Paul was pulled in by the crowd of his alumni members. His curiosity was just as young

spirited as he was in his current mid-20s, little to no wrinkles and a spry face. The screams of one man and mumbling of others contrudes a tense, constricted feeling around Paul’s chest, as he anxiously inches towards the source step by step. It's been almost a decade worth of working thefts with these people. Paul had become accustomed to the screams and the rush of high and loud energy bouncing around during their profitable ‘extracurricular’ activities, but that sensational feeling dissuaded when these outbursts were not because of alarms or impacts. A disgruntled man parts the group in half, moving towards Paul.

This disgruntled old man, Solimus McQueen, was the reason Paul ended up here in the

first place. McQueen was the superior leader of the group. McQueen walks past Paul, the two making a glance of eye contact. McQueen’s stoic stare made Paul remember, that day he was caught shoplifting for the 3rd time. At the same run-down convenience store. That time, he remembered to try to be as discreet as possible but his buddies decided ‘Hey, let's make a scene with this shotgun auctioned from eBay’. Paul gave up quickly, while his friends ‘escaped’ with a 2 year sentence of multiple attempts of theft and resisting arrest. Paul didn't have much. All he had was a roof over his head and a grieving mother to watch over, so being behind the steel bars of a putrid prison cell was not an option. Paul waited on the sidewalk of the store, until he noticed the blue and red swirling lights gleaming in the distance, pocketed under the sunset. The police car parked right in front of the store and out came McQueen, donning a fitted light blue police uniform.

Back in present day, Paul catches up to McQueen. “Yo, McQueen, what's wrong?”, he asks

“They want out. I give them everything to learn and now they're pussying out”, McQueen

retorts with a frog in his throat.

“Well, maybe we can work something ou”-

“Well fuck ‘em!”, he mocks Paul's subtle tone. His aggravation was clearer than ever.

“McQueen”, Carlos approaches from the group to Paul and McQueen, “it's over. We

have enough money to live the rest of our lives. We had a good time boss.”

McQueen moves his hand over his mouth, respiring through the slips between his fingers.

“We're not fucking done here!”. The rest of the group forms in to make a new barricade in front of McQueen: JJ, Ellie, Omar, and Logan. “I’m not done with you all, we’re not, we’re not…you just can't take the money and run off!”

“Maybe it's time to stop being this dysfunctional family and move on”, JJ replies

underneath his lips.

McQueen looks at all of them, a devilish glance one by one, and he smiles. “You wanna

know what's realistic? The amount of crap that you all left behind at the crime scenes, all these years that I kept in case you ever pulled this stunt”.

“Bullshit”, Omar shouts, “Like what?”. Omar looks at the rest of his crew, “This guy’s

bluffin’”.

“That's so much to label off the top of my head over these past 2 ye-Oh”, McQueen looks

at Carlos, “how about the silver and gold watch Carlos ‘lost’, with stains of blood from the time his arm clipped onto that fence?”. Carlos’ jaw dropped open, and McQueen smirked at the sight of it. “You remember, right? I mean, the bloods gone by now, but I got plenty more.”

Paul stares at the two men staring off, his anxiety rising to the point he could taste the

perspiration on his lips. Carlos looks down and mutters something under his breath, a voice too low for Paul to hear. Then, he grabs for a black handle strapped to his belt. Carlos pulls out a black Glock pistol, aiming it directly at McQueen. Paul’s process of thought slows down, his eyes widen to the realization that Carlos is instantly aiming a gun at McQueen. Paul yells, “No, d-!” A shot is fired. Paul turns and notices McQueen slowly getting on one knee, blood seeping out from his left shoulder and staining his light blue button-up. McQueen reaches for and pulls out his Bronco Revolver. BANG. Paul notices that McQueen’s hand is now soaked in crimson, with a decently-sized hole right in the middle of the palm. It was just too quick, he thought. He looks around and sees the smoke emitting from Omar’s now-visible pistol. Paul reaches for his pistol, and halts all movement when McQueen and he make eye contact once more McQueen slowly shakes his head. His pupil’s shake from the light refracting off the water in his eyes. He was right. If he steps in, he’ll also end up six feet under in his mid-20s. One by one, Ellie, JJ, Omar, Logan and Carlos fire one more shot at McQueen. It was enough to finally make the old tank collapse on the floor, now soaked in his blood and eyes shot closed. Carlos walks up to what is left of McQueen, and aims his gun at his wrinkled forehead.But, Carlos lowers his gun. He turns to Paul and gestures his hands to move towards him. Paul moves closer. Carlos grabs him by the arm and whispers into his ear, “Finish it. His eyes are completely shut”. Carlos offers his gun. Paul glances at him and then at the gun. “He won't know”.

“No…it's fine”, Paul declines, pulling out his chrome-plated Beretta handgun. He hovers

over McQueen, examining closely of all the bullet wounds, from his bleeding eyes to the several open holes in his torso. Paul bites his lips, suppresses all his emotions into the trigger, and pulls swiftly.

Over the course of 2 years, the group disbursed. Carlos made the plans for how everyone

lives their new life, and it went good. For a half a year that is. From what Paul heard, The FBI found traces of the crews DNA, excluding Paul. Carlos took the blame, fibbing that he framed everyone and ambushed McQueen, being sentenced to 15 years followed by 5 year probation. They actually believed it. Paul was surprised to hear that, based on what he'd assume of Carlos’ character. JJ got busted for drug abuse, Omar was accounted for drunk driving, and Logan was caught vandalizing. No jail time, but the police did take most of the income they earned as ‘crime scene evidence’. Ellie was the only one smart enough to completely evade the suspicions of the authorities and keep her cut entirely. Paul managed to do the same thing. But he was ‘lucky’, he felt; especially that he had enough money for him and his family. There was no advanced intellectual plan, just acting like a civilian that got his moneys’ worth the right way.

Paul sits in the middle of his room in a meditation pose, eyes closed. Paul blocks off all

thoughts that had occurred within the past day. He meditates, calmly fishing out memories past and through.

McQueen starts the car, and drives out onto the main road. Paul, slouched, leans on the

passenger door behind the driver seat, gazing out of the window with a sour grimace painted on his face. “So, third time?”, McQueen breaks the silence.

“Yeap”, Paul retorts

The car swerves out of the road, the sound of burning rubber screeches along the road like someone using chalk on a blackboard for the first time. Closing to a sudden stop, Paul's body flies into the metal barricade separating him and McQueen face first. Paul lashes back, favoring his neck and forehead.

“WH…what the, fuck man”, Paul mumbles to himself. He looks up to find his view of

McQueen in the drivers’ seat gone. Suddenly, the door next to Paul opens, McQueen’s arm reaching in and pulling Paul out by the collar. McQueen pins him against the car, eye to eye. The following words were branded into Paul’s mind as he stared into those vehement eyes: This never happened. You were never shoplifting and caught like an amateur, again, he said. You were never taken in by a cop car; you were never in this fucking alleyway. You will go home like this never happened. Paul nods his head rapidly, bringing a nauseous migraine to accompany the anxious sweat dripping from the pores of his oily face. “Now, tomorrow you will come to 468 Northwest Avenue, going over the rusted hill behind the train tracks. 7am don't be late or there will be consequences. Remember that”.

“Y-yeah”, Paul struggles to articulate his words to even a short sentence, “Yes, I'll do

that”.

McQueen loosens his grip, and pats him on the shoulder, “This'll be the day your life starts getting better”, he lifts his right index finger upward, “no more mistakes”. McQueen got into his car, and backed out of the alleyway. “And bring a goddamn mask!”, he yells out of the driver seat.

A strong vibration from Paul’s phone disrupts his meditation. His eyes open, and he

reaches for the phone, looking at the caller ID: ‘JJ’. Paul answers the phone, also turning on the speaker.

“What’s up?”, Paul greets

“Yooooooo, what's up man?!”, JJ ecstatically responds, “We still up for that Taco

Bell sesh or what?!”

Paul chuckles at JJ’s over-enthusiasm, “Ehhh, noon sharp sound good with you?”

“Tight bro, tight. Can't wait to see you man, it'll be like a reunion minus, uhh, one,

two…four”!

“Hah, alright man, see ya then”, Paul hangs up the phone. He gets up from the floor of

his room and puts on a pair of black pants. He keeps the heather grey shirt and wears over it with an open slate jacket, double-checking the pockets. He brushes his teeth, swishes around some mouthwash, and leaves home.

At 11:59am, Paul arrives at Taco Bell, and grabs a booth next to an open window. After

some time, he decides to check his phone for messages. Nothing. At 12:28, JJ walked through the doors of Taco Bell, wearing oversized clothing that was a clash of loud neon colors. Paul notices a tint of red in JJs eyes. He looks around and finds Paul. He walks over to the booth with a wide grin and open arms.

“Yoooo, what's up my man!”, JJ reaches in for a handshake. Paul stares at him blankly,

raising his smartphone. He taps on the big white digits plastered on the screen.

“Oh damn”, JJ sits down, “Sorry about that man, wifey’s been actin’ strange”

“Really, huh? It's fine”, Paul takes a sip from his drink and rolls his eyes with a squint

“Cool man!”, and oblivious JJ replies, “So man, my wifey changed her relationship status

on Facebook from engaged to widowed, and then, get this”-

Paul’s bitterness and aggravation of JJs’ stupidity leads to his blocked thoughts opening

back to his brain. The memories came back quick and instant. He remembers vividly how he had just strangled Omar with a metal string 12 hours ago. In his own apartment. He remembers the stench of vomit flaring up his nostrils as he threw up just from the thought of murdering someone. But now, as he read JJs’ lips through his inaudible dialogue, he just wanted to tell him, like an impulsive shudder from goosebumps: I killed Omar. I killed him, and everyone will get their oh so deserved rightful place, he thought. Step one of killing Omar was complete and slightly set back from the traumatization , but now comes step two. Paul smiles, and JJ laughs. “I know, funny right?” Paul remembers the bag he felt in his pocket before leaving.

“Yeah, yeah”, Paul impulsively replies. “Look man, I actually got some errands to run,

sorry to cut this short”, he sneakily pulls out the plastic bag of discolored powder, clenching its visibility within his palm.

“Psh. It's all good man. Sorry I was late though.”, Paul gets up from his seat, as does JJ.

“C’mere bro, gimme a hug”, Paul says. He hugs JJ, and notices he brought his own

Monster energy drink can. This is too perfect. Paul pours the poison between his middle and ring fingers, JJ still unaware. Paul exits through the doors, eyeing at JJ gulping down his drink. Step two was done.

A few hours later, Paul made it to Logan’s place. He walked up, and without hesitation

kicked Logan’s apartment door down. They wrestled, punches were thrown, and Logan’s vintage-styled home was decimated, from the ornate statues to the marble counters. The walls shaded with oak were stained with blood and the hanged vinyl records were asymmetrically shattered. Paul finally got a pillow over Logan’s head and shot him 3 times. Another death. But this time, there was no remorse, or gag reflex. Paul actually felt good, which somewhat disgusted him. But why? Even he didn't know. He went into the bathroom and cleaned his face up as much as could see amongst the cracks of the shattered mirror. He called JJ, and told him of his poison fiasco, reinforcing why JJ was starting to feel under the weather. JJ cursed him to hell, but Paul hung up the phone. He calls 9-1-1, stating that he just killed 3 men. Step 3: done.

Paul is now underway of going through step 4. Paul thought to himself that McQueen

would've been happy with the amount of effort into planning he put into this. Before this, he rehearsed with McQueens’ ex-partner James on what would happen at this point: be taken into the right cell with Carlos. At the court hearing, the judge asks, “What purpose would you all of a sudden go on a serial killing spree?”

“I thought I was doing this for the greater good”, Paul says subtly, “But now I regret it,

your honor”.

He sheds a single tear, rolling down his cheek.

Paul was thrown in to be given a final hearing for his sentencing. His statement though

was enough bullshit to not get thrown in solitary confinement. Paul, now in an orange jumpsuit, is guided by James through the dull prison interior. Walking down the lanes of the cells gave time for Paul for some more meditated thought. Life changed.

From that moment on after Paul’s 3rd arrest, everything did change in Paul’s perspective.

The dirty cop taught him everything, from how to pickpocket with not single reaction of the naked eye to how to act like the victim, learning that the world is just a stage. McQueen said that was the best metaphor you could think of when adapting was necessary. McQueen became the mentor and role model Paul needed to seek in life, he was a father figure. Paul never knew his biological father, but even if he did, he had a strong feeling McQueen would’ve been the better replacement. Maybe Paul felt good because he hadn't got caught yet, that the face he was putting on was still masking himself from everyone. Or maybe it was because for the sake of McQueen. It had to have been the latter, Paul reassured himself.

On the 2nd level at the 5th cell, James stops Paul. He opens the cell. “You got a new

buddy”, James shouts at the cell mate. The cellmate looks up from a book he was reading, and lo and behold it is Carlos, clean-shaven wearing an older version of the orange jumpsuit. Carlos smiles and laughs, “A new buddy, right”, he closes the leather bound book shut.

“It's good to see you again too, Carlos”, Paul smiles in reciprocation. Step 4 is done.

Paul takes a seat on the bunker bed, nonchalantly hopping on the bed, “How ya been, man?”, Carlos asks, “It's been a year and a half now, right? Estimate?”

“Yeah I would say that. You got a baby face without that beard”, Paul chuckles

“Ha ha, we got jokes. You're pretty happy for getting thrown in jail”.

“Well even though I see myself as an optimist, it's because I'm seeing a good friend

again”, Paul says brightly.

“Hmm”, Carlos yawns and brushes his hair back with both hands, “Fair enough. So what brings you here”, he smirks at the orange jumpsuit Paul is wearing.

“Shoplifting…”

“Shoplifting? You're fucking with me right?” With an embarrassed expression on his

face, Paul shakes his head side to side. Carlos bursts out laughing, “and here I thought we taught you never to do amateur hour again. Or at least McQueen”.

“He *was* the one that caught me shoplifting”

“Right, right. I remember that story”, Carlos leans back on his seat. He brushes back his

thick black hair and takes a deep sigh. “How are the others doing? I get phone calls every now and then, but no visits”.

“I haven't heard much from the others, besides Ellie. Since she’s a part of the fucking legal system, but good for her”

“Yeah, good thing she didn't end up like the rest of them”

“Is she still curvy? Like does that ass still have its own zip code? Or did she get old?”

Paul couldn't help but laugh uncontrollably at Carlos. “Look man, I haven't seen a woman in a year and a half, I gotta know this stuff!”

“You're a piece of shit”, Paul remarks

Carlos shrugs, “That's why I'm here, among other things”.

Silence stirs the air as Paul grows tenser in his muscles towards Carlos.

He can feel it in his bones, a twitch to just strangle him now with the cables he has hidden in his jumpsuit. It's for McQueen. McQueen would want this redemption. This is why he feels good, because he's so close. Not because he's losing his humanity, he denies.

“I remember that day I decided to shoot McQueen. I remember saying under my breath

‘Fuck, I'm sorry’”, Carlos refrains from making eye contact with Paul. “I hope you know that I made that choice for everyone's greater good. He threatened all of us. It may be different from your perspective, but in my mind, I did what I had to do. But I regret it, and I'm sorry”.

Paul almost took the apology in his head and accepted. But two personalities were fighting: the one that said this is too far and the loyalty to McQueen. McQueen helped him mature over the years in Paul’s eyes. He couldn't look back on that and accept such a deceitful bullshit death.

“It's okay”, Paul replies, “Y'kno, I've been conflicted by that. Loyalty. How loyal is one

required to be as a human being, Carlos?”

“You're asking me? Shit, Wrong person to ask”, Carlos jokes.

“I would like to know, from the perspective of the man who put everyone on his

shoulders”.

Carlos squints his eyes, “Loyalty…honestly, loyalty can only take you so far. You can't

be loyal to the dog owner that doesn't feed his dog, if y’kno what I'm sayin”

“Yeah, I get it”, Paul nods. He could tell that was as genuine as Carlos has gotten over

the last years. But Paul didn't get it. Or at least he disagreed. It wasn't enough to stop carving through Carlos and finishing the plan. The bell begins clanging. Alarms begin blaring, piercing through Paul’s eardrums. A flood of orange begins forming through the open space outside of Paul and Carlos’ cell.

Paul picks up a disoriented Carlos. “Let's go. Get up.”

“The fuck? Did you do this, Paul?” Carlos exasperates. The crowds of prison inmates

begin to form outside their cells.

“I managed to find some people. I'm taking us home. come on, trust me”, Paul begins

losing the tone of voice. His acting dissipates from how close he is getting to the end. It's the sheer excitement, like waiting for the release of something you've been anticipating months for. He grabs Carlos and guides him through the orange sea, evading through the punches and bodies hurdling past them. Outside, they reach a fence, now blown through with a circle of fire. Paul pushes Carlos through the ring of fire, sprinting through the woods. As they sprint, Carlos looks back, sweating in terror.

“What about the attack dogs?”

“What?”, Paul replies in a slightly irritated tone

“The attack dogs. Like in the crime movies!”

“Wh- what, fucking...no, just keep running”, Paul's patience was thinning out. Even

though Carlos was right, aside from using a fictional movie as research, Paul just wanted to reach the endpoint.

The duo finally reach a hill, isolated by a meadow, deforested. The grass is a lush green,

with the skies slightly clouded in grey sulfur. Sunlight beams through a tiny gap, shining on the plain in front of Paul and Carlos.

“Y’kno if it wasn't for that mystifying sunlight, I would've preferred back to prison”,

Carlos said

“Out of all the days, you would get the shitty weather”, Paul said enthusiastically. He

crept closer and closer as he wrapped the wire cable around his left hand. Paul is prepared to lunge, crouched. Carlos turns around, and tackles Paul onto the ground. Carlos restrains Paul by the neck with his left hand, and raises his right arm. He swings, gliding swiftly across Paul's jaw. That ‘good’ feeling Paul had, quickly vanished in the moment he felt his jaw swell and tasted blood in his mouth.

“You think I'm fucking stupid?”, Carlos punches Paul again, directly in the nose. Paul’s

nose spurts out blood. “JJ called me. He told me everything you told him, you egotistical piece of shit. Shoplifting my ass, You killed them all!”

Paul struggles to find breath with his broken nose, “McQueen…”, Paul loosens from

Carlos’ weight, and punches him with his cable-wrapped hand. He makes distance between himself and Carlos. “You killed him”, Paul cries out, visibly upset, “and everyone just…they deserved it!”

Carlos grunts, “I should've killed you with McQueen. I was hoping you'd soften

up with our little talk, but fuck it, fuck it!”, Carlos pulls out a knife from his pocket and rushes at Paul with a horizontal swipe of the blade. Paul nearly escapes it, and charges back at him with his shoulder.

“We could've negotiated”, Paul shouted, “you made me kill him in cold blood!” The two

wrestle amongst each other, overtaking each other turn by turn.

“He threatened us! You call that loyalty?!

Paul screams in pain, realizing the knife has lunged into his left rib cage. Carlos

overtakes Paul, back on top, and releases the knife from his rib cage. He strikes down aiming for Pauls’ heart, Paul counteracts by grabbing both of Carlos’ arms. He begins seeing blurred visions, 2 of Carlos, then 3, as his strength to resist slowly weakens. The tip of the knife reaches the layer of his orange jumpsuit. Then, 3 gunshots sound from Paul’s blind spot. Instantaneously, Carlos becomes covered in 3 blood-filled holes to Paul’s surprise. Carlos falls, and Paul looks around him, finding James holding a Bronco revolver.

“I knew I would find you eventually”, James boasted charismatically.

Paul gets up, and limps over to Carlos. He takes his knife, and pauses. This is

happening, he thought. “You don't understand”, Carlos breathes heavily over the loss of blood, “it’s too late”. Paul yells a battle cry and stabs him multiple times.

on the torso, and then slashes his eyes. He yells up to the skies, covered in dirt and blood. “James, come over here”. James moves closer to Paul. Paul reaches his hand out, “Give me the gun”, he mutters ferociously.

“I think he's dead enoug”- Paul swipes the gun and pulls the trigger rapidly emptying the

entire barrel into Carlos’ torso. Paul pants heavily, exhausted from the rage-induced rush through his head. Pauls’ heart fluttered with ecstatic joy, something so poetic that made him feel so alive and righteous. He turns to notice James staring at him in disbelief, shaking his head. Paul's expression fades. He calmly states, “I liked it”.

James sighs, “Come on Paul. Let's get you cleaned up”. Step 5 was complete. It

was the end for McQueen’s redemption. James pulls out a body bag and drags Carlos’ corpse into the black bag. James hands Paul some bandages to reduce the blood loss from his open wounds.

Paul and James approach the latters’ car, Ellie waiting at the passenger door. She

approaches Paul, tears built up in her eyes. “Is..is he dead?”, she forcibly asks Paul.

“Yeah well I'm okay too, thanks for as”- Ellie slaps him across the face. The pain of his bloodied jaw reverberates.

“You son of a bitch! What the fuck happened to you?! They were family…”

“A dysfunctional family”, Paul walks up closer to Ellie, “remind me why you're not on

my list”

Ellie slowly steps back, when James intervenes. “Hey now, if it weren't for her, I

wouldn't have access to the legal system, and you wouldn't have finished your vendetta. Now that it's done”, James hands Paul a set of civilian clothes and a tape recorder.

“What's th-wait, a tape recorder? You’re trying to make me record a confession, are

you?”, Paul asks

Ellie shakes her head, “but it's important.”

James and Ellie get into the car. James shouts, “A cab will be heading your way soon,

and your records clean, so stay low and you should be fine. Later, kid”. The cars engine putters into a roar. “McQueen is one sick fuck”, James shouts, and drives off.

While Paul waits for his cab on the sidewalk he plays the recording given. A bit of static

flourishes in the start emitted by a voice following afterward. “Alright, are we good?”, the voice of McQueen emitted from the recorder. Paul wonders, why this now. ‘An incentive, right?’, he thought. Yet he couldn't help but feel that shivering sense of anxiety, the same he felt when McQueen died. “If this isn't Paul, fuck off. If this is Paul, then..time to take a breather kid. Where can I begin…I remember when we first met. I could already tell you were still a blank slate, still struggling to evaluate your life. You seemed like a good kid, with the potential qualities of a leader. But you were still in your shell. And at the same time, I was having troubles. The crews that you most likely met in the future were the same crew that I truly despised. Carlos always argued with me over superiority, Omar was a stubborn alcoholic, JJ was a stupid-ass asswipe who never knew when to stop sniffing rocks, I hated Logan's face, and Ellie was just on the fence”, McQueen sighs in the recording, “I can't believe I did this. Thank god I don't have to live with it. But I made myself into a role model for you. I intentionally boxed you into this figment of a perfect role model that was me. You became the perfect mutt. You were a dog that stayed loyal. That's when I staged it. I'm a religious man, so I'd rather die with clean hands, but, um, yeah. Remember when I said the world was nothing but a stage? If everything went as planned, then you probably thought you killed all the monsters to avenge me in some sort of good light. But… you’re the monster. I made you that. Or a fucked up byproduct. I warped your mind just for my selfish deeds”, Paul's hands began shivering as he held the warm recorder, “And I hope you realize this. To keep it short, may God bless you a better future. Stay safe, kid. I'm sorry I made you go through this”.

The taxi cab began closing in, and Paul, red around the water-filled, bursted out in a low hysterical laughter as he got into the cab.