted grin. “Scouts will travel all over the city to snatch you up. Luckily for me, I found you first.”

Silence.

“Shall we begin?”

Silence.

“Or do you forfeit?”

“No,” she said. She didn’t know what forfeit meant, but it couldn’t be anything good. A stranger that killed with his violin? Someone—or something—who made things happen in a blink of the eye? Whatever forfeit meant, it wasn’t good.

“Good. Now I pick.”

“What?”

“Now that you’ve won this round I think it only fair to allow me to choose something in my strength.”

“But—”

“I’ll be honest, that was nothing like your show in the Mitza. You were perfection.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, in a whisper but only at first.

She remembered the Mitza. The audience was stunned into silence as she played. From nobody to the next big thing. It was everything. No, this was no time to be weak and apologetic. Alice Olegovna, First Chair, violinist, musician beyond all others, did not apologize. She glared at the stranger and readied herself.

A yellow nail tapped under his lower lip as he walked to the window. Those nails seemed to be a new addition, but she suppressed that thought. It wasn’t like she took note of people’s nails. Through the reflection, she could see him study everything available until he made a wicked smile that had her tense up.

“What is it?” she asked, but the fear started to burn and fuel her anger.

“We will play atop that bridge.” The bridge was long, gray, and decrepit. It was the kind of bridge people pretended had a history instead of updating it to match modern security standards. They would label it Neo Gothic or some other term of endearment and prestige. “Whoever plays the longest wins the next round.”

“What are you talking about? How can we play atop the bridge? Why would we even do that?”

“I didn’t ask why we would tune our own instruments. We shall do it because it’s the challenge I have chosen.”

“Are we playing a specific song?” she asked, shocked by the stranger’s display of hostility. She even flinched as if to avoid one of her father’s switch swings.

“No, in fact,” he said, with those dingy yellow eyes glaring at her. “You don’t even have to play particularly well. Just play until one of us can’t.”

“What if we fall?” she asked, her childhood fear of heights suddenly tapping at the back of her mind.

“You play, or you lose, simple,” he said, indifferently.

“But what if we both fall?”

“Shall we begin?”

The bridge looked like a strong platform, but as she looked at that horrible, gothic design, her legs started to shake. How far up was it? Regardless, the Stradivarius called to her even while hidden under his strange suit. He snapped his fingers, and the cold nipped her all over. On instinct, she looked down and wished she hadn’t. It wasn’t until she felt Lady slip between her fingers that she regained her thoughts and stared directly at the stranger who held his violin. The feel of Lady was her sole comfort. Alice hunched over her violin and made a prayer. It was usually nothing more than a groomed behavior. Now, it meant the world. The heights seemed to squeeze her agnostic mind into some sort of godly direct. The God of the Abrahamic religions, the plentiful polytheistic gods, the gods in her mother’s nighttime stories, and the similar—if not same—gods her father rambled about when drunk, she prayed to. All and every god and goddess she had ever heard of, she prayed to them all. The Stradivarius was god amongst all. It was only when she turned her thoughts to the Stradivarius that her mind calmed and that empty filled. Then she played.

When he pressed bow to string he did so in Col legno style, or wood to string. To anyone with talent, caution was key in Col legno. Both bow and string were delicate and require tender care. He was no master, and there was no care. The sound hurt her ears, made her feel a bit

dizzy, so she shut her eyes and played on. The man couldn't even play. It was beyond real. She had won three tournaments in San Francisco, four National Competitions, and was on her way to becoming famous before she found her way into this weird city. This man challenged her. He sought her out, and he couldn't even play. That horrible sound echoed in her ears. She still felt unbalanced, but a bitter laugh escaped her that nearly made her fall off the platform. That beautiful work of art would be hers. She laughed harder. She knew he was done when she heard the snap of his string. The stranger seemed amused more than anything else.

With a hum, she played. Woman became one with music, instrument, and self. Everything else was tuned out. It was the only way to win and she had to win. There was no room for failure or mistakes, no weakness.

...

Bow or switch. That was the choice Father forced upon her, bow in the left, switch in the right. Bow, always bow. Myra, his violin, was a nasty instrument. The strings always seemed to wear. No matter what the reason, her father claimed it her fault. There was a nick on Myra's neck that always stabbed her palm. Father said it showed her where to place her hands. She hated that thorn, but it hurt a lot less than that switch.

She played. It was nothing like Mr. Hugo's son. The way he glided from note to note, octave blending into octave, was masterful. Hers were jagged, malicious in all ways. Father noticed, he always noticed. For every fault, he would slam the switch on the table. She would repeat the song until it was perfect. Sometimes she didn't even know she made a mistake, but her father's switch was always there, slammed against the table as a reminder.

...

The steel beams of the bridge vibrated and unbalanced her. Like the switch, it brought her back to reality. She looked. A horrible accident caused cars to pile up. Fire. A person on fire. She heard the screams, felt the vibration of a car hitting another car into her steel beam, and looked. The stranger played its violin, eight eyes closed as if tuned to the horrible screech as she had been with her music. Two arms played, a third arm wiped the sweat off its forehead, a fourth arm securing it to the steel beam, as well as a fifth. A final arm scratched under its chin. Its face held horrible fangs. The body was covered in long, dark, prickled hairs.

She couldn't believe her eyes. It was unreal and horrific rolled into one. Alice's bow no longer pressed against Lady's strings. The music stopped. The thing with a Stradivarius looked straight at her, its eyes glaring down at her with a smile on its face. It was only after that ugly smile that she'd realized she stopped playing.

"It appears I've one this challenge, one for one."

"You're not human," she said, more to herself.

"No need for name calling," it said. "Besides, it's your choice."

"How is this even a fair competition?"

"One for one sounds pretty even to me. Better make this next challenge count."

The point of the tuning was to learn her enemy. What did she learn? The specific and effectively pointless routines he did said he was ritualistic, possibly superstitious. Working in her own home field advantage should work in unsettling that superstition. There wasn't much hesitation as she faced her apartment from the amount of room given to her on the platform. She picked that apartment for a reason, the view. The only place that played real music for the masses—The House of Blues—was lighting The Nest with its bright blue light, calling for her. The next round would be hers. With the next victory comes the Stradivarius.

“Whoever House of Blues falls for the most. I’ll make the arrangements,” she said, with a smug smile. “In about a month probably—”

“No need.”

“What do you—”

The long platform of the bridge was replaced by the familiar backstage of the House of Blues. Finally, her legs had solid ground. There was no way she would mistake this place for anything else. It was her first real gig in the city, the foot in the door she needed. A home away from home. But, how? It was a question she repeated in her head. When did he manage to book a staging time? How did they get down from the bridge? There was no answer.

“I need a drink,” she said, heading straight for the bar. It followed. She could no longer think of it as a man now that she’d seen its true form. The bartender—Tyron—didn’t even bother to ask as he prepared her drink. She wished he did for once. She’d ask for something stronger. Hell, she would ask for help.

“You may go first if you wish,” he said, his hand pulling back the curtain for her.

“No games,” she said. “How can I trust this game when you’re not even human?”

He pulled out the case without any hesitation and out came the Stradivarius. She could hear the music play. The sound of that boy moving through the octaves like a kite in the sky. This time she touched the frame, cool and smooth. It produced a unique sound she hadn’t heard since that boy so many years ago.

“If you don’t play there will be no Stradivarius.”

Alice walked up to the stage of the famous House of Blues, a walk she had done countless times before. She pulled out her case and held Lady in her arms as the crowd clapped and shouted her name. These were her people. All of them eager to hear her new composition.

They would settle for her old composition, “Lady and Storm,” always her default. The crowd cheered as she pressed bow to violin. Not even a whisper escaped as the crowd leaned in close. Bow slid across string and out poured the full weight of “Lady and Storm.” At the end of the song, she looked up at the crowd now enthralled by her music. Then she looked at the man in the worn suit who looked troubled.

“Beat that,” she said, as she walked back from the cheers.

He pulled out that awfully nicked violin case, which caught her off guard.

“You’re not using the Stradivarius?” she asked, thinking of that horrible sound this violin produced.

The stranger made an amused face and said, “I wouldn’t dream of using another violin. A musician should stay true to their instrument.” His eyes grew paler, his stature taller, and his voice colder.

“Sure,” she replied, but it gave her a chill. It reminded her of Father and that dreaded Myra.

She heard clapping and the typical cheers for a new musician. Those poor people. She couldn’t help but reflect on that horrible screeching she’d heard on the bridge. It was the same cheers she got when she first played. He made an awkward bow and did some quick tuning. He struck in Col legno and produced a horrible screech that pierced her ears. She had to grab the wall so as not to fall to the ground. It lasted for one horrible note, but it felt so much longer.

It was then she noticed the House of Blues and her patrons. They screamed and covered their ears to fend off that horrible sound. Some tried to run for the door but seemed bound to their tables. There was no doubt now, no way it could convince her otherwise. She grabbed Lady before she even knew what she was doing and pressed bow against string. Lady made a sound

she never heard before. It was as if that screeching and her rhythm collided. She pressed through the motions of “Lady and Storm.” It had some effect on the audience. They were moving as if to cover their ears.

“It appears I’ve broken my E string. Would you like to weigh in now?” he said.

“Weigh in?” she asked, trying not to shout as the others recovered themselves. “What even is this? You were killing them!”

His brow raised as he looked at her with an uncomfortably blank expression. The worn gloves were now pierced with hideous yellow nails. It wasn’t just his nails. There was something different about him. It was uncomfortable to look at.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” she asked, avoiding his gaze. There was no world where this man could not understand his lack of talent to the point that it looked like he was killing his audience. Even the deaf would squirm after that display. He was fixing his violin and she was readying to play her own in response. Then the silence struck her. That same crowd had booed more talented artists to tears, but for this insult, they shouted nothing. They were all still under his odd spell, not dead but something in between. Men and women lay on their tables as if resisting some force that compelled them. It was their eyes that told the truth. No blood, no messy show, just empty eyes. “What did you do!” she demanded. Nausea forced her to take the nearest seat. A dull man looked back at her and nausea came all out in a puddle of sick.

“I was making them fall for me. That was the point, correct? It appears your interference has caused some sort of reaction.”

“I am not making some Faustian bargain,” Alice demanded more than asked, as she spat the sick from her mouth and took a nearby drink. One shot went down with a punch. Another

soon followed. Still, she couldn't find the heart or courage to run. The Stradivarius, too, was displayed before his feet. "His" still felt like the wrong description to give to this creature.

The stranger tapped on his violin with those disgusting nails and pulled a hair from his head to restring his violin: "Does that mean you forfeit?"

"Forfeit? I'm not going to play your sick game!"

"If you forfeit there will be consequences."

"I told you I'm not playing your sick game!"

She worked up enough anger to walk to the door and fought the urge to hurl up everything she'd ever eaten. She opened the door and looked straight into the horror show that she had walked away from. The stranger strung his violin both in front and behind her. She looked at both of the creatures in complete confusion.

"You agreed to a competition. The best of three is the winner unless you choose to forfeit. I ask again: do you forfeit?"

"I..." She looked at the others in their state and thought of the bridge. There was no doubt anymore; this was all the doing of the creature before her. The case for the Stradivarius opened up and she wanted more than anything to grab it—steal it if need be—but she could not betray the House of Blues and all her patrons.

"I forfeit," she said, before she realized what she said.

"Understand what that means—"

"I don't care. I forfeit," she said, sitting on a nearby stool.

Everything seemed to stop. For a moment she feared she would pass out, but it stopped as quickly as it began. She looked back at the stranger who only glared at her.

"You will play or—"

“I will not play for some stupid thing,” she said, looking back at Lady. All its nicks and imperfections seemed to shine in the blue light the creature couldn’t block.

“What about the Stradivarius?”

“I prefer Lady,” she said. It was the violin she chose. How had she forgotten? It was so long ago.

...

It was her father that had messed her up. She could play for the hiring committee. But not when her father glared in the crowd, waiting for her to fail. Myra’s neck poked at her palm, twisting until she had to pause for a moment to get a better grip. Father was furious. She could see him in the audience fuming. Perhaps she could only feel the fury. After the botched audition, she had to slip into the crowd just to escape the argument to come. She wandered the streets of San Francisco to forget and avoid.

There was a grimy alley she hid in. No one took a second look at that dark alley. Some of them were clearly dressed for the interview. They saw her fail. She listened closely to hear what they had to say about her. There was nothing said at all. No one cared but her and Father. She could hear him walk closer so she hid behind a nearby dumpster. At that point in her life, she recognized her father’s walk. She didn’t check to make sure she was right. There would be no switch to scare her. She wanted nothing to do with his anger.

Alice pulled out Myra as soon as those steps had long passed. Her fingers had already hardened from years of that horrible thorn. The smell of garbage reminded her of the dumpster she hid behind. She chucked Myra. A weight released from her as she inhaled the slightly horrid dumpster air. Alice stepped into the side streets. She would go back, face her father, tell him she wanted nothing to do with classical music. No Mozart, no Beethoven, no long dead men. That

was what she wanted to do, but her feet kept on walking the opposite way. It wasn't long until she passed a music store. Most of the products were guitars, drums, typical rocker gear. It was enough to have her think. It was never the music that she hated, only Father and his Myra. Still, a guitar might be nice. She thought it over, her with a guitar latched to her.

It didn't fit. She walked past the aisle with names proudly displayed across the frame. None were familiar. Myra was a custom-made violin. Her father hated brands except for the Stradivarius. Brands were an obscure concept to her. Her father would label all of them less-than, which made his Stradivarius worship all the stranger. Then there was Lady. The violin stood in the used section. There was nothing much special about her other than the carved Lady on the back of the neck.

"You like violins?" the store owner asked.

"I suppose," she said, unsure if that was actually true.

He smiled like he knew something she didn't before he handed her Lady. "Try her out. There's a place down the alley, House of Blues. Maybe you'll find your people."

Her people. The House of Blues was her people and now there was an intruder harming them all.

...

"You will play for the Stradivarius," he said, somehow looming closer. "Your very own Stradivarius."

She ignored the creature and looked at the people around her. There were few she recognized more than a friend of a friend, but they were all her family in the House of Blues. This was her first real gig in the city. All she was to them was a nameless nobody.

She played again as the thing continued to talk about nothing that mattered. It could be the last time she played. A new composition. No sharp spikes, perhaps no order at all, just magic from the heart. Its voice was drowned in the force of the music. It didn't say a word, but she knew it had somehow gone and vanished. All that magic belonged to her and Lady. The song finished and the sounds of the House of Blues started to rise. The heart of the city was before her as the crowd started to clap and cheer.

She stopped her playing for another round of claps, made her bows, and headed straight to the bar. The bartender handed her a shot, pointing out a young musician who seemed to be looking her over. This was home. Lady, secured in her case, wanted out, another round of music. The new musician took her turn and the crowd cheered. She looked at the faces, looking for the stranger with the Stradivarius, but it was nowhere.

“No more Centra Prodigies, eh?” Tyron asked, leaning over to hear her response.

“That's what I heard,” she said, sipping her drink. “So what happened with that guy I came in with?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, but she didn't feel ready to open that wound. The silence lasted so long he started again, “You could own the House of Blues. Been a while since she had a real owner.”

The offer caught her off guard. She had always assumed Tyron was the owner. She looked around the parties of eager patrons, the new musician that played a nervous note, and the thought became increasingly appealing. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about the stranger with the Stradivarius. The House of Blues was safe, that was all she needed. She polished the rest of her drink and walked the tables. Most knew her either directly or by reputation. Any and everywhere she turned was a conversation. Her people.

“Think about it! Not much else to do in the city!” Tyron shouted.

The walk felt aimless, but she could walk toward any one of them and find a new friend. There was the call of The Crawl. She could feel it now, but she ignored it. Some came and went with the call, but it was never for her. Drinking didn't bring her here like some of the others. The House of Blues brought her here, a new home.

This was the first place she performed in the city and there had always been room for her in the roster no matter when she decided to drop by. The place was a little emptier than she expected, unfortunately, but that would rise and fall as the city wills. The new musician seemed to soothe her hand when staring at Alice, perhaps playing for her favor? To own the House of Blues, a strange thought. A lovely thought.

She took a seat and watched the new musician. This spot would do. Since there was no reason to keep Lady in her case, Alice let the loyal violin out and felt her strings. There was a new nick on her neck that interested Alice a great deal. It must have happened when she met the thing with the Stradivarius.

“Are you going to play?” the new musician asked, apparently finished herself.

“Perhaps,” Alice said, as she examined her bow. She gave the woman another quick glance before focusing on Lady.

“Haven't heard a violin play in this city. Mostly just hear that awful screeching metal.”

“I suppose I could play,” Alice said, sliding her fingers across Lady's neck and plucking a string, then two. Lady was good and ready and the woman seemed eager to hear. Alice pressed the bow to Lady and music drizzled then poured. With each stroke of the bow another person entered with eager ears. Alice played under the House of Blues as if not a soul was watching.

The Cost of Freedom

It had been a month since Lammy's name was blacklisted, and after you had a mark on your name the security business was gone for good. Once you learn the odds and ends of security, however, there was always the other business to fall back on. The robbing people for cash sort. That was why he was blacklisted. He only stole to give himself a—self-decided—well-earned bonus from the passionate patrons who wired their houses with every odd and end. Now, it was about survival. Small-time theft from people who wouldn't even know the difference. This last job, however, was larger than a small-time theft. An old client—new mark—was gone for the week. The man had a hideous—and expensive—rug. Lammy made more money than he ever had off that ugly rug.

Lammy usually didn't have money to burn on alcohol, so when he did he tended to abuse it. One crummy bar was as good as any other. It was dirty, nearly empty, and the bartender looked ready to stop a fight, but it would do the job. One drink turned into two, which turned into five, which turned into a stumbled exit out of the bar. The car was gone, the street was unfamiliar, but for a drunken Lammy that was the beginning of an adventure. He stumbled around, pressing the button on his key, hoping the car would alert him.

A crowd of people seemed to pull him further and further into unknown streets until nothing looked familiar. Everyone was happy so Lammy just enjoyed it all. They headed straight to another bar. A young man grabbed him by the arm and a woman grabbed the other. All three headed for the dancefloor. Lammy forgot how he got there, but it was nice just to forget about surviving. He'd have to go back to his car and find a place to sleep. After the alcohol ran its course. Soon he moved with the swarm of Crawlers to another club filled with more drinks.

After the third club, Lammy stopped fighting the crowd at all. People whispered about something called “the call of The Crawl” but there was no definition of what that could be. The money earned burned away and Lammy woke from the hazy, drunken night wondering where he was and how he got there. Where was he supposed to go? He walked the unfamiliar streets asking strangers for some hint of where he might be. That’s when The Nest’s neon sign lit up before him. Someone walked out of the complex dressed in red and mumbling to herself. Lammy figured she would be someone who’d know the place.

“Hey, where are we?”

The woman dressed in red just looked at him for a moment before she said, “The city.”

“Yeah, that’s not really helpful,” he said, chuckling. “Name’s Lammy.” He extended his hand. She looked at it with a smirk.

“Scarlet. Looking for a job?”

“A job?”

“Yeah,” she said, walking and he followed. “You’re at that stage where you’re going to need some money coming in. There’s always a job available if you know where to look. I can help you out.”

“That would be nice.”

Ring, ring.

“But first, you’ll need to wake up.”

Ring, ring.

The alarm forced Lammy to actually get up and start his day. Poor Scarlet. He hadn’t seen her since he set her up with John. It must have been weighing on his mind more than he thought if he was lingering on old memories. The loveable weirdo never disappeared for this

long and he was beginning to worry. He thought she'd like the man with that goofy red mug. Perhaps he had misread what she wanted. Maybe he was feeling guilty, but he couldn't think of why.

Hungover, confused, and hobbling toward a job, all too familiar. Those little facts alone were enough to remind him of the night he first came to this strange city. It could be as simple as that. He sprinkled some cologne, hoping it would make a difference, and ran out the door. When Lammy saw the Violinist, he knew he had to hurry. The woman never held the elevator open and pretended like she never heard him asking. He managed to force his way in the elevator. She looked annoyed at something as the elevator went up. Lammy pressed the ground level and stared Alice down, but she paid no mind.

"Hi," he said, hoping to get her to at least notice him, but she only mumbled to herself and fiddled with her recorder. Lammy wanted to chuck that recorder out the elevator, but it would do no good. He heard Alice had a temper and he didn't want to find out.

She walked off with only a few mumbles as conversation as the elevator screeched downward. Lammy slid to the corner of the elevator put on sunglasses to help with the light. An art gallery, that was the job. Scarlet didn't give much information other than "art gallery," which felt a little strange in this city. Lammy walked the discolored, checkered, carpeting and noticed a few new faces at the open bar. The poor bastards were clearly "across the valley" types.

Lammy hailed a taxi and waited as those walking The Crawl passed him by in their usual zeal to get to the next bar or club. He'd be lying if he said there wasn't a part of him that wanted to join instead of work this gallery job. A taxi stopped in front of him with a driver eager to start up some conversation. Lammy took the back seat and mouthed the address, hoping the shades expressed his disinterest in conversation. It worked, for once.

The gallery host—he could tell by Scarlet’s description—was waiting in front of the building with an irritated expression. It was like the host knew he was hungover and hiding in the taxi. The first scolding of a new occupation was on its way.

“Are you... Lammy?” the host asked with some attitude.

“Yeah,” he said, expecting the rant. Instead, the host walked on with no doubt Lammy would follow. No lecture was a good sign for Lammy.

“We almost got the entire collection from the one and only Thatcher Burr—”

“Who?”

The gallery host simply rolled his eyes, frustrated. They still hadn’t made their way to the floor Lammy was supposed to guard, but the host sure did spend sweet time name dropping every piece of artwork they passed by. The junk glued and sodded together was the funniest of all to Lammy. For him, who cared about the name of the guy who stuck some brick to a pole? Lammy knew he should be playing the game better with his new employer. The host could have fired him the moment he walked in late. To be fair, he didn’t hear the alarm. To be honest, he was too hungover to be there.

“Anyway,” the host said in a tone that brought him out of the daydream. “We simply want you to look out for thieves or vandals. We have a wonderful collection from all across the city. Some of these works came from “across the valley” which you may know is quite a challenge.” The host gave him some mad stink eye before adding, “Perhaps you may not.”

“Right,” he said, as he rubbed the hangover out of his head. At least the pressure took his mind off the hangover for a moment.

The host wanted to say something more but decided to walk away instead. Maybe he could smell the alcohol or maybe something else. When did a couple of bottles get Lammy

hungover? There was a time when he could party all night and wake up as spry as something spry. What is something spry? He lingered on the question until his head started to throb. Why was this so hard? It didn't matter. He should be concentrating on the job and all these strange examples of art anyway.

A mousy woman stood in front of some of the supposed art with her head tilted in thought. The art looked like a blot on white canvas to Lammy, but she looked at it like it was something remarkable. He walked around for a while, hoping that it would make sense from some angle. She just stared at that one dot the whole time. He didn't get it. With his head as muggy as it was, he should have just avoided her and moved on. There was no telling what conversation would spark from that dull dot. She turned around as if he spoke aloud and walked over. Lammy figured she must have an extra sense to her.

"Do I know you?" she asked. Her eyes seemed to suggest that she did. She leaned closer and sniffed the air before she added, "The host must be pretty desperate to be hiring drunks. Suppose there aren't many options in the city other than drunks."

"Thanks," he said, "but I need to get to my job, so..." He took a step back and looked around like there was some place for him to go. There wasn't.

"So, I'll be wandering around, ever mindful of the gallery's drunken defender," she said, taking the hint. "Feel free to chat some more if you find the time in your busy schedule." She looked around at the nearly empty room as if to make the point clearer.

There wasn't much to patrol, but his job depended on people thinking he was doing something. Everything was visible except for one corner which seemed like a good way to look busy. There were only five people in the whole space: Mousy, the host; some old man; and some tatted kid that looked ready for a brawl. What an interesting collection of patrons for an art show.

Whoever heard of an art gallery in the city, anyway? So long as they paid a wage, Lammy couldn't care less. A boring way to make a living, coming to this empty space day in and day out, but a boring living was better than no living at all. Hell, after this hangover, maybe it should be the way he started to live in general?

In this entire collection, nothing looked artistic to him. Deeper and deeper, aisle by aisle, the art started to change until nothing looked the same. The entire gallery was small, but somehow he found a patch that was secluded from the rest. Maybe he was not hungover at all, just plain drunk. There had to be a turn here somewhere, maybe right or left? Great, lost on the first day. No, the room was too small to get truly lost. He just had to keep on moving forward until something familiar appeared.

The hall was getting thinner and thinner until it squeezed him on both sides. The only other thing in the room was a lifelike painting framed in what looked like rock. Perhaps the rocks were papier-mâché painted in gray. The picture was too bright to see but felt strange. It was a familiar strange. A pocket, this city was filled with them. Lammy hated pockets. They were always a pain in the ass: inferno of eternal hell, space void, always deadly nonsense. There was no amount of money in the world to warrant messing around in a pocket.

The hall had disappeared sometime of him noticing the pocket, trapping him. It was exactly what he earned for taking a job in an art gallery in a city like this. He could only go straight into the pocket now. Lammy plunged into the unknown ahead. The portal was thick, oily, and incredibly resistant. It coated his body in its warm pastiness and unbalanced him. Only when he felt something that wasn't pasty did he know he had broken through. The world on the other side was a painting. Too bad Lammy wasn't some art expert, or he'd give it the correct title. Realism? Everything was realism or surrealism to Lammy. It took him a moment to realize

there was nothing else to do but walk deeper into the painted world. Something was trapped in here with him. He could hear it rustling around. Perhaps it was like how records hold music in place for release: old sound trapped under folds.

“Hello there,” someone said, but he couldn’t really see who through the oddly shaped trees. It was like looking at something through peripheral vision despite the fact he was looking right at it.

“Come out and explain all this.” He was in a tiny cube of a room and now he was surrounded by trees. What exactly could explain all this? It followed some laws in the city. Everything had some law to it, but he never knew anyone who knew any by name.

“Sorry, sorry,” a man said, walking out of the painted trees with his hands clenching a paintbrush. The man was covered in paint with a stained white shirt. He looked just thin enough to seem a little unhealthy. “I don’t usually get visitors in my little patch of reality.”

“I’m trying to get back to the gallery, actually, but after seeing this, I figure I should investigate,” Lammy said. A “patch of reality” confirmed this as a pocket, which meant a lot of unnecessary strangeness to follow.

“Art gallery? Is that what they’re using my old place for?” the man asked more to himself than to Lammy. “Anyway, my name’s Chuck.”

“People call me Lammy.”

Everything looked like it was smudged and oiled. There was a sunset, a city, stars all in the distance. It was a weird reflection of a real place. Perhaps it was based on a real place. There even seemed to be an entire planet looming over the sky. So, it’s some sort of painted pocket. Fitting that a painter owned it. Sometimes the city worked in over-the-top and unsubtle ways. “How would I get back to the gallery?”

“Oh, sorry friend. I haven’t been out of my little patch of reality since I had hair,” he said, running his hand through his bald head. “It’s been a long time.”

“Are you serious?” Lammy asked. If the state of his bald head was the measurement, it certainly wasn’t good. Maybe Chuck didn’t have much hair when he found the pocket, but that still seemed like far too long. “What do you eat?”

“Whatever I want,” he said, brushing the air until a car appeared. “Let me show you around.”

“No, I should really go. Magic, voodoo, hoodoo, is where I get off the bus. Where’s the entrance?” Lammy asked and turned on Chuck before he could run away. Chuck didn’t really try to run as opposed to try and shift away from a punch. Even as Lammy held him tightly, he seemed ready for a good hit.

“Calm down, calm down,” he said, struggling with Lammy’s grip. “Entrance? That thing opens and closes as it pleases. I don’t really pay attention to it anymore. I mean, why would I?”

“What the hell are you talking about? How long does it close? I need to get the fuck out of here—”

“No, no, no, friend. It’ll open and find you. Thirty minutes, an hour, the longest I ever saw was twenty-four hours, but to be fair that was a long time ago,” he said. “Well, you can either stay or come with me.”

“Twenty-four hours? I just got this job. I can’t be fired on the first day!” Lammy said. His voice cracked like a puberty riddled teenager. Where else would he get a job with an employer too desperate to fire him? Even in this strange city, a job like that was a long shot.

“Wow, man. I’m sensing a lot of negative energy coming off of you. Take a breather and loosen up your grip a little bit. I think you need something to drink. What d’ya take: whiskey, wine, vodka? The least I could do for this inconvenience that you seem to be in.”

“I—did you say vodka?”

Lammy was probably already fired after disappearing. You couldn’t show up late, show up drunk, disappear, and expect a job waiting for you. Two of those were fine—apparently—but three? No way. Why not take a drink or two? Or three? Three was a good strong number. Plus, it would be nice to see what this Chuck could do in his world of his. That brush certainly sounded like freedom to Lammy.

Chuck nodded and spun his brush around until a bottle of vodka appeared, shot glass and table included. Chuck poured and said, “Take a drink, have a seat, and chill out a moment. No need for negative energy when you can have just about anything you want in a few brush strokes.”

“Yeah, just need to chill out,” Lammy said, eyeing the glass as he parroted the words. It looked more like some clear, oily, whiskey. That brush really had made what he wanted, no lies or trick to it. Lammy squeezed the glass to see if it caved in. It seemed solid enough. The drink looked drinkable, so he pressed it to his lips and took a sip. That drink was strong enough to wake him up. He grabbed the bottle and topped himself off as Chuck leaned back on his own chair with a smile.

“Good, right? The best you can get from the city and for free. No reason to even go out in that city with those people,” he said the last word with discomfort.

“Yeah, people suck,” Lammy said, filling his glass again. “Don’t make me drink alone. I’ll feel weird.” Lammy didn’t actually feel weird, but it was awkward drinking another man’s alcohol in front of him.

“None for me. Don’t think my liver could take a single sip. Used to be an alcoholic when I was a city boy, but then I found this place. Now I feel complete.” He looked ready to sell Lammy the most amazing timeshare.

“My dream world would be filled with more alcohol,” Lammy said, taking another healthy swig. Chuck nodded as if he understood.

“Yeah, it started out that way for me too,” he said. “But when you can craft your own world there really isn’t a reason to drink. Being god is really something.”

And with nine easy payments...

“Or, maybe you really aren’t as committed as I am,” Lammy said.

Chuck looked at Lammy with an unsettling expression until he burst into laughter. A few drinks in and merriment was contagious. Lammy’s head was swimming and the hangover buried somewhere underneath it all. Too much too fast on an empty stomach, but hair of the dog was always good.

“It looks like that door won’t be back for a while. Want me to show you around?”

“Sure, why the hell not.”

Chuck droned on and on, explaining this or that. It felt like the gallery host all over again but blessed with alcohol instead of cursed with a hangover. It was nice, beautiful at times, but it was clearly a place for an artist, not some drunk gallery guard. Lammy was as polite as all those shots could muster. It was some strong stuff. The tour ended with a trip to some small little cabin

in the middle of a vast cornfield. It was all nice, especially when Lammy was able to sit down and take a breather. That was his favorite part.

“That’s almost everything,” he said, producing some beverage to split between the two of them. More alcohol was always the right answer for Lammy.

“Almost?” Lammy asked, taking a sip. The drink had some alcohol in it but mostly just fruit. “Damn, how does a man make all this?”

“Time. Just a lot of time. I wasn’t even creative before the start of this. I just wanted to get away, but you start to create what you want after a while.”

“Oh, I thought you were an artist,” Lammy said. He had been drinking the evidence of that artistry. And sitting in it. And walking in it. Hell, he was probably breathing the evidence. How did breathing work here? That sounded like a question that could be solved with more alcohol.

“Suppose I am now,” Chuck said, with little thought or commitment.

“We’re literally standing in your own world, but you don’t think you’re an artist?”

“Suppose you’re right in a way. Just never thought of it like that is all.”

“Well, what were you before all this?”

“Before? Let’s see... Tried The Crawl first. I suppose everyone tried The Crawl at some point. After that, I tried to make a living with anything I could. I was a driver, courier, a not-so-successful fighter, and a counterfeiter. Preferred the driving.”

“I feel that. The city is one tough ride. I just got this new guard job and after today... Yeah, after today who knows if I’ll still have this job.”

“Sounds like you could really use a break yourself. Ever think of finding your own little reality?”

“If I could ever find one, sure. I only have about four people I can actually stand. The rest of this damn city can burn for all I care.”

“Sounds like you have the same mindset I did,” he said, sipping his beverage. “Which reminds me, there was one part of my little reality you haven’t seen.”

“Really? To be honest, I don’t think my legs can take another tour—”

“It’ll be real quick,” he said, getting up and opening a hatch from the middle of the room. “Just the basement. It’s the most important piece of this whole little world of mine. Come on. It’ll be quick.”

Lammy’s feet seemed a little squirmy under his weight, but he followed. So long as Chuck kept on feeding him drinks, why not? The door closed behind them. Darkness was so thick that it was nearly impossible to see. The back of Chuck’s head was the only visible thing. The stairs were thick and oily with no way to place a solid foot in the ground.

“What’s all this then?” Lammy asked, wiping the sweat from his face. It was humid and a furnace was barely roaring as the only source of light.

“It’s sort of a heart, I think,” Chuck said, scratching his bald head. “It was the only thing in the pocket when I found it. Just a little fire.”

“That’s nice,” Lammy said, leaning over a poorly defined bench. “Why does everything look so... runny?”

“Things don’t seem to stay here. The fire seems to eat it away,” he said, but he looked like he wanted to say more.

“Is there something special about it? You said it was the heart, right?”

“Yeah, actually. I found out the first time I found the place... well, truth was someone else found this place. He showed me around, got me drunk, and we were just having a hell of a time... until we weren’t.” He placed the paintbrush on a table near the furnace.

“Someone else, you say?” Lammy asked though he was losing interest. All this walking around had him a little irritated. The alcohol didn’t help. The desk seemed to bend to his shape, which kind of worried him but not enough to do anything about it.

“Yeah. He started to tell me the fire needed kindling like it was alive or something. He thought he could make a good buck from the things he made here. Said he wanted me to be a part of it. I guess that was to catch me off guard.”

“Clearly you won that little argument. What happened to your friend?” Lammy asked, standing up to get his blood flowing.

“Thatcher fell into the fire and burned alive,” Chuck said, staring at the furnace as if it consumed him too. “Made a painting out his ashes. Figured he’d like that.”

That wasn’t at all what Lammy expected to hear. Lammy should wait for that door to reappear away from the man staring at the fire, he knew now. He looked in every direction but couldn’t really see where they came from. If only that light was brighter.

“I think I should get going.”

Chuck said nothing as he stared at the furnace. His eyes had a dull and empty look. That wasn’t the most settling thing to see.

“This world has given me everything. More than the city or my life “across the valley” ever did. I owe this world all I am.”

Did he have to get all freaky now? Lammy could make it on his own. He would have to. All he needed to do was head straight through and feel around for that staircase. It wouldn’t be

easy, but he had stumbled across worse when he was drunk, so why stop now? Next thing he knew, Chuck ran at him with a shovel.

He moved out of the way quickly enough for the shovel to hit the ground. The ground gave way like thick sludge, devouring the tip of the shovel completely. Chuck had trouble pulling the shovel out, which gave Lammy time to back away.

“What the hell, dude! Are you serious?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Chuck said, as he finally pulled the shovel out. He looked at the end of his shovel with disapproval. It seemed rude to prioritize the murder weapon as opposed to the murder subject.

“You aren’t seriously trying to burn me alive, are you? Because if you are, that’s some sick shit.”

“No, no, you,” Chuck was literally trying to make up an excuse on the spot right then. “Yeah, yeah I was trying to knock you out to feed the furnace, but you saw my world. It is beautiful, truly beautiful! You can’t get that from the city. You’ll be a part of that! Isn’t that great?”

“Like shit, man. What the fuck kinda bullshit is this right now? Get me the hell out’a here, fucking fucker!”

“Well, yeah,” he said, looking back at Lammy and giving the shovel a few practice swings. “Thing is I wasn’t completely honest—”

“Oh, the fucker trying to swing a shovel at a man he’s been pumping alcohol into hasn’t been completely fucking honest? Say it ain’t so. Now get me the fuck out of here, you piece of shit!”

“Like I said, not completely honest. See, the thing is that one of us is going to have to get in that furnace before that door opens up. The door opens, lumber walks in, and lumber gets pushed over the furnace. You’re the lumber, by the way. Just in case that wasn’t clear.”

“Yeah, figured that, and now that you’re staring me in the eyes I hope you realize you’re not getting no drop on me!”

“It’s pretty fair when you think about it,” he said, which was the dumbest thing Lammy had ever heard.

“Fair? What part of you getting me drunk and trying to hit me over the head with a shovel is fair to you?”

“You decided to walk in and stay for a visit. You had the chance to walk away, but you chose to stay. You chose to drink and keep on drinking. The same thing happened to me when I first got here: the tour, the drinking, except mine was a knife if you could believe that. What kind of psycho tries to stab someone? At least I was trying to knock you out, you dig? Oh, dig, get it,” he said, chuckling as he swung his shovel.

Chuck rushed forward. Lammy stepped out of the way before grabbing the shovel. Next, they were in an all-out struggle. Chuck pushed him back. Lammy nearly fell from the sudden force. Lammy twisted around and had Chuck straight over the furnace as the door opened up. Lammy pushed with all his might. The man was tall but skinny. Lammy wasn’t a heavy lifter by any means, but he was stronger than Chuck. The oily floor pushed down as he pressed forward, mushing around his shoes as he kept kicking forward. He had Chuck over the furnace now. Chuck pushed as hard as he could, eyes filled with fear.

“Wait!”

Chuck's grip loosened. It was all Lammy needed as he pressed the attempted murderer straight into the furnace. It happened in a second. Chuck didn't so much burn as was consumed whole. There wasn't even a sound as he was eaten by the flame. There and gone. The fire roared alive and shot sparks out like a mad storm. It was so sudden Lammy could barely find a word. The one thing he couldn't deny was that he had killed a man. A man had died by his hand, and the thought squeezed at his stomach until he puked. A murderer. He was never that before. No one would know if he could leave.

Lammy looked for a way out and the door suddenly appeared. He saw Mousy enthralled by the blot painting, the old man stared blankly, and the tattooed kid shifted around. The whole place was resetting and looked as real as the gallery view. The furnace light even revealed the staircase.

Back to that gallery and... or. Lammy picked up the paintbrush from the table and tried to make a bottle of vodka. It worked, it truly worked. He could hardly believe it. Maybe, just maybe, he could take one little shot and go back. Or two. Maybe five.

Five drinks deep was the thinking stage of drunk. Any less and he'd practically be sober. Now that everything was coming together the place didn't look half bad. In fact, with the brush in his hand, this place could look like anything he wanted. No debt, no masters. The door to the art gallery was still there and ready for him. The door could disappear and the decision would be made for him. He just had to wait.

What had Chuck said? Something about the door coming in and out until it finally just gave up. Did he say how long it would take? That had to mean Lammy could just wait it out. The patrons waited and among them that host who looked more than a little stressed out. It was a funny thing to see from afar. Lammy had failed enough employers to have heard every kind of

insult in the book. There wasn't a reason to go back for that. Friends though. Shallow as they might be, friends were still something to go back to. They were people to drink with and rant at. A world without someone to rant at wasn't much of a world to live in. Another drink made six.

When he found the city, it seemed like freedom. It worked, for a while. This brush was the genuine thing, real control. He would never have to struggle again. Anything he wanted would be his.

There was no gift like that anywhere else in the world or the city. There was always so much work to do to get anything. How many times had he worked for people with fancy paintings and useless things? It would drive him insane to linger on it.

Now, there was a paintbrush in his hand and true freedom.

He tried to make a bucket. The end product was a horribly misshapen mess. All it would cost... Right. He nearly forgot the cost. A person per so and so long. Was that worth it? Instinct said no, but the city was filled with selfish assholes. What were the chances that one of those bad people would wander in? Plus, Chuck said the door only opened when it needed someone. It couldn't need someone often. So, a long time of getting everything you could ever want with a price tag of some selfish asshole who probably deserved a bit of a hot seat anyway. Besides, that was a problem for another day. The door started to get blurry. He had to be running out of time. He grabbed the bottle and hobbled over. His balance was a little off with the vodka, but he didn't practice night and day with beer goggles just to fail now. That training managed to send him semi-stumbling to the door. The gallery host looked straight at him and, for a moment, Lammy thought the host saw him through the painted lens.

Instead, the host just stepped out of view. For Lammy to take that step would be purposely going for a lecture. Another sip from the bottle had him cough as the door started to

fade away. True freedom at the end of a paintbrush. It was anything and everything that he'd ever wanted. Part of him hadn't even realized how desperate he was for it. A glorious new world at his fingertips. The door was gone and the furnace took its place. Just like that. He wasn't—it's not like he chose to kill a guy. Things just happened. He's not a bad guy. What was bad, anyway? He just wanted a cold drink in his hand, maybe a nice meal to eat, and that's it. He could have anything, but he wanted so little. The cost of that freedom was a long time away. Until then there were plenty of drinks to fill the day.

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