

**Voltage of the Electric City**

by

Tania Shirkey

Submitted to the Department of Creative Writing  
SUNY Purchase  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

May 9, 2021

Sponsor: Catherine Lewis

Second Reader: Medhi Okasi

## Contents

Introductory Essay	ii-iv
Chapter 1 – Potential Difference Rectifier	1-9
Chapter 2 – Transistor	10-19
Chapter 3 – Solid State Memories	20-32

## Thinking Backwards, Again and Again

Tania Shirkey

It took me a long time to realize that writing wasn't simply an obligation of going to college but was something I wanted to do with my life. I want to be an author, real pro-bono one, capable of writing well thought out works that can make a difference to someone besides me.

My senior project, "Voltage of the Electric City" started off as this, but just like me it's changed through time and careful meditation on its elements and characters, multiple redrafts and new ideas took shape until hopefully, I made something good out of this Frankenstein. It's a story I've always wanted to tell ever since I first started reading in my aggressively poorly managed Philadelphia middle school. The setting that emerged more out of vague flashes of inspiration as I wandered to the back of the schoolyard and looked up into the crisscrossing telephone wires. At that moment in time I would go on to finish reading my first book, *The Hobbit*, and several Roald Dahl stories and *Choose Your Own Adventures* books from which I got a specific taste for strange Sci-Fi, with *Inside UFO 54-40* being my absolute favorite thing to reread at the time.

Anyway, this reasonably long stint of reading and rereading the same books again and again turned out to be a nice boon. Now in Brooklyn, New York, my middle school teacher would grant me special attention during a large narrative assignment he assigned. The task was to write anything fictional, or not, as long as it followed a narrative structure and keep it below 10 pages. Without thinking, I asked him if I could go beyond the limit and, after I described what I wanted to do, he graciously accepted. This narrative essay thus became my first foray into fiction writing: a fantasy adventure centered around a little man being whisked away by a group of knights to go kill a dragon.

What I find interesting about that story is how much I deemphasized certain elements usually related to high fantasy and replaced them with political baggage (the knights were enlisted by the kingdom, a governmental duty) and the lack of magical races or creatures except for Dragons and magicians without really knowing much about dark fantasy. I guess my taste for loaded political

intrigue stories backed by mundane economics and nature was already ingrained in me then, funnily enough.

My teacher was particularly enthralled by it, so much so that he offered me an opportunity to use it as an example of narrative essays done well. It was embarrassing and if I'm embarrassed about talking about it now then imagine how I dealt with it as a quiet, an emotionally rich but ultimately stunted boy. He did end up convincing me to share it under an agreed upon pseudonym though: "Anthony Stickly," or maybe just "Carl."

I'd spend the subsequent day picking off ladybugs from my arm in our backyard.

It would take me another while to get back to reading or writing. Having gone through most of high school without ever picking up a book for leisurely reading, it wasn't until my graduation that I began to seriously consider a career path and a college. Admittedly, becoming a writer felt like an obligation. It didn't stop feeling like that either until I felt a real panging guilt from writing many, many poor attempts at postmodernism, poetry, and trying to understand them in literature classes. But something did come out of all those little mistakes, building up to one real, natural revelation.

A story has a seed, usually the first draft or a note, and a good one grows with time or when dug with fertilizer it takes a little time. Like taking care of a plant, revision is akin to figuring out how much fertilizer the story needs.

In the process of writing, I've discovered myself both as a writer and person. I learned to embrace revision instead of fearing it, leading to a better sense of control over my stories that my earlier work lacked.

This story, *Voltage of the Electric City*, is a story about an electrical engineer, a detective, and the threads that bring them together in a conspiracy that they both stand to gain from but find conflict within each other due to a disagreement in their shared past. The setting is post-apocalyptic where a global nuclear war destroyed most of civilization as well as leaving behind climate change so intense that Earth becomes locked in permanent winter. The last remnants of humanity are escorted to the City,

a once soviet Antarctic base converted into a metropolitan city powered solely by twelve dynamo generators so large that they constitute entire facilities miles from the City itself.

While the setting of this story didn't change, the conflicts and motivations of its characters, along with its plot and structure changed quite often. At first it began as a short story that revolved around a major character – Benjamin Vivari – losing his memories from an electrical shock and then reclaiming them by interacting with his silver wrench. The original story focused on themes of loss which I attempted to bring forward as I recontextualized the short story as a chapter one of a larger story. This version had its strengths like a keen focus on setting and introduced Sorenson Poltnik, a detective, as a major character. This version very quickly became reminiscent of stories like *Dune*, focusing much more on the world's politics than the individual character conflicts.

The premise was born from the fascination I personally have about electricity. I began thinking about how people connect with it, and how it works elsewhere in the world. Imagery from shows like *Serial Experiments Lain* and comics like *Chainsaw Man* influenced me and lead to the idea of an early 80's society being thrust into a far worse world. And it's in that world without flora or animals or life outside of The City that I found potential for stories beyond just the characters of Sorenson and Leo.

I look forward to finishing the project in the future and am eternally grateful to the program. The project's world is bleak, as is ours, but I don't write to revel in its suffering. Instead, I want to show how hope can be found even in the icy tundra of a nuclear-wasted world, and if it could be found there, then it could be found anywhere.

## Chapter One

### Potential Difference Rectifier

Somewhere, tucked away underneath swirling grey, lies a city surrounded by twelve electric dynamos. From each spread a large network of electrical poles, each one stretching up to about twenty-five feet tall and stabbing the Earth even farther below with titanium roots, ensuring that the wind will never tilt them. The city connected to them is built deep into the Antarctic shelf like a stubborn mole, resting atop a hill and sheltered by a curtain of black, draping electrical cables surging with the power of those Dynamos, growling low in what its people call its "Hum." These humming wires are dense enough to shelter the metal sheeted homes underneath from the harsh winds carrying sheets of endless, blinding snow. The people underneath it that curtain call of this a simple name: The City. Humanity's final vestige, it needed no other name as the rolling grey clouds of soot that cover the sun may have sapped the last traces of hope that they ever had.

But, far off from the City and within the Twelfth Dynamo that was first activated long ago, there is a whisper of advancement. Within the tall concrete hall of its first floor, its white walls draped with machines installed over years of jury rigging, are two engineers. One, dressed full in a thick, yellow rubber suit, works tirelessly atop a thin metal grated floor on an open box of wires, breaker switches, and rows of miniature power converter batteries. The other is a shorter man with a large, round red nose and blistering hairs jutting out of his cheeks and chin with his own rubber suit only pulled up to his waistline. The top half falls to the floor as he leans over a toolbox lying on the ground.

He's looking up at the working man, his arms folded over while he calmly nods. "There, steady, just like that," he says, his of warmth. He brings his formidable fingers up to pinch his inflamed nose, a voice graveled yet betrays no hint nervous habit, while he watches the other engineer suddenly lower

to pull from the wall's battery. "Leo," he sharply says, "you need to cut the circuit before you can start removing live batteries, kid! What do you think will happen while there's still power?"

"We'd have to get Charlie," Leo huffs, referring to the sole medical staff among them. His breath fogs up the plastic visor in front of him. "Didn't we already cut the Dynamo's power, Ben? There shouldn't even *be* any flow here!"

Ben grimaces, his thin lips cracking in the arid, round hall, "Kid, we can't turn off the *entire* Dynamo, are you crazy? Whole City would go dark."

"Fine, gramps," he raises his weight, shifts a pair of pliers from hand to the next, and reaches for a breaker switch on another panel adjacent to the one he was fiddling with. He flips off one of the black jutting switches and hears a bit of the hum around him die down, but not totally.

Ben sighs, his thin shoulders relaxing as he once again sits down in front of their toolbox. He fishes around in it silently while Leo returns to his own work. Ben finds it and rises to his feet. "Here," he says while mid-toss, low balling a sizable metal thing towards Leo.

"Huh," Leo looks back and recognizes the flying object in a second, immediately letting go of his pliers to hold his hands up like a basketball net positioned low at his waist. The object flies plops into his right palm and he brings down his left hand to ensure that it doesn't slip. After spending a moment to feel the weight of the thing, he uncups his left hand to reveal a rubber-handled set of electrical shears. But just beside him, he notices that the pliers had fallen through the grated floor. Leo opens his mouth to thank Ben, but notices the pliers hanging on by the nail of its pivot to the edges of the metal grate floor they stand upon. He positions low to grab it, but pushes it to fall with the push of his thumb. It falls straight down into the murky darkness below them, where thick electrical tubes carry raw energy from further beneath the Dynamo. "Dammit, my pliers," he shrieks.

"It's fine," Ben says while swatting the air, "we've got another one."

"In the shelter! Why'd you even throw this at me?"

"You forgot to grab 'em."

Leo frowns, "But we aren't going to just start cutting wires yet, are we? We need to remove the faulty converter batteries first, then dig out any frayed copper, then —"

"True," Ben points at him and then brings it back to his chin to scratch it, "you got the method down, *but*, using the pliers you'd need to hand it off with the shears once you get to the cutting bit. Sure we're going to start sorting them by color and rows in the box, true, but you can accomplish that with shears."

"How?"

Ben brings forward his index finger and thumb to look at Leo through the small gap between.

"A light touch is all you need."

Dejection takes over the forefront of Leo's mind as he stares off toward the center of the hallway where the rest of their equipment stands on the extension of the platform they stand upon. It loops around the hall, which itself is shaped like a circle, and behind the pillar of wires, hanging lights, and interlaced machines is the door to the outside between them and some slight comfort. Engineers arrive to the Dynamos to, usually, perform maintenance as the Dynamos are much older than the City itself, which often requires some overnight work. Thus they live within shelters built within the vicinities of them to which they arrive in trucks full of rations, water, and nichrome in case the heaters to them had worn out over time. They usually never exceed sixty degrees Fahrenheit, but Leo still feels the pull towards it, to a place where he can lay back and prepare some tea and not have to replace copper linings of wires for hours.

And, as he stares, his ears begin to ring with the hum of the wires all around him. No longer emanating from behind him, he hears the buzzes and snaps of small shocks ring out from the tangle and, briefly, feels himself drawn to it. A moth to a flame, the moth burns its own wings.

He feels a hand grasp his shoulder, knocking him out of his trance. It's Ben, his face suddenly solemn. "Hey," he says, "You feeling okay kid?"



Leo shakes his head and waves his hands in front of him. "Ye-yes, of course," he says, "I'm perfectly fine!"

Ben narrows his eyes. He had planned to leave Leo to the duty of this job, the first one the young man would do by himself in his five years of apprenticeship. Now he began to feel less certain, the want to take those shears back and to do everything himself crawling up his spine. He sighs and looks beyond Leo to the box of spilling wires that's meant to reinterpret raw energy into usable electricity and sees the myriad methods he could employ to speed this all up. *The process*, he thinks, *that's all I need to teach him*. He feels the back of his thin dry hands, and says, "Fine, then tell me the process of how we're doing this today. The whole nine yards."

Leo explains in full detail, gesturing enthusiastically while Ben nods to each beat of the plan. It's all rehearsed as Leo had studied this procedure repeatedly for years, but even as he felt that he was just now beginning to grasp the embodiment of the work he felt pulled into a strange darkness. Even as he outwardly explains this newfound optimism, inwardly he feels as if he's sputtering in cold water. Air escaping his lungs without meaning, his hands work accurately like a machine's, but not with passion. And the worst part he begins to realize as he looks deep into Ben's bright green eyes is that he, his master, has no idea.

Yet even still, he's able to convince Ben well enough for him to say "That's right," and strike his back with a friendly palm and smile, "now go do it, I'll be right here." Leo feels disgust swirl in his mouth while he silently returns to the work ahead, the work to maintain the Dynamo.

Hours into this work, time that had paved the way to Leo sorting out the wires and examining each with waning precision, disaster strikes. A bolt of electricity rises from one of the wires he snaps apart with the whitened blades of the shears, curling in an arc toward him like a threatened, lurching snake he had only ever read about. He instinctively raises his arms as it falls from his hands and strikes the surface of the converter's metal chassis to propel it forward once again, snapping at the rubber of his suit. Ben snaps to action as he gets up and catches Leo as the man begins to fall backwards. But, as

the rubber lands on his skin, Leo shouts in a terrified screech, freezing Ben long enough for Leo to fall into his master's chest instead of his arms and they both begin spiraling backwards. Once Leo feels the impact, once he recognizes his body hurtling nonsensically against the floor, the sensation of falling takes complete hold of him and once again, he shouts. He is filled with horror as the water around him begins to close, leaving the only safety he can find to be to reach out his hand and grab.

Then, whiplash. Leo suddenly feels his body twist abruptly as his feet finally stick to the floor and his back strikes against cold metal, a faint reverberation ringing across his spine in pain. He groans as he makes the realization of what happened, slowly opening his eyes to the sight of himself sitting on the metal floor. *The guardrails*. In the panic, Leo had grabbed hold of the metal guardrails outlining the walkway which swung him into one of its posts. From the sound of the sparkling wire, he looks left to see the converter's control box several feet away now with his own body now on the walkway leading to the platform where their toolbox still lies. And, to his right, he hears Ben groaning closer to him as he tries to get up. He's on his back and grasping at one of the posts but slips and falls again on his side. Leo blinks, suddenly scrambling to get up and lift Ben up so that he leans against the metal railing where he can collect his breath.

After Ben is propped up Leo reaches for the rubber mask of the suit and swiftly doffs it to let out his black, messy hair and patched facial hair, and breaths. He tucks the mask into his underarm and clasps his other hand onto the rail, staring straight forward to the rows of other converters, to the myriad other appliances he must fix by himself. Ben stares straight down into the void beneath them, seeing how the wide energy tubes are only slightly illuminated by faint orange lights before being swallowed by the dark abyss, and gulps.

After several minutes, Leo speaks, "Sorry."

Ben continues to stare into the darkness beneath them, his mind sent into a wordless panic that his advancing age does nothing but worsen. "It's fine," he says meekly as sweat stains his eyes and

shines his exposed scalp, the last pieces of wispy white hairs blowing slightly in the breeze of the hall as it took in outdoor winds.

Leo's thick eyebrows furrow. "I'm serious," he says, "I shouldn't have panicked." *That too*, he realizes, *is an empty statement*. His face scrunches up, confused at the emptiness.

Ben raises one of his hands, looks at it, and closes it slowly. To him, his skin is percolating, the presence of it and his bones suddenly clearly apparent and obvious. He chokes a swear, which to Leo sounds like an aggravated grunt, and says "Let's get back to work." He points past Leo to show him that the wire had stopped sparking, "It should be safe to work, with your equipment at least."

Leo opens his mouth the protest.

"Just," Ben interrupts him, "don't panic again. You know what you're doing."

He looks down at Ben, who rises up to his chest, with worry. "You should go back to the shelter," he says bluntly, "get some rest. I may have messed up, but you're winded."

Ben looks at Leo in his eyes, staring deep into the young man's blue eyes. "I've been scraped before, Leo, I'll be okay. We've got a job to do, and we want to get it done with. You've got that project you gotta get back onto anyway, so chop-chop!"

Leo smiles, remembering what Ben was talking about, and feels maybe even just a semblance of levity rise up his chest. "Besides," he says before donning his mask, "it smells like copper in here." He hates the smell, the metallic and slightly burnt smell of electricity. But then right as he walks back up to the control box, he realizes something. "Uh, Ben, I think I dropped the shears." He looks once more across the grate floor.

"Oh," Ben dully says, "Do we have another pair?"

"Yes, but they're in the shelter."

"Then go get them."

Leo looks back to Ben, who has looked back down to beneath them. "Are you sure? What if something happens to you?" The image of the sparking wire rises up like a bad dream.

"I won't do anything, I swear." He holds up his hand, "I promise."

Leo pauses for a moment before raising his hand. They meet together and shake hands.

"Alright," Leo says as he takes off his mask again, walks out the Dynamo's central chamber, and leaves Ben alone as he catches his breath. But despite the warmth of their exchange, Leo can't help but feel the creep in his spine grow, the stench of copper pervading his nostrils while the noise of the hum overtakes his ears. Something is wrong, and Leo cannot hear it past the clack of his rubber soles.

#

It smells of burnt copper in the dynamo and Ben, while left alone, lets the smell settle with him. He listens to the hum, and all of its intricacies as he's learned it in the twenty year history of the City. Within the seemingly melodious hum lies chirps of signal lights, the wails of tubes carrying massive energies, and the whirr of spinning magnets. Its as he stands there, his arms resting sidelong on the uncomfortable metal bar of the guardrail, that he hears within these sounds traces of the past. Birds, crying wolves, the roar of cars in the distance, technology had always advanced forward into the realm of nature. Now, there was none. The birds that were there for him after school, singing between trees. No frogs leaping out of the grass after rainfall. Verdant hills beyond which his grandparents lived and to where he visited one summer.

Then there was the City itself. The massive, looming structure, which to him and the others that first settled within it was already mostly built aside from what would become the Lower District. Always there were the Dynamos, and his memories wander to the reconstruction efforts he underwent to power them back on. It was no easy feat, and it took months before they could get its central magnet spinning again. What it took was Ben's own ingenuity as an electrical engineer from his own hometown in Upper New York, where he had trifled in the business of tinkering and invention. He was

allowed on the boats down to Antarctica because his machines proved his capability, the work he did on Dynamo Twelve only further extending that to carry on the rest of human history.

Ben shakes his head and turns around. His eyes catch the toolbox, still resting on the ground but tossed slightly to the side during Leo's scuffle. He smiles when he considers it, unsure as to why. There are no more vast, verdant hills, there is no more weather, there are no more animals. The merriment of the Earth had been stolen away and cast behind the veil of this City. Ben had found his wife within it, he had a child with her while living down in the Bottom District and within the shadow of the hill central to the entire City.

And of course, there was Torren. The massive skyscraper yawning above all else and holding up the nest of wire above the City that powered it all. It was them, the people within that tower, that took everything away from him. This he knows, and he reminds himself of this hatred, that there can be no happiness anymore. People live, but at what cost?

He leans down, picking away various tools from the top of the toolbox until he finally pulls away at the false floor of it, revealing a wrench, silver and gleaming in the false light above him. The instinct to grab it then rises up inside him, a phantom movement, and his gaze then rests upon Leo's unfinished work. Consciously, he had no idea why he felt such an anger. It feels coded within him and he rolls his thin shoulder, feeling the tension within it. *This must be how sleeper agents feel*, he thinks, despite how distinct the sensation was.

And it was the need to fix a broken machine. He had watched Leo perform his work, had felt his fingers dig deep into his own flesh as he choked the frustration at seeing the boy work so slowly. It was easy work, that much he ought to know! After all, Ben had taught him his way, and even if he didn't know why his hand not only reached this strange, small, and light silver wrench, nevertheless how he knew it was there, he knew what to do with it.

*Part away the bad wires*, he thinks during his approach to the control box, *feel their weight, know the copper's state inside it, and snap it forcefully with a good tug*. He's done it enough in the past

to prove its efficacy, he knows, but as his hand lands upon the chassis of the control box he finds it odd that he can't bring forth a memory of doing it before.

His stomach knots. His memory, his mind, is blank. *How didn't I realize this sooner?*

Everything past a point, the day he can remember fixing the Twelfth Dynamo, is gone. He brings up his hand, letting go of the control box, and grasps his nose. But then he feels it, a rumble in his hands that rises up through to his tense shoulders and massages them along with his chest. It's the wrench, and as he brings it up and forward he feels the core of it magnetize toward the bones of his hand. Then he sees it. An inscription, the letters "J.V." and the image of a young boy, his son, emerge out of nothing. Images of a boy playing in the window, listening to Ben speak to him as he tussles his short blond hair. Ben, for the first time in a long time, feels certainty, trust in this wrench, and maneuvers to his work to the beat of a name.

"Johnny Vivari," he whispers.

He tugs at a wire, feels its emptiness, then pulls. It snaps apart and a flooding sensation enters Ben's body. It rushes from the wire as a small yellow twinge of light and gets caught by the wrench which begins to alight in a surge of electricity. It then penetrates his skin, a painful tingling surging up the same way as the wrench's vibrations had and stabs at his heart. But, unlike a regular shock of electricity, where a great weight enters into the body, he begins to feel lighter. Something then feels as if it surges away from him, the sensation entering into his brain and draining him of thought, of touch, of sight. His nostrils flare, his ears pop, and he feels his back collide with the steel grate underneath him, the push of the impact feeling to him as if it had happened mere seconds before.

In a brief two second interval, Ben is laid across the floor, his consciousness fading as the wrench becomes heavier and heavier. His last thought before fading into the cold whiteness was of Leo. *This is yours now, kid.* Then there is total blankness pulsing to his heartbeat.

## Chapter Two

### Transistor

What most people younger than the founding of The City know of the Old Days are what adults prop up against their sheet metal walls or celebrate on the hill winding up the middle of the metropolitan. Posters, music, stage plays from eras far removed from even themselves, the people underneath the wire writhe in gleeful escape, having successfully built on top of the hill and outstretched from the Torren Building. It is the district of illusions, the Top.

Sorenson Poltnik, a police investigator, sits within one of the houses of pleasure: A bar stylized after a Brooklyn speakeasy complete a hidden entrance below a restaurant and a jazz band that arrives three times a week after five, but leave before seven. If they were expected to stay after seven like the Old Days, then they would have to be paid extra in thick coats to stave off the creeping cold that comes after sunset, never mind the bitter frosts that suspend most outdoor activities during the summer.

Though, while Sorenson had always found jazz peaceful, he can't help but feel irritated over the sound of this band not so much because of their quality, but because the events of his workday insisted to stay locked within his brain. Still, he tries to appreciate the relay of old hits like "Blue Bossa," but he instead hangs his head over the bar table as his ears ring and his pale hands scrape at his short black hair.

In his anguish he hardly even notices knocking knuckles reverberate near his skull on the bar table or even when the man performing that knock says, "Hey, drunk! You've gotta get up already."

Sorenson peeks up from the fold of his grey suit jacket, his dim blue eyes nearly folding themselves shut as he recognizes the man as an officer by the shine of his gold Public Safety badge on a blue, messily put upon vest covering a white sweater. He groans, rising slowly while muttering, "Who? Which department?"

The man laughs, and as Sorenson's eyes finally peel open, he finds he faintly recognizes the man's scruffy brown hair and wide, round figure. He slaps his hand against the brown replica-wood bar table, "What, you're here moping around at a bar and didn't get a drink?"

"Anderson," Sorenson faintly recalls the man from earlier that day. A beat officer that patrolled Huminger's Place, a sub-district of the Bottom District that was the first to be rebuilt from the initially dilapidated state the Bottom District used to be in. Slap-dash metal cubes of homes strung along in dirt roads and fire barrels in some spots. Even where it was more refined it still all stank of burning. "Why are you here?"

Anderson smiles, waves to the bartender, and sits down on the stool next to Sorenson. The bartender immediately starts plunging into cabinets, grabs a glass, and fills it under the counter. When he lifts it up to the top of the countertop it's a tall glass filled with orange juice. He hands it off to Anderson who then asks the man to get Sorenson another. The bartender nods.

Sorenson's eyes faintly trail the bartender in a fixed, and bewildered gaze.

"What? Didn't know I was a regular here too, Investigator?"

"I'm just here for the night."

"You like the jazz?" He juts a thumb toward the jazz band behind him. The three of them play their music on a short, round concrete stage in the far corner of the bar that's just barely able to keep in their large instruments. A drum-set, a trumpet, sax, a large Old Day looking bass guitar, and a small piano set tucked just nearly at the faux-brick laid wall. Together they were about getting ready to finish



their set of the Henderson classic, the lead guitarist beginning to eye the leaflet of notes across from him that stood on a thin metal stand.

Sorenson adjusts his posture on the red cushioned stools, now sitting straight up, "I dabble." His attention averts to the bartender as he hands the investigator a glass of juice similar to Anderson's. When Sorenson looks back at him, the officer had raised his glass for a toast. Sorenson shakes and clasps his head, irritated. "Anderson," he says, "what's with this show? Don't you have paperwork to do?"

"What about you investigator, weren't you the one who closed that case today? What paperwork would I possibly have left?"

Sorenson grimaces at the newfound hostility. When he was standing outside the apartment of a murdered couple just earlier that day, he had seen a far more reserved, friendlier Anderson sitting by with a colleague on the scene. What had happened between then and now? He clenches his sharp jaw in thought before saying, "Of course I was, but I was relieved when Chief Heinrich told me was done for the day." He grasps the glass of orange, sparkling juice, "This place is close to the Torren offices, so I came here once I started feeling a headache coming along."

Anderson purses his lips and averts his gaze toward the wall of vintage alcohol lining the walls replica wood lined shelves. He sips a bit of his drink, then says, "Right. You got it off easy."

Sorenson looks down on the man, noticing that he only rises up to his chest while sat down. *Odd*, he thinks, *I thought he was taller when I met him*. The jazz continues to ring in his ears, though its energy and melody begin to taper off as the band evidently begins to improvise. He squints past Anderson towards them, suddenly bewildered. "Are you saying," he slowly says to Anderson, but his voice trails off as he becomes more bewildered by the band's choice to begin their own melody completely broken off from "Blue Bossa."

"You're the Chief's favorite," Anderson bluntly says. "He's willing to forgo your paperwork for a day just because you're a little tired."

The murmur around the two officers die down and Sorenson looks off to see why. He quickly notices how many of them have begun to stare off at the jazz band, their faces twisting in confusion and their words becoming aggressively hostile. But they aren't becoming angrier with each other, it's the music. He then looks down at his own drink and then at Anderson, surprised he isn't looking at him in the same way that the patrons are staring off at the band. Instead his thin eyebrows are arched in wry amusement and his hands docilely fold over the base of his drinking glass. "Yes," Sorenson lifts the glass up to his own mouth, "I'm no favorite, though. I've done my job, Anderson. That being getting illicit copper dealers off of the streets. He was carrying around fifty pounds of it in his car hood, murdered a couple that were in desperate need, else the wires in their homes would burn."

Anderson looks up at the officer, his wry expression sending a shiver down Sorenson's spine. "Don't you find that odd, investigator? Us officers must go out and patrol for what? Signs of copper philandering, of people robbing what we, admittedly, only have a bit of. But it's something we could have had more of if Congress just chose to open those mines out the west." He points a finger out in the air past Sorenson, possibly pointing it west. He then brings it down, chuckles, "Why is it that we haven't come up with a better solution in twenty years? It's suspicious, if I say so myself."

"Anderson," Sorenson starts, but then a shout from across the bar wrenches his attention away.

The jazz stops as a man rises out of his table while loudly berating the musicians. Most of what he says blows past Sorenson's ears and at first he simply hears the ramblings of a student at one of the music halls on Theater Square crazed with knowledge he uses for idle conversation. But then he spats at the trombonist, saying, "You walk all over the legacy of the genre with this, mess!" Sorenson shakes his head, returning to his drink with warm resignation up until he hears a woman's voice from elsewhere in the room. She shouts, "He's right, you're all embarrassing yourselves!" Soon the bar erupts in agreement as the jazz band is shamed repeatedly. Soon enough the band is ushered to leave, its members dejectedly ending their session with hanged heads and limply dragged instruments as

others rose to shout at them closer to the exit. Some even follow them upstairs the narrow stairway, Sorenson even faintly hearing a smashed bottle from the distance.

He immediately begins to spring up, but Anderson whistles and says, "Bad reception."

"What the hell was —"

"People don't like it when they deviate," Anderson says quickly as the bartender drags the raucous few back into the bar with their arms locked behind them with the top half of a bottle in another man's hand. Nobody, it seems, is hurt. "All's they ever want is to hear the classics."

Then, just as quickly as the noise began, it dies down. People return from the top of the stairs to their seats beneath cubic displays of paintings and glasses full of drinks, alcoholic and not, as calm as they were when they moments before. The chatter among them soon fill the bar, replacing the space that jazz once filled.

He barely even hears Anderson answer him, but does hear him knock the bar table with his knuckles. "I'm saying that the guys in Torren have got something to do with it. We're in a dark age, investigator, a spiral of cynicism and lies."

Sorenson looks back to the officer and watches him as he slowly brings his drink forward and drinks of it, not once stopping for air. "You're insane."

Anderson says nothing, just drinking and staring up into the ceiling.

"You're drunk."

"Not true," Anderson asserts while tapping his glass, "I'm only as drunk as you are, Mr. Poltnik."

When Sorenson moves to drink the juice, Anderson had laid out for him before he feels the palpable shakiness of his hand as it brings the rim to his lips. The juice goes down sweet and smooth, but once it hits the back of his throat he can't help but gag as it burns and corrodes at the same time that he puts the glass back down. *This juice, he realizes, is full of alcohol.*

"Just a favorite of mine," Anderson chides, seeing Sorenson's shocked expression. "You're way too overworked Mr. Poltnik. I figured you needed something you cool you down." He reaches for his drink, seems to realize something, then says, "Don't worry, it's on me."

#

"Where are you going Mr. Poltnik? Don't you want to hear what I have to say?"

"No." Sorenson pulls up his left wrist to check his watch. It's five-thirty, he suspects Heinrich might still be in Torren filling out paperwork or otherwise being preoccupied with his weird knickknacks. Promptly, he buttons up his long brown coat and fastens his black cotton gloves while stepping from the last step of the bar's staircase.

Anderson follows behind him in his own vest and sweater. The sweater, Sorenson guesses, must be enough to fight the cold. The beat officer stammers and says, "You barely even touched your drink!"

"I don't drink," Sorenson snaps while only turning his waist slightly at Anderson, "it's dangerous to anyway. You can freeze, maybe worse!"

"Well, have you seen that happen?"

"Yes," they are already up to the intersection outside of the bar, Lafayette and Bernard, "in fact, it's suspected that the couple were drinking, open to attack from the copper dealer."

"Jesus, you're acting like that's what did them in!"

"It's not, but it made it easier."

"Why're you being so cold Poltnik? I was trying to make you feel better."

"You're infuriating."

They cross into Birmingham and Lafayette to walk up to Videlli where Sorenson can cross to Lincoln and Fulton. There Sorenson knows of a tram stop where he can deposit Anderson and move

forward up to Torren, which is located all the way up Lafayette. All the while they pass by high-rising apartments and venues, some theaters and other themed bars, all styled after Old Days architecture despite all of it being refurbished out of metal and other materials either left over from the first ships or from underneath the City. But Sorenson's gaze is focused on the looming tower of Torren, the golden skyscraper that holds up the lotusing cover of the wire, the Hum and the murmur of others along the sidewalks accentuating his steps.

That is, except for Anderson. "Hold up," he says while chasing Sorenson after a light had suddenly turned red. He crosses anyway, saying out of breath to Sorenson once he catches up, "I'm telling you investigator, there's something sinister going on here!"

"Tell somebody who would care."

"What's wrong with throwing some harmless theories around?"

"The right ones can cause civil unrest, officer! They should have told you that when they trained you." In fact, it was part of the written portion, where they have recruits study the law over the course of a month. The mantra is simple, "Public opinion is the key to Public Safety. Does that not ring any bells for you?"

"Well, yeah, of course," Anderson says indignantly, "just because you rose up to Criminal Investigations doesn't mean you ought to boss me around, though. We're different departments!"

"It means it does, Anderson. You are on the second lowest rung, while I—"

"Am fourth highest,' yes I know. You're not my teacher!"

Sorenson doesn't dignify himself enough to respond, instead he clenches his fist and thinks *I am going to kill this man.*

They walk up onto Fulton street where a tight row of benches sit at the edge of a wide sidewalk. The benches sit next to a sign with tram schedules posted on a box in the center and a circular icon at the top with the image of a departing tram car. The tram stop is already crammed with people waiting to get to their homes and many more emerging from the storefronts that line this street.

Because of this, Sorenson and Anderson are forced up against the side of a large brownstone apartment and a commuter's stream away from the tram stop. Then, Sorenson stops along with Anderson, the two waiting in silence as they wait for the tram.

After several minutes, but to Sorenson what feels like an hour, Anderson dimly asks, "Why are you going back into Torren?"

Sorenson looks down at the man. His face, which was once an irritating mixture of joviality and fat, has become rendered muted and wistful as he looks up into the wire with wide eyes. However, he looks nowhere near where Sorenson is, even when he addresses him. Sorenson coughs, "I want to see what I can do about what happened at that bar."

Anderson nods as his expression brightens, but not considerably so. *Could he be listening for the Hum*, Sorenson thinks. It's a comforting noise for some, a low and steady drone that never actually deviates. The only time it truly does is when one's near a heater where it becomes focused and hyper. Anderson speaks again, his voice low as if he were asleep, "You think you're gonna try and arrest those guys who beat on them?"

"No, the artists aren't protected by any known law, so I can't touch them."

"So then what's your goal, exactly?"

"I want to see if I could get Heinrich to consider submitting a suggestion for a new law that would protect them to Congress. He has more influence over them than me, since he's head of Public Safety, and it's as you said before." A car speeds past them, honking until it melds in with the rest of the soundscape. "I'm his favorite."

Sorenson hadn't looked back down to Anderson, but he hears him shift his weight against the brown faux-brick wall. He then says, "Then what's stopping you from going there already? It's only a block away from here."

"You've drunk quite a bit, I want to make sure you at least get in the trolley safely." Even if he isn't stumbling, alcohol can severely alter the body's ability to heat itself. If Anderson goes home and

meanders, he may contract frostbite in his own home. The most that he could do, he supposed, was to see him off. But even still, Anderson says nothing, so Sorenson shrugs and figures that was all the man needed to hear.

As they stand there, they soak up the evening atmosphere. Soon the minimal light peeking through the wire gives way to the streetlights growing brighter in the dimness. Still, the streets are crowded with people, cars, the sounds of the metropolitan that bring Sorenson comfort and he allows them to carry him off to some other place. *Comforting*, he thinks, beginning to feel inclined to take the tram home himself.

But, somewhere else in the City, people are struggling for food, for heat, for life. No other day had brought his attention to this as much as it did now, and suddenly the image of the murdered couple springs forth in his mind. He instantly becomes alert, wary, spotting the tram in the distance. "Oh," he says, "it's here." As both men stir away from the wall, Sorenson can't shake the feeling that he's hearing something odd in the distance. A high-pitched whining above him somewhere. He follows it up to a streetlight just aside the trolley stops, unsure of why it is that the hair on the end of his neck is standing. It's then that he sees it, the light is flickering and buzzing intensely.

"Alright investigator," he hears Anderson say, the trolley having stopped at the station and intaking its new passengers. "It's been a good meet."

People on the sidewalks stop where they are. Sorenson hears some near them as they say amongst each other, "Do you hear that?"

"Mr. Poltnik?"

Sorenson's eyes widen. He looks along the other direction, to the west side of Fulton, to see a mass of people begin to stop and look up toward the wire. He frantically looks up, seeing that the wire is still there and appears normal, but he begins to hear it himself, a low whine similar to the Hum but shrill and tapering.

Anderson looks to Sorenson, "Are you doing okay?"

"Anderson, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

The streetlight bursts and the cable above the tram alights in large sparks of light. Sorenson ducks, grabs Anderson and lifts his coat over the two of them to ward off the sparks. He hears everyone scream around them, the small suns bouncing off of the back of his coat. The sound surrounding them grows shriller until the whine erupts into a massive boom of noise as every electrical device powering the City suddenly shorts out. Sorenson grinds his teeth and shouts, "It's a blackout! Everyone get inside!"

Panic fills the streets as he unveils his coat from Anderson. He shouts to pedestrians telling them to retreat to safer locations such as art houses or theaters, chiding Anderson to do the same. Together they reign people out of the now dangerous tram where its halogen lights may burst, or its heater catch fire from a sudden surge of energy. They make considerable progress as the streets slowly but surely begin to thin as bystanders invite others into their apartment halls and the distant blare of engineering vehicles prompts a sense of safety in others out in the streets. But then Sorenson hears something else in the collective whine the City had become caught in.

It's not a mechanical noise, but instead something that creeps from underneath his feet and reverberates from the shattered tops of light posts. At first it feels like an earthquake but soon enough it manifests as a sound, distinct and horrifying. A single, pained and horrified bellow of a man pierces through the entire City for a moment briefer than the blackout itself, and once it ends, it's all over. Suddenly, lights turn back on and steam from the Top's the heating vents cover the road. In less than a second, everything returns to normal, leaving Sorenson as a single man lost in a valley of darkness.

Hearing then returns to him and he turns to Anderson who is just a few feet away from him. They look at each other, horrified.



## Chapter Three

### Solid State Memories

Almost all Engineering teams that are sent out to the Dynamos are comprised of a small group of people. Usually it includes two or more Engineers, about as many needed for the projected job, and then two medical staff that live in an offshoot within the shelter just in case an accident occurs. A small medical room flanked with an entrance to the rest of the shelter and an even smaller bedroom that only fitted a bunk bed, drawer, and desk all built into the walls. The floor in these rooms is no more than several feet, but it's enough space for heat to become trapped in its curved white walls, providing enough comfort for the medical team and more than enough for Charlie Yor, the sole member of that team for this Engineering excursion.

Before her on the small desk which can barely even fit an elbow's length is a spread of playing cards and, beyond that, a cup of coffee. The cards are splayed out horizontally and staggered in stacks incrementally in seven permutations. She holds one of the cards in between her fingers, a three of hearts, considering whether to place it on a four of clubs or four of spades. Her eyes dart between them and a five of hearts laying closely to her left hand along with a smaller deck of blue cards. They display an intricate pattern of cherubs inside two parallel circles which seem to contain entire worlds within them, the chubby angels cycling in diamond unicycles along each other.

*So weird*, she thinks while she studies the pattern, distracting herself from the choice of which four to place the three, unsure if she would be able to put the five anywhere. *Did whoever make that pattern think it meant anything, or were they just fucking around?*

She bought them because she liked the shade of blue. Calming, but when she studied it later she became obsessed with the meaningless in it all, staring endlessly at the winged boys unicycling along lush meadows of grass away from presumably verdant hills crowned by flocks of birds in the sky.

*And why diamonds? Did they not want to insult these things with plain old unicycles, or did they not know what they looked like?* She then had to face the fact that she's never even seen a unicycle herself nor could find reason in riding one. She lifts one up without facing the other side. *Maybe they aren't diamonds*, as she looks closer she reasons that the lines that she once thought were faces of the wheel might just be *spokes, the rubber might just be the line outlining the wheel. Or maybe they're cage bars, but there's nothing in it.* She continues to stare at it.

At some point the sound of the shelter's speakers tear her away from her impromptu study. Leo's voice is transmitted through the rickety tubes of iron, his message crackling into Charlie's ears both terrifying and distracting: "Charlie! Get the med room ready, it's Be—Mr. Vivari, he's..." By the time his voice lingers she is already snapped up to attention, the card in between her fingers having fallen to the floor face down. The voice continues after the card strikes the floor, "Mr. Vivari is comatose, electrical injury, we need to save him, now!"

In no time at all she is already donned in her white medical smock and darts into the adjoining medical room. In the large square white room she repositions its monitors and bed into its middle, plugging in the electrical equipment to the ground sockets. Carefully and yet with the swiftness of a professional she scans the layout, nods, and grabs the gurney from the corner of the room's closet, unfolds it from its vertical sitting position, and rams it out through the med bay's thin suspended doors. She turns right up through the shelter's hallway which winds slightly due to the curvature of the topography it was built on, weaving slightly right as she passes the kitchen and sharply left and right

again to bypass Communications to the north and the library to the west. Past this is, finally, the northern entrance which opens out into the Antarctic wastes.

There she stops, her head spinning as she tries to look for any sign of Leo or Mr. Vivari, though she was once told by the old man to simply call him "*Benjy*." Seemingly out of time, she rushes to the side of the thick iron front door and picks up an intercom running through a thick aluminum wire from the ceiling to the floor. "Leo," she barks into it, "where the hell are you?"

#

Leo stands above the smoldering body of Benjamin Vivari, the stench of burnt copper wafting up into his nose. When he first saw it, he immediately darted for the shelter's intercom near the south entrance to the Dynamo, called for Charlie, and had planned to drag Ben down out into the medbay himself. But, as he ran back to the body he felt his legs begin to drag behind, his arms suddenly weighed like lead, and his mind became immersed in a horrible fog of emotion. Halfway to the body, along the concrete walkway that encircles the inner ring of the Dynamo, he grabs the wall and his forehead to dress the headache these feelings conjured.

Guilt, anguish, and despair cloud his judgment and take his balance.

*No!* He punches the wall, letting the stinging pain therein ground him back to reality. But that reality does not come, so he bangs his fist against the wall again, and then again, and again until he no longer feels his hand but instead a million needles penetrating his skin. He pulls the hand forward, stares at it and focuses on the pain. And eventually the emotions do temper, Leo's mind once again becoming a blank canvas for thought instead of feeling. But his legs are still buckling and his shoulders sag forward; Leo realizes that he is in no position to move forward.

There was a saying that Leo had learned in his childhood after Ben had taken him as an apprentice. They had always brought him comfort, a tiny imperceptible sliver of it that he would repeat

whenever he was struggling with a particularly difficult task: "Both the past and the future are no more; the *now* is all that remains." He repeats it again under his breath. Again, and again, so that his legs can regain their sensation and his hand opens on its own, as it was too pained for him to open it. Leo rises once again and scrapes past the Dynamo walkway to the metallic ground Ben now rests upon, caressed by the gentle murmur of the electricity.

Ben is splayed out on his back, his arms thrown out to beside his head, and his face is stuck in terror. Leo thinks it odd that, as he looks down at him from above, he seems more lively than he was alive. His eyes pop out, large on his face as his mouth, still half covered with a dirty mustache, is hinged open by the jaw. Leo finds himself imagining what it must be like to be in his place, but shakes his head and kneels down.

Then, a glint of light catches his eye and he looks over to Ben's right, closed fist. It's a wrench, small and silver, gripped tightly by Ben's blood red fist now resting its back on the metal floor catches Leo's attention more than just a glint, but also as an item that he had never even seen before, and though Ben was always careful to keep his belongings a secret, he can't help but shake how impractical it looks. It's smaller than Ben's palm with only its head poking out from between Ben's forefinger and thumb. It doesn't even seem practical and he finds himself doubting the obvious. It couldn't have caused this, it had to be something else. The wrench isn't silver, even if it appears so, because if it was then it would've caught the electricity and shocked him. No, this was a freak accident, unrelated to this, thing. *Besides, who would ever make an electrical tool so dangerous?*

But then he notices something even more peculiar about it. It's vibrating and not an imperceptible amount either, but violently twitching within his fist as if it had a life of its own.

*His life*, Leo suddenly thinks, dismissing the thought with a shake of his head. "There is only the now," he repeats. He stares at it though, unnerved by its presence and its seeming discord with reality. Even if something is charged with electricity, it shouldn't vibrate, at least not as much as the

wrench is and, as Leo drags himself over with a propped up leg, not while it's being clenched on human skin.

Then a voice surrounds him from all around, "Leo, where the hell are you?" He sneers slightly, recognizing Charlie's rough voice through the crackling speakers nestles somewhere in the bramble of the Dynamo.

"Right here," Leo says diminutively as he takes his right hand, still covered in its rubber and leather layered glove, and brings it toward the wrench slowly. He stops about halfway to it, waits for a spark of electricity or for it to, somehow, fly out of Ben's grip, but when it doesn't he brings his index forward, tapping the wrench. Even from behind the veil of the glove he feels it vibrate like a heartbeat with rhythmically natural motion. In fact, while his eyes study its jeering shakiness, his fingers already begin to wrap themselves around the head of the wrench. The vibrations suddenly shift to a soft gyration, as if the wrench had begun breathing in his grip. It makes it hard to tell if he's touching anything as it is so constant that it fools the nerves and worries the mind. Because of this he bears down and stares directly at it as his fingers clench, with middle and ring finger joining the index, to pull with at first the strength of his palm and then the pull of his arm and successfully pulls out the wrench.

He looks at it, unsure of what to make of it, but as he does he witnesses a blue spark cross its surface and then jump forward to his face. It catches his forehead, his eyes overcome by an overwhelming burning feeling that overtakes his vision. Darkness fills the world, the gentle hum of the Dynamo dissipates, and his nose stops smelling copper.

#

My name is unimportant for it's been drowned in booze and newspapers for it to really matter anymore. Only one thing matters: the name "Arthur Vivari," which I know must be hidden somewhere

in the newspapers across from me or, perhaps, from the lips of free agent informants. They pay a pretty penny, though, so I've become unable to afford the iron for my home's heater or for the copper fillings of the wires on my house once it begins to burn out. Booze is cheap, though, since nobody in their right minds would drink it down here at the Bottom, even if it's in low supply right now. I happen to like Old Day whiskey that tastes rough and acidic.

Right now I'm reading one of the newspapers laid across from me on a stout coffee table, poring through to find that name printed anywhere or mentions of anything related to disappearances. At some point in the past I even began cutting out the paper with my electrical shears borrowed from my old line of work and pasting them along the margins of other papers to see if, maybe, it would help me keep track of things. After a while the experience has become more like reading unimportant missives than the news, but one recent headline does catch my eye.

ELECTRICAL DYNAMOS REFURBISHED WITH NEW WIRING it declares with a rough illustration of a City electrical pole, a long metal pole strung along with branches of the wire and fitted with control boxes messily built to loop the black tangle into anything fashionably usable. I find myself becoming a bit perplexed by the illustration as I recognize it as the one on Henderson Avenue, merely a minute walk from my apartment. A chill runs through the cracks of the walls and pull up my black coat. Laziness is what it is. If they had an illustrator, a real pro bono capable of drawing all that mess of electronics, then they should've simply illustrated what that new wiring looks like. I run through how it must look through my head several more times, imagining the work it must have been to tear out all the old and replace it with the new, and smile.

They're really working up their game, Torren is. Before when there was a City-wide blackout, which for a time was getting to be pretty common, they wouldn't even bat an eye, kept saying how it was an inevitability of the City prospering in this "New Age." Horseshit, they just didn't want to put in the work until someone important put up a stink about it, and I guess what it really took was that person who got shocked at a lamp post the other month to really shake people up. Good thing I left.

After I'm able to briefly fume I reach for my glass of whiskey and slowly bring it to my lip, taking in the smell before tucking it into my mouth. A phone somewhere in the apartment rings, echoing from the kitchen across the living room. I quickly put down my glass, the newspaper, and walk briskly over past the coffee table and into the main hallway of the apartment. From here, where the front door is a couple feet away and my bedroom immediately to my left, I cross to my right into the kitchen which is a small cube of walls except for the partition in between it and the living room, acting as an island. The phone hangs from the wall as a white box sort of deal and my hand juts out for it to stop the incessant whining of its ring.

A voice on the other speaks abruptly after I pick up, "Hello?"

"Yes," I speak into it as I bring it across my cheek, "This is Mister Whodunnit. This my informant for the day?"

"Yes, Mister Whodunnit." We speak in code names since it's entirely possible that my phone line is tapped by the folks up in Torren, though I hardly mind on my end. They no doubt recognize my voice, but it's customary to play by informants' rules anyway. It's protocol bordering on tradition at this point, after all they don't know *his* voice so it's still worth protecting it. Speaking of which, this one's speaking in a strange English accent. I get it, but it's still grating. He says, "Where would you like to eat today?"

"Depends on how much you've dug up."

He stops briefly to choke a swear, clearly upset that I'm cooperating with his dinner date story. While he's busy I move the receiver onto my shoulder and grab a pen and paper on the kitchen island. "There's quite a lot happening at the old Dusty Coinage. I've heard it's got nice decorum for being down at the Bottom."

I grimace a bit as he pronounces "bottom." Bemused, I'm inclined to agree. "Sure thing, I'll meet you there at, say, one-ish?"

He quickly recites the bar's address and road crossing before abruptly hanging up, apparently displeased with my uncooperative nature. Fine enough, I've only hired him to dig up some loose ends I'm no longer *allowed* to find myself. No need to think on why, though, so I stuff the paper into my pocket and leave through the front door, making sure to double check my lock.

The roads are busy today with cars locked in traffic maniacally honking each other down and people huddled along the sidewalks with their heads pointed slightly down. Some say they do this to watch for gum and other nonsense that may be on the road, I'm not entirely sure, but I think it might be more of aversion to step on the heels of others; they're trying to avoid conflict with each other. I, meanwhile, pass most people with brisk and sudden movements that jeer some to a stop and keep others that are more trained in the art of moving quickly to make subtle paths through. All the while I pay attention to the signs at crossings and buildings to see where exactly this Dusty Coinage is. It may be a bar since the intersection it apparently makes its home is along a road of many bars that belong to folks down here at the Bottom. Because of that I assumed it'd be easy to find as, while many buildings even down here are fashioned after Old Day brownstones, the bars on this street are remarkably untouched by the hand of Torren-style architecture. Instead of tall, rising brownstones, they are low grey metal huts lined along a thin road that can only barely fit cars and some people along it. I think a lot of people may appreciate even though it readily brings reality back to the forefront, and rather aggressively I might add, but they're easy to find landmarks for when one is walking along the street and happen to fancy something. Not all bars serve alcohol, not everyone wants it anymore, but some do house some minor distractions.

For a while into walking I find myself get lost briefly in the scenery of it all, staring at some impressive work on the metal sheeting and layering done by some architects to make the buildings seem so real. It really becomes a distraction once I come around the bend to the bar street where I notice a rather tall white apartment building flanked by one of the bars. One side of the building is an ivory white shade divets carved into the metal to give it a natural, Earthen look as if it were made of



real brick. But, as you follow along its seam to the right, it stops suddenly with the wall between the two turns to a murky black metal and drops straight into the roof of the bar, a short two-story hovel in comparison. Its roof isn't clearly ordained like the apartment's and its walls are made of the same black material from the apartment's side and only has a few windows while there are clearly some for the apartment.

It's irritating to see this, to say the least, especially since this part of the Bottom, the Alpha District, or Huminger's Place as the Top wants to call it, was recently renovated. Many had their homes pulled away from them to make this imitation of the Old Days with many not being able to afford the new rent. I'm lucky. Even if my wife pushed me out of our old home, I still receive some cash in mail from taxes which are partially inflated as incentive. I look up to the Torren Building, the golden eyesore up above the sprawl of wire above me, and glare at its magnificence. Sometimes I wish they didn't pretend to still have me around their finger, that I could be done with all of this. But then the sense of something else strikes me by way of the black contrast to the tower by the wire. Each wire, a cable carrying vital electricity, is blotting out a sky I once saw as brilliant and comforting. The wrinkles on my short chin stretch as I frown, unsure of the nostalgia that's creeping out of my stomach.

I'm able to find this Dusty Coinage fairly soon after my stint of reminiscing, but quickly find that I took too long. Inside of what I could only describe as an American South themed bar there were several round tables each with oil lamps sat upon each, dimly glowing, and when I saw that there was absolutely nobody sitting there I approach the barkeeper to ask. The mustachioed fellow tells me that there was a woman in a heavy set red coat sat at one of the tables, the one furthest from both the front door and bar, until she got up to leave after ordering absolutely nothing. So it was a woman? I was aware informants tend to chase me down, looking to prove themselves for my particular case since I'm such a wanted man, but I take a moment to be impressed with her voice work as I walk over to the table in question.

As soon as I reach it I notice that one of the chairs, in fact the one with its back to the replica wood wall, is moved back into it without a chance to move back in. Nothing else about it is strange though, but even still I make an educated guess that she didn't really try to con me since she had already done all the work and there isn't a gun to my back so I lift the oil lamp to see a folded piece of paper. I smile and snatch it up, unfolding it while seating myself on the moved chair.

It's a simple letter that says only one thing: "Please wait here." I turn back to the barkeeper, order some gin, and wait.

The bar isn't very popular as barely anybody else comes through the front door. The barkeeper, meanwhile, shoots me expectant glares while mopping up the tables of their dust. At first I think he's a bit confused by me, customers that only drink and sit in the corner probably seem quite strange these days, but then he stands straight up as the front door creaks open. It's a couple and he's quick to usher them out, explaining that they're closed. They rebuke him, of course they must be regulars, by pointing out that he's open on Wednesdays. The tender looks over to me and then assures them that it's a "special day," closing the door. *He was paid*, I realize while sipping from my second glass. "Say," I speak up after they're gone to the guy, asking, "You know when my," I choke a bit, not really much of a fan of the terms we're supposed to use, "date's, 'sposed to get here?" But he just shakes his head and asks if I'd like another drink. I shrug and say that I do.

A bit more time passes before anyone else tries to enter, but when the door does begin to open the bartender doesn't even move an inch. Instead, a squat man with round glasses and a frayed mustache comes in with the casual stride of someone coming to get their morning coffee. He grasps the trim of his hat, which accents his brown trench coat, and bows it to the bartender polishing some of a shot glass. The tender nods back and I raise an eyebrow. *Someone else, maybe?* But then he looks over to me while doffing his hat, revealing his exposed scalp underneath, and bows lightly before walking up to grasp the back of the chair in front of me.

"Excuse me, sir," He speaks calmly, in the voice I heard over the phone but stripped of any fake accent, "may I sit down?"

*I thought it was supposed to be a woman.* I can't help but feel a bit like the rug was pulled from under me. "Get on with it," I gruffly say, not wanting to seem like I'm unnerved by this gesture. He's obviously trying to trick me, and I'm not going along with this charade, even if it supposedly evades the police somehow. "You've been doing enough to give them the runaround so sit and I'll get you a drink or something."

They sit obediently and hunch over the table, their large nose huffing and shrinking as he speaks frantically. "I'd just like to discuss the information you hired the missus for."

*They must be a couple.* "Alright," I clack my glass onto the table, "Then say it."

"Your boy, he's nowhere to be found."

I feel a part of me freeze up, but once again it's not enough to really faze me, there's just been too much to keep up with after all these months. "Tell me something I don't know," I'm partially disgusted as the words spill from my drying lips, but the liquor warms me up.

"Tell me, have you heard of the Dynamo Killer?"

My hand, which was lifting my glass to my mouth, stops. A killer? Would that even be possible, but no, then they would find a body at some point. And what's this about the dynamos? Suddenly the illustrations find themselves in my mind, the image of the drawn body tied up in the wire with its skin burnt pitch black. "What, what do you mean *killer*?"

He widens his already large eyes and tilts his head, "A killer, sir. Although, the Bureau hasn't been able to catch them and there isn't even a description or assumed identity. They say they're a phantom, through and through."

The body in the illustration contorts, its legs shrinking and its waist becoming more and more lithe as the face slowly cracks into Johnny's. Oh, my boy, how could I have let this happen? I feel my hand quivering over my glass so I quickly bring it to the table and say, "How do they do it?"

"They don't know, but the method of identification is that the victim disappears, completely disappear from reality."

"And that 'Dynamo,' part? What's that mean, my boy had no way of being near any of them!"

"There's reason to believe that it's just a name as many Dynamo workers disappear off the face of the Earth as well. You should know this."

Silence enters between and I feel it occupy the space around the oil lamp, the light burning and burning and burning. And how long can I keep doing that, I'm starting to wonder?

"Anyway," he starts after a while. He looks down, coughs, maybe looks a little guilty for telling me what he just did. "Right now the Bureau, whom are my current primary source, thinks that they are lurking somewhere down here in the Bottom District. But there was someone else, a strange person, they told me an exact address, said that's where you would find them."

"This Killer?"

"An accomplice of the Dynamo Killer."

There's a moment where I feel my lips move, my heart beat, and suddenly I'm in front of an apartment door and evening light spilling through the wire pours out onto my coat's back. The apartment is all sheet metal, a huge slanted rectangle on the other end of the district, only capable of keeping about twelve individual suites until it breaks off into another identical cubicle of homes. It's the old style of construction, before we really had a chance to build anything nicer looking with the materials we had.

I knock on the door in front of me, but instead of standing the door splits open and whines along its axis. I place my hand on it and open it slowly, the light behind me revealing a barren place, a barren hovel. But somewhere inside echoes a peculiar noise: weeping, a child weeping quietly, alone. Then it stops, but timidly I walk in and say, "Who's there? I'm not here to hurt anyone!" I wander in, surprised with how barren everything is, and then I see them. A small child with a head lacquered with

black hair and massive reddened eyes. He looks up at me, and I, I look down at him. I kneel with a hand outstretched and say, "It's alright, I'm here to help you, kid."

#

Then, suddenly, Leo returns to the Dynamo, to his own body but not the Dynamo's interior. Instead, he awakens staring into a bright white light and hears the buzzing of the halogen. Already he can sense that he cannot move through the sheer weight of his limbs, sensation only returning in slow, loud heartbeats. Eventually, though, he's able to swivel his head and see that he's in the shelter's medical bay. As he looks over to his right, he then also sees Ben laying on a stretcher with medical equipment surrounding and attached to him. Leo briefly wonders if it's the same for him and struggles to crane his neck forward until he sees his rigid body, doffed of its rubber safety suit and now dressed in his slacks and flannel. It's there that he sees it, and feels it weigh down his hand like a brick.

The wrench. He tries to splay his hands open to let it fall to the floor, but to no avail. His fingers cling stubbornly to it, his flesh burning against the warm metal. *It's useless, he realizes, the thing's stuck to me until I die.*

He finds himself looking back over to Ben. He's still laid out as he was before, but now his arms are folded aside his waist and his face, once twisted in absolute fear, is now calmly set to appear as if he's asleep. Leo tells himself over and over that's just how it all is. He's asleep, and he himself just woke from a dream. That's right, Ben's dreaming too and soon he's going to wake up, after all, he was breathing! It's all going to be okay!

Tears roll down his cheeks and stain the bed's sheets as footsteps sound from another room. Charlie exclaims excitedly but to Leo it still sounds like she's somewhere else, alone and in the cold.