



# Spiral

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When I was a  
child,  
my mother told me  
that if I went  
out  
at night,  
the gypsies would come  
and steal me away.

That night,  
I slept on the  
porch.

by Julia Rosenfeld

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## Soulless

by Matthew Castleman

“What about the boy?” asked a spindly, ragged man with pair of long scars running up his left jawline. “Jackson had a son, didn’t he?”

“Damn right he did, but he don’t no more,” replied Mack Carver. The scarred man’s question had pulled him out of his story, and he glanced over the collection of dusty marauders with a faint and sickening grin before his dark eyes blurred out of focus again and he resumed the tale. “Little Nathaniel came runnin’ out of the house just in time to see his daddy crumple onto his mama, and he knelt down in the big pool their blood was makin’ all around and he couldn’t even cry. I told him his daddy’d gone and crossed me, and th’ain’t nobody crosses me ‘n gets to brag about it. Then I told ‘im, nothin’ personal, but I’ll have a tough enough time gettin’ along when I’m an old man without havin’ to worry about the grown-up son of Phil Jackson comin’ to find me. I gave it to him quick, one in the forehead, and there I left ‘em all, a pretty little family in a pretty red frame. That was five months ago today.” Mack threw back his drink like a mustang being branded, and it blazed its fiery path down his throat to a stomach that the years had toughened into a knotted leather pouch. He set down the chipped glass and looked around the saloon, his men grinning at him for his recounting and everyone else keeping their heads down and their drinks close.

The bartender was a ruined old buzzard missing an eye whose apron was cleaner than the clothes he wore under it. He seemed unimpressed by the outlaw’s feat of infanticide and went on polishing a glass with an unnaturally grey washcloth. “Want another?”

“Hit me,” Carver replied, tapping on the worm-eaten bar. He took his second drink as fast and hard as the first, and a blurry mist started to settle in, just the way he liked. “You boys’d best find somewhere soft to pass out soon. I’ve got plans for this town and you’ll be wantin’ a decent night’s rest.” The band made their way in twos and threes out of the run-down saloon after a final round, and Mack Carver perched himself on a barstool to think about the day to come.

He was still perched on his stool at ten the following morning, the bartender having decided that it would be more trouble than it was worth to try and kick him out, when one of his men shoved through the double doors, send-

ing them swinging and clattering back and forth, drawing protesting creaks from their old, tired hinges. "There's somebody headin' into town, boss, and he looks like trouble."

Carver pulled himself out of his half-trance of plotting, the simple robberies and holdups woven into poetic cleverness in his mind dispersing. "What do you mean, 'trouble'?" He looked down at his glass, which had been gathering dust for the past several hours, and slid it across the bar where it narrowly avoided plummeting to the fate that so many of its comrades had met in the rough establishment.

"Armed like he's goin' to war, for one thing," said the gangly renegade, his adam's apple protruding as if ready to be picked. "He's dressed too nice to be a cattle driver or a nobody, but ain't no businessman. Ridin' with just enough supplies to get here, nothin' extra. And, I dunno, somethin' just ain't right about him."

Carver nodded. "Truly, it's not exactly a secret that I've got ten grand hangin' around my neck. I'm rather surprised the roads here ain't already bein' kicked into the air by every gun got a man behind it." He hopped gingerly out of his barstool and clapped the man on the back. "Thanks for the warning. Round up the boys and meet me back here at noon. I'm gonna go take a look at this newcomer for myself. Where is he?"

"He was riding in from the south, should just about have reached town by now. There's an inn with a stable at the southern tip. You should check there."

Mack nodded and walked out, brushing the night's dust off of his jacket and slowly working his cold, stiff muscles back into use. The morning sun was ambling its way up into the sky and he put on his old, rain-warped hat to ward it off. As he walked down the main street, watching shopkeepers sweeping their porches and other citizens going about their business, he opened and closed his right hand, flexing his well-worked forearm muscles and stretching out his long fingers. He brushed the handle of his long-barrel .44, checking that it wasn't too tight in the holster.

The swinging doors yielded like frightened sparrows to his calloused and scarred fingers, and most of the inn's inhabitants seemed to notice something captivatingly interesting anywhere other than his eyes when he stepped into the room. One didn't. He sat in a corner with a steaming mug in front of him, wearing a dark suit and a deep blue shirt, an impeccable straight-brim black hat on the back of a nearby chair. His expression defied the very term, not communicating as much as a cryptic hint of whatever lay behind it. His eyes were a dull dark grey, almost black, and if they had ever been windows to his soul he had boarded them up long ago. He stared at Mack for a few seconds before returning his attention to his drink. Mack stopped at the bar

for a toddy and took it to the corner table, sitting down opposite the young man without asking.

"Good morning."

"Did I invite you to join me?" The voice was straightforward and not aggressive; it sounded as earnest a question as if he had asked Carver his name.

"You looked like you could use a little company."

"I have all the company I care to keep this hour of the day," replied the dark man, tapping his mug twice and returning his hand to its almost-relaxed spider position just beside it.

"I just happened to spot you coming into town and wanted to offer a hospitable welcome."

The man met Mack's eyes for the first time, but he wouldn't have said he was looking *into* them any more than he could've looked into an iron wall. "So those were your men. They seemed unduly curious about me. Much more curiosity and I might have taken offense. You'd do those men well to keep them wary of strange passersby." With that, he emptied his mug and left the table as if Mack had vanished from his sight, walking up a staircase worn smooth with use to the rooms.

Mack bolted his own drink and walked to the bar, behind which the fat, mustached innkeeper was brewing fresh coffee for his lodgers. He turned and almost flung two mugs into the air as he realized he was under the outlaw's gaze. Hastily he served his customers before mincingly approaching the man.

"W-What can I do for you, sir?"

Carver thumbed the newcomer as he disappeared onto the second floor. "I got a curiosity about that young lodger there. What can you tell me about him?"

The innkeeper appeared to weigh the odds of admitting ignorance and feigning knowledge. "Nothing. He paid for a room for the night, gave me the name of Wilson. Never seen him before in my life, and he doesn't talk much."

Mack nodded. "That he doesn't." He slipped down from the barstool, dropped a pair of coins on the counter and adjusted his hat. "He decides to thaw that frozen tongue of his any, I trust you'll let me know right away." He walked out without waiting for an answer.

He returned to the bar, where his previously occupied stool remained vacant, as did those on either side. He sat down and ordered another drink as he settled into thought to pass the time until midday.

His men started assembling in a back corner under the staircase at ten to twelve, and he roused himself from contemplation to join them, making a

quick visual sweep of the room as he walked over. One young man who had been staring at him was caught and looked the other way faster than Mack's amused half-grin.

Mack pulled a chair up to join his comrades, savoring its scrape against the grit-glazed floorboards. "Gentlemen."

Some smiled, some nodded, a chorus of "Mack's and "Boss's, a few glasses raised. "Here's where we start. This town is as far from anything as any of us could want. It's off the main rail line, the nearest civilization is over two hundred miles across gravelly, scrubby son-of-a-bitchin' waste, as you well know." (More nods, chuckles.) "And there ain't an army post close enough to hear the boom if every building in the place turned into gunpowder and every person turned into fire. So, we're gonna take our time. No screamin' raids, no chaos in the streets, no rampage. We do it calm."

Mack slowly and smoothly drew his .44, a cool and easy motion, no tension in his arm. The weapon was blued, a dull navy overlaying the steel that kept it from glinting. The sight was shaved off, and the hammer extended to permit the single-action pistol quicker operation. The black wooden grip had eroded to fit its owner's hand perfectly, and an embedded silver dollar shone in the midst of the wood.

"We're gonna spread out and own this town." He held the gun up in his right hand, flicked the cylinder's backing open, and rotated the cylinder once, letting a shell drop to the table with a rapid patter. "First, Jack and Sissy are going to head to the telegraph office to oversee every cable and make sure none of them suggest somethin' amiss." Click, patter. "Second, Malcolm, bein' our best rifleman, goes up to the ridge overlooking the big West road. In addition to serving as lookout, anyone wantin' to leave's gonna have to ask me, and if they ask real nice maybe I'll let 'em. If I do, I give 'em a white scarf to wear. Anybody not so bedecked gets a lead earring." Click, patter. "Third, there are five lawmen in this place. Fortunately two of 'em are married, town marshal included, and their houses are next to each other. B.T. and Jason, you'll be nearby in the morning, and when the husbands head off to work you'll keep close to the houses, understanding that at the first sign of trouble you are to get the women and keep 'em at the ends of your guns. And I mean your colts," he added, giving the two men a steel-hard look. "Once we own this town you'll have women throwin' themselves at you dashing outlaws. No need to make things overly unpleasant for those who don't have the same clarity of vision." Dropping his eyes to the table again, he rotated the cylinder a fourth time. "The rest of us will proceed to the marshal's office and suggest that he and his men carefully consider the paths their lives will imminently take, and whether or not they want those paths to continue much farther. Once we've got all of these done," he said, reloading his gun, "we start moving, methodically. First we take the bank,

then every business in town one by one, then the richer houses. We clean this place the hell out. It may take a day, or more. But time is something we won't have to worry about."

His men sat back, in thrall to their leader and the plots he spun. As simple as the plan was, to a rough and ragged collection of cutpurses whose old bosses had pretty well all been followers of the guns-fired-in-the-air school of banditry, it was their bridge across the Rhine, and Mack Carver was their Caesar.

The sun crept and scampered between walls, railings, mud imprints and dusty side streets in a youthful red, like a small child let out of the house for the first time in its life. A cold wind gusted in from across the plain, winnowing its way between boards and shutters to plant its icy kiss on everyone in the small town. It was a harsh morning, a raw, cold, primitive morning.

Mack Carver awoke noiselessly, his eyelids sliding up like shutters. He eased himself off of the door he had been leaning against all night and slowly stretched himself out. Several of his men sprawled across the room, and he walked to each to give a morning boot prod in the side.

"Up and at 'em, my fellows. It's time to give this town a taste of iron and humility."

Mack pushed the double doors of the inn aside and walked with his long, silent-thunderclap stride out onto the street. His men poured out behind him and fanned away in all directions. Eyes of every age and color regarded him as he strode—fearful eyes, hateful eyes. His own were locked straight ahead, never deviating from the arrowlike path he followed like an intangible rail.

He knew his men would do as he had commanded, and in the meanwhile he had a brief errand to attend to, a bit of reconnaissance. Thin but choking dust spiraled into the air from his bootfalls, measured and precise. There were those who thought of drawing arms against him as he passed by, of heroically ridding the town of his dawn-lengthened shadow. But though his eyes never moved, they knew as sure as the sunrise that he followed their every motion, and a single unwelcome twitch would grant them only a one-way ticket to the dirt, an admiring obituary and a hundred limerick epitaphs from those smart enough to let Mack pass where he pleased.

He arrived at the farther inn ten minutes later, around the time that the first of his men ought to be getting into position. He let his body push the doors aside, not bothering his arms with the job. The innkeeper had his response prepared before Mack had taken a breath to ask the question.

"That Wilson gent checked out an hour ago. Didn't say another word, just had a coffee, gathered his things and left." Mack paused for a moment, smiled at the innkeeper's eagerness, and tossed a dollar coin clinking onto

the counter.

"Thank you."

"Thank *you*, sir, thank *you*! Anything else I can do for you?" Mack turned and made for the door.

"Have whiskey and glasses for nine set out at five this afternoon." The doors creaked behind him.

It was moments after his exit from the inn that the first gunshot of the day rang through the still air like a temple bell. His hand blurred and was on his weapon faster than the echo off the building he had just vacated. A moment's calculation and his arm slackened as he recognized the sound as a rifle shot and coming from the east, the only real road connecting the town to the outside. Evidently some poor soul had made the mistake of trying to use it for its intended purpose with Malcolm serving as toll collector. Carver started walking briskly eastward to discover the nature of the unlucky traveler. He made his way up the small ridge overlooking the road, not seeing Malcolm immediately. Either he had improved his stealth lately or he was staying especially low presently because there was still a live traveler to potentially contend with. Assuming the latter, Mack stayed low and silent as he ascended.

When he reached the top he drew iron in cold concentration and turned a full circle, tracking every direction with his colt loose in his hand. Malcolm wasn't hiding. He was dead. The single shot had been right through him, not by him. There was no sign of the killer.

In half the space of a gunpowder flash, Mack was propelling himself back down the ridge and into the town, moving along with a leopardlike lope. Gunfire reverberated off wooden walls and packed-dirt streets.

By the time he got to the telegraph office, the last cries of the two men he'd stationed there had been telegraphed into eternity as a series of jagged, crimson dots and dashes seeping down the walls. It looked like a blade had done the work, and not in the quickest and most efficient way. Outside the lawmen's houses two more lay sprawled atop one another, full of holes, lead-imbued blood darkening the thirsty earth.

He ran. With the surging power that had brought dozens stacked upon dozens of the strongest foes crashing lifeless to the ground, he ran. More gunfire. He was entirely blind to all of the panicked, cowering townsfolk he passed, propelling those in his path aside as easily and thoughtlessly as he cut through the air.

Less than a minute had passed by the time he reached the center of the town. His remaining men had been caught by a barrage of pistol fire as they had run out of the inn. One still had a bottle in his hand. And that was that. His proud band, his personal entourage, his comrades-in-arms, his broth-

ers. The men who would have followed him to Hell already waited for him there.

"Malcolm was nineteen years old," Mack said to the man he knew stood ten yards behind him. "Did you know that?"

"No," came the indifferent reply, "but he knew it. He knew when he decided to follow a man like you that he might never see twenty." Mack turned around, very slowly. His nemesis stood, eyes blocked by the black brim of his hat, his black coat dancing lightly like flame in the wind. He wore a .45 low on his hip, a Winchester slung across his back and a rapier at his waist. The sword surprised Mack, uncommon sight as it was, but it fit.

"Let's get this over with," he said after he had looked over the black-clad man whose name was undoubtedly something entirely different than Wilson. He received a simple nod in reply. The two men turned to face one another. Silence fell over the town, the very wind itself seeming to hold its tongue in deference to two such godlike combatants. None of the citizens dared to make a sound, and some scarcely remembered to breathe. The sun stopped in the sky. The clouds stayed in place to watch. The eyes of the two men met, the stranger's impenetrable, impossible coldness meeting the outlaw prince's withering, soul-stripping gaze.

Two razor-sharp cracks echoed out through the town into the arid desert beyond, so close together as to be almost indistinguishable. The land gasped out its held breath as the echoes of two gunshots played out in a half-second symphony across the plains.

Mack Carver dropped to his knees, blood seeping eagerly out of his chest and running down his torso and arm. His wound was on the right side, missing his heart, but badly damaging his right lung. He had the strength and control to survive, but not for very long if the bullet stayed where it was, and he didn't anticipate any medics in the town tripping over themselves to help him. Through the grey clouds that coalesced from the ether in his vision he saw his opponent take slow, easy steps toward him. When he got closer, Mack saw the thin trickle of blood coming down his left arm, and the flesh wound he had inflicted upon it. An eighth of a second later and Mack's shot would have gone right through whatever vague semblance of a heart the man possessed.

"Who . . . are you?" he managed to get out through the blood in his throat. The man stopped in front of him.

"You know, people say some pretty nasty things about you, Mack Carver. The worst go so far as to call you a 'soulless killer.' Oh yes, soulless! I know better than that, of course, like most. You've got a mightier, more driven soul in you than most people could ever conceive, that's easy to see.

But there was another man, a gunman more vicious than even you would imagine, who dedicated himself to truly living up to that title. He scoured the West, acting in ways no human ever could, fanatic in his pursuit of the ideal of the soulless killer. And one day, he got his wish. What soul he had left up and disintegrated like a thin fog in the noonday sun."

Mack's blood continued to pool around his knees. He clamped his hand, tangled in his shirt, over the wound with inhuman strength, and staunched the flow.

"Thing is, bodies don't really abide not having a soul to fill them. It's like a low depression next to an overflowing lake. The water will flow into it naturally to fill the void. And there just happened to be a free soul floating nearby to satisfy the killer's body. One that had left its own in an involuntary fashion, long before its intended departure." He grabbed Mack by the chin and looked him in the eye. "My name is Nathaniel Jackson. And the thousand dollars I gave the town doctor will ensure that you live to remember this day, when I took the only people in the world who loved *you* away, just as you did to me. Nothing as cruel as a child, is there, Mack?" With no further words, he walked away, blurring off into nothing as Mack tried to lift himself up, tried to raise his pistol from the ground. But his knees might as well have been roots and his .44 a freight train for all his efforts.

"I hope that thousand dollar investment didn't rob you of funereal funds," Mack said, his iron heart filling him with strength even as it sent his own lifeblood into the dirt around him. "I've killed so many men once. Twice is nothing but a welcome change to the routine."

## Love Letter

by Samantha Feldman

**D**earest Mathilda,

I have waited for so long a time as to think my heart would burst, and so for fear of cardiac explosion have resolved to share with you the deepest secrets of that muscular pump which resides in my chest cavity.

I love you, Matilda. My desire for you is like a lion's for the juicy rippling muscle of the spry gazelle it so ardently pursues, so that it may tear into its supple flesh with the calcified tools of destruction that rest between its powerful jaws. Like an untamed beast of the African plains, I wish to capture your sweet form in my nefarious grasp so that you shall belong to me forever.

Your skin, so like the milky color of a rabid boar's mouth foam, beckons my touch and sparks a wildfire in my blood hot enough to melt the entirety of Antarctica and to burn every last one of its furry and feathered inhabitants to a fine, grey ash.

Would you be mine, Matilda? Forever to reside with me as an embalmed foetal pig forever remains at the earliest stages of it wrinkled, chemically preserved form?

Please reply as quickly as possible to my request; if I cannot soon know of your feelings, the precarious balance of emotion that has kept my bodily functions stable shall cease, and an agony as great as an epileptic's most uncontrollable spasms shall overcome me and I know not what shall become of my poor, wretched soul in such circumstances.

Fondly and Forever Yours,

Sir Matthew de Pamplemousse



# Molniya

by Mike Rauscher

**A**lvaro's face cracked open two hours into his shift amid a fusillade of teletype noises. Moonsweeping. So routine by this point that his eyes opened into the periscope screen full of stars instead of the cramped Soyuz cockpit around him. He had to stop sleeping in here. Strict scheduling kept radiation exposure to a minimum inside the habitation module for sleep hours between 18:00 and 2:00 Moscow time, not to mention a bed and a pillow. But Alvaro had heard too many stories of neglectful cosmonauts in their third or fourth tour of duty with terminal cancers and so he only ever went into his room to read, exercise and go to the bathroom.

The teletype ceased with an electromechanical clack. Alvaro dutifully removed his gloves, fed the scoreboard ticker numbers into his slide rule and punched today's targets into the tracking radar. Day forty-six in the lead tube.

Passive sensors engaged. Control rods retracted. Headlong into the radiation belts, a sea of cancer for his atomic sailboat. Out in the black, American missile freighters swung onwards to the moon, one hundred million World War II's already filed neatly away up there and one hundred million more in Siberia—Father Earth and Mother Sky.

Moonsweeping was the terminal lot of the Red Rocket Corps. For three months, three intrepid cosmonauts would ride in three eight-hour shifts across the map in a lopsided figure-eight, one loop stretched tightly around the earth and the second into the chasm before the moon. Were all atomic hell to break loose, the Moonsweepers' task was to sink the American Titans that hadn't yet poured Mother Sky's tears from the clouds in three orderly eight-hour successions of searing crimson death shot from their missile racks. Then, when they were finished, three journeys home to the same anguished-stricken bunker in Kazakhstan and three Hero of the Soviet Union medals over emergency rations and tense radio reports of incoming missiles.

In six hours, Alvaro would be nearing the peak of his orbit and his craft firmly inside American radar coverage, meaning the start of his off-shift while he held no surprises for the Americans. Moonsweeper bedrooms had more amenities than typical Soyuz fighters but less time to use them. It wouldn't be until the middle of his off-shift, when he'd firmly left the radi-

tion belts, that the lead doors would let him in to bathe and exercise and get ready for bed.

Alvaro knew his fear of the radiation belts was a bit unfounded. American freighter pilots routinely passed through without shielding. It was like getting a dozen X-rays a day for a month. But Moonsweeper pilots went through them sixteen hours a day every day for months on end and that was what all the worry was about. Alvaro shifted the periscope mirrors to see the earth receding into the distance, the shadow of night creeping over the autumnal blue orb like an eyelid—Father Earth's eyelid. Truthfully, there were more reasons he slept in the cockpit.

And Alvaro didn't need the story anymore to remember his routine, one week of one shift in space made it as routine as breathing, but it kept him company. It was an old story his mother told him in Cuba, on the sugar farm when he asked why there was no rain that year. The sort of story that's too worn-out to be religious no matter how many names are named in offense to Soviet dialectical materialism. The children of the sky and earth pushed their parents away from each other, and birthed in the between the world we live in. The rain was Mother Sky's tears and the wind Father Earth's sighs. He'd timed everything in the Soyuz routine to a matching part in the story back when his Russian was poor and he needed to get through flight school.

It had been some time since Cuba, since the bright-eyed revolutionaries had come to town when he was fifteen, looking for bright-eyed recruits. He kissed his mother goodbye, took his father's gun and ran to the old man's grave to tell him he was a man now. And the revolution soured, he lost his father's gun on the beach fighting the Americans, and lived his nights in the cigar smoke of decadent westerners in the same Havana only months ago he had torn down. Interminable days mopping floors by day and by night at two bars and a casino, learning how to read and to fly cropduster planes so that one day he could go home to his mother and not be ashamed. He almost would have too, but there was a girl.

The moon's face was always a somber tear, if you looked carefully sometimes you could see the sunlight reflecting off of the American freighters—the gleam in Mother Sky's sad eyes. Moonsweepers were encouraged to take pictures, and the amenities cabinet had three rolls of film and a black and white camera to take into the cockpit for the off-shift. Pictures of the moon and American Apollo freighters and Mercury fighters and other close-calls were the inevitable focus, but not for Alvaro. It was the earth in all of his photographs, blurry and out-of-focus through the periscope. Black and white and still and frozen and lonely like the moon, but with clouds and winds and parts of it that were still alive like he was.

Two clicks from the failsafe point buzzer. Radio Silence. The click

codes in the cockpit all meant something, each of the buzzers and klaxons were stage checkpoints. If pressed he could recite the call-letters and gauge pressures and indicator lights to ensure that everything in his Soyuz LKP heavy space fighter was fully functional. Alvaro was all out of film, but he had his sketchbook. Solitude was the other advantage of Moonsweeper orbit. He had no bunk-mate like the wide-eyed Georgian farm boys in the hunting-dog orbits. Out here there were no prying eyes for his sketchpad or his zero-gravity transgressions, infrequent though they were, and fire kept his secrets secret on re-entry. Personal effects came into the cockpit in their little crate and the bedroom was disposed of. There were still plenty of hours left in his shift but Alvaro knew enough of atomic warfare to know Father Earth could wait a few minutes for him to put down the sketchpad. He was trying to remember the sky.

Havana was hot, the drought had come back with a vengeance. Alvaro learned in cropdusting school what a blacklist was. Alvaro had been a revolutionary. Alvaro was a filthy commie rat and shouldn't be trusted with a paper airplane, much less a cropduster.

Alvaro mopped for the same night clubs by day and went to better flight schools by night. One day a woman came in in the afternoon and asked Alvaro where to find his boss. Alvaro told her he slept in the day and came out at night to greet the guests, but asked for a name to give his boss when he came in at the end of the shift. She told him "Adriana."

Adriana did get a job dancing at the night club, but Alvaro never saw her dance. She came in twenty minutes before his shift was out and he would have twenty minutes to charge up the blocks to class and then his second job. She was also someone from out in the country, who came to the city with the revolution and, like the revolution, couldn't quite be swept under the carpet. They joked about flying away together in Alvaro's airplane, the one he would steal for the revolution were he ever allowed near one, with nothing but a shared smile and the wind in their faces.

And the wind came. The papers flashed in silent fear the morning when the world nearly ended. When the dreadful cloud peered up from Saigon as it had in Japan and China and Korea and the bombers filled the sky and teletypes full of orders pointed men at the moon to better grasp each others' throats. There was fever in Havana. Men in long coats wandering the streets at night and men on the moon storing sadness in the Mother Sky for the winter. One day, when Alvaro was fired from his evening job and when there was no dancing that night for Good Friday, he took Adriana to the docks to watch the sun set and walked her to her home before flight class. Smiling in her doorway, Alvaro fumbled for a reason not to kiss her. He resolved to do it the next day.

More noise in the cockpit. The watchful eye of American radar cover-

age wasn't supposed to be comforting, on some sort of intuitive level. The loud metallic buzz from everything on his passive sensor boom meant he'd passed the threshold range of detection and died down to place him officially on the start of his off-shift. Were the world to end now, he would have to wait helplessly drifting through American space until he left sensor coverage on the other side of his orbit, pogo-stick the atomic thruster to fight the hand of Father Earth from cradling his tiny ship, and fire his missiles while American tracking would have a lessened chance of employing counter-countermeasures on them. For now though it meant more boredom in the cockpit, more drawing, and more of Father Earth in the periscope, closing his grand eyelid to blind himself from the rain. Alvaro's sketchpad filled with more aborted drafts. The off-hours were the same, full of yogurt packets and urine vials and naps and backaches until the indicator radiation doors let him into his cramped room with its tiny viewport where Father Earth drew closer every moment. Alvaro's pencil snapped, a fragment of graphite floating silently off the page. Three more hours. Alvaro was anywhere but the cockpit.

Havana's fever became a cancer, rotting it out from the inside, and the men in coats carried promises for sale up and down the boulevards and alleyways. Alvaro's flight school graduated and the local blacklists might be ignored if only he stretched the search out far enough. He hadn't kissed Adriana that next night, nor the next, nor the one after that. She still smiled when she saw him at work, and told him that one night he should stay and watch her dance, now that he didn't have school afterwards. Alvaro agreed for the night after next.

The revolution came back. It was more bitter this time, more bloody and bloodthirsty. Buildings burned. People started disappearing. Blacklists got tighter. Alvaro searched farther and farther, tracing roads in truckbeds for interviews farther and farther away. He missed Adriana's dance on the night they had agreed upon. He missed work the next day and the one after that.

One of the men in coats from Comintern sold him a promise with the Soviet Red Rocket Corps, hunting for washed-out revolutionaries in search of the coming madness, and Alvaro spun into a dive and took the last plane out of Havana. In a few more weeks, Alvaro was in a bunker in Kazakhstan and Havana was burning to the ground, American tanks roving up and down the boulevards and alleyways amid the night clubs and hotels. The long drought finally ended.

Something is missing in a Moonsweeper's bones. Something that keeps him from the straight and narrow and keeps him from feeling all of his feelings at once. A missing ball-bearing in his wants and desires that sends him hunting farther and farther away, sweeping eccentric orbits of the soul like

the ones he flies through space. His fingertips scrape the moon where his frail leaden craft peaks thousands of miles short.

Alvaro put down the pencil in another day's defeat. He could shade her dress on the stage now but never her face, too ephemeral and distant in his mind's eye. The earth swelled in the periscope, Alvaro not missing any moment. The Pacific crept out from the shadow of the earth and still Alvaro's tiny capsule raced the sunrise to its target. This was why he stayed up late into his sleeping shift and slept in the cockpit. The hope to see it rotate underneath without any pomp or circumstance.

Mother had told him the old story the first time that the rain hadn't come. Their embrace ended, pushed apart by their children, the rain was Mother Sky's tears, and the wind Father Earth's sighs, feeling her tears on his cheek, because this was the way things had to be. But the drought, Alvaro's mother explained, fighting tears from her own eyes, was because Father Earth and Mother Sky didn't love one another anymore. And when the rain came they were pining for only their love to well up in the sorrow.

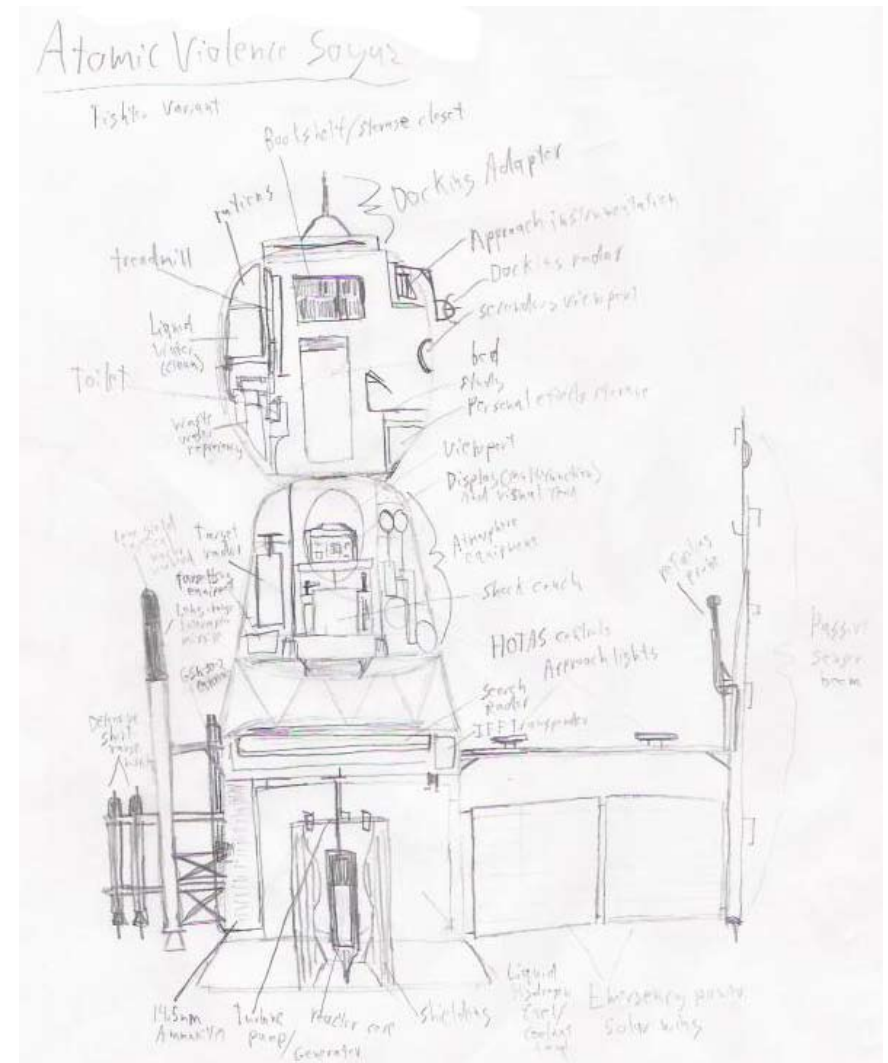
The island finally slid a tip out into the earth's curve and Alvaro stared, sleep-deprived and entranced as it maneuvered into the viewport, green and brown specks immutable under the whimsy of the wind. Havana was the grey dot in the corner, the wind still licking dry the charred bones of the night clubs and casinos up and down the boulevards and alleyways.

Goodnight Adriana.



## Soyuz

by Mike Rauscher



(opposite) **Memories and Missiles**  
by Bryn A. McDonald

# Love Poem

by Julia Rosenfeld

i. silently he  
 loves me  
 on the tracks of abandoned railways  
 we speak  
 of timelessness and  
 truth,  
 the 1920's  
 the French Underground that he wanted to join  
 when he was six

i suffocate

(at his touch)

ii. afterward i can  
 never remember  
 what it  
 was you  
 said  
 because i was too  
 busy  
 listening  
 to your voice

iii. wait. catfood?  
 i thought you  
 (said

you) worked in  
 real estate.

bastard.

iv. i want to do something  
 creative

carve your  
 name into my  
 eyelids

oh, wait.  
 That's already been  
 done.

v. sits down to write a poem  
 about despair but  
 thinks of peach  
 blossoms and  
 blanket forts and  
 the taste of your  
 teeth

vi. Maybe we should talk about the weather  
 again.  
 Or your latest econ exam.  
 Or some obscure composer from the Czech  
 Republic.  
 Or maybe about how I never liked your poetry  
 and think you're boring.

vii. i lost my favorite sock  
 last night  
 didn't like the taste of your  
 kisses  
 have forgotten the poems  
 in my head

viii. they used to be  
 exciting, she  
 says,

flying,  
 epics, sometimes killing  
 people

now it's all  
forgetting deadlines and being  
late  
for work

maybe i should go back to  
eating catfood,  
pooping in your gar-

den

ix. you hugged me like someone  
who's never been  
kicked in the  
gut

in the middle of  
saying i

love  
you.

it turned me on.

(x. i want to write poems

in you.)

xi. fuck uganda,  
she said (salt  
crystals,  
wine  
sparkle in her  
eyes)

i just  
want to see  
you laugh  
again

xii. after you left  
i bottled up your  
scent

from the back of your  
seat

someday i will mix it with  
rain or  
vodka,

feed it to our  
child.

xiii. do you understand what this  
means  
to me?

i could have been rich  
have dribbled paint into your eyes  
at Christmas  
have stepped out the door into a  
bucket of grass clippings  
and you

xiv. men,

she  
huffed,  
give 'em a  
smile  
and the next thing you know they want  
a lock of your  
nose hair and  
your mother's  
middle name

# Angela Reading

by Faith Hayes



# Wasteland

by Aries Indenbaum

In Part one of *Wasteland*, we meet Adin, the son of Elias and Alma. The family lives and works in the suburbs outside of Central City, expelled for being defectives. In the desolated suburbs, haunted by packs of rabid dogs and giant cactuses, the family works servile jobs. Adin recycles the wastes generated by chain-stores after a recent war; his parents work in sewage pits, separating useful metals out of the stream of human wastes.

Unbeknownst to their son, Elias and Alma are planning an escape. For years, they have been writing out a map through which they can return to the City via the sewage tunnels. The pair does not plan on including their son in the escape, though he is fascinated by the City.

In the meanwhile, Adin meets Sasha, the daughter/assistant of the local Doctor. She throws an asian pear at him one day, and they grow to mutually adore one another. The age difference (Adin, fourteen; Sasha, eighteen), does not seem to matter, nor does Adin's "defective" status.

This is part two of three. For the first part, please read Volume 1, Issue 3.1.

## Part Two

On his walk home after work, Adin saw Sasha in front of her house, bleaching the stones. The perpetual line of the ill formed in an arc around her. She wore solid rubber boots, goggles, gloves up to her elbows and a long white dress. Around her, the ill looked ravaged and contagious, fluids dripping off of them, like sauces oozing from a sandwich. Adin walked over to her, a skip in his step. Sasha smiled at him, and dropped her mop into the grass.

"Hello!"

"Hey-hey," she said. "How are you doing?" She loosened the goggles and popped them on top of her head.

"Just fine," Adin replied, his smile thin. The Supervisor had been in a foul mood that day. Life was the opposite of fine.

"Really?" Sasha said, seeing the worry on his face. She gestured to their steps, striding over. "Penny for thoughts?"

Adin followed, tagging behind her. "Just about the City. I think of it too much."

Sasha sat on the steps, making a space for Adin. "That's funny. I was born there, but I don't think about it all that often. I look up, not out."

Adin paused, digesting Sasha's words. He stretched out his legs, feeling the bones pop in their joints. "What do you remember?" His voice sounded

more desperate than he would have liked.

“Not much,” Sasha shrugged. “I was only a kid. My dad kept me inside, most of the time. He said it wasn’t safe.”

In the yard, children in wheelchair started to chase each other, carving little lines across the grass.

“Inside?” Adin puzzled out.

“Yeah. It feels like a place where I’ve visited, but haven’t really lived. A tourist, you know?” She thought back to it: the market, the museums, the freak show and the ocean, still nothing really stuck. It was all postcard memory, flimsy and hastily edited.

Sasha didn’t quite know what made her reach for him—probably her exhaustion. There was something incredibly real there, something solid. She let her head fall onto his shoulder. He smelled strangely like rust, and far too strong.

In the yard, one of the patients started to cough uncontrollably, a deep hack that seemed as if it dredged up parts of his lungs. They turned to watch the man, his chubby wife rubbing a hand on his back, wiping a brightly-colored rag across his forehead. As if speared through the center, he collapsed in on himself. His wife cried aloud, an agonized wail, a counter-harmony to her husband’s jagged cough. She had an operatic wobble to her yelp, possibly assisted by her generous shape. The other patients gave them a halo of a few yards, jumping away at the color of the phlegm the man was heaving onto the lawn.

Underneath her cheek, Sasha felt Adin’s shoulders tense as the woman howled. “This happens a lot,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t worry.”

Adin nodded, though his shoulders still tensed.

“Do you have any stories about the City? That you know?”

Adin closed his eyes for a second and smiled, thinking of a story his father had told him. Sasha didn’t move a single muscle while he spoke.

The story Elias told went something like this:

The City was founded on the island in the center of the bay, sparkling and clean. Before the first homes had been built, fishermen would journey miles and miles to hunt the thousands of species of fish swimming in the salt water. Sea lions crashed against the fishing boats, jellyfish clung to their poles. They lived together, fished together, a magnificent tribe of men. At night, they sang songs, baking fishpies. The men made little makeshift homes and paired off with a minimum of fuss. Bedmates gathered, often in duos, triples and sometimes quartets.

On the Sunday mornings, after the preacher’s lead the men in song, they would gather their lovers and dive for abalone. Nude, they wrestled and hunted across Central Island. Some of them men organized games of

polo; others smoked salmon and sucked the meat out of the crab legs. In the sunsets, they collapsed into piles of homoerotic glee. Of course, there were fights, arguments, hair-pulling and boat-stealing. But overall, life was content. The island was theirs.

The trouble came with the women. Women brought homes. Homes brought commerce. In the kitchen they built, the women discovered ways to preserve fish through their alchemy of brine, salt and vinegar. Tradesman from across the country visited the bay, and took their preserved-creatures off to places far away. Once the fish became mobile, the little village exploded outwards and upwards.

Merchants began to export the fish and the stories of the clear bay, the millions of fishes. The fish market became a tourist attraction, “Little Tsukiji” in the guidebooks. Canning factories sprouted up; energy farmers build windmills on the rocky cliffs surrounding the harbor. The abalone died off, many of the fish migrated.

The Town Hall became the City Union.

A university took root at the old city center, building their academic towers up and up, to view the bay around them. The corporate kids sprouted up around the ivory tower, and the city grew, and grew. There was always something a bit weird about it, something ancient, tribal and salty. There was more crime than normal, more disorder. They said that the sea air brought it out, made the riots more plentiful, made the protests sharper and fiercer.

During the war, Central City became the safest place in the country. The winds swept the missiles away. High gusts sent the gas bombs hurtling out to the suburbs. A protective bubbled hovered around Central City, a halo. Inside, the populace starved and clung to each other, gripping together through the disasters. They were a city of survivors, people forged within war’s dust cloud.

Elias and Alma’s escape began like any other day. They awoke with the sunset, arms interwoven. The other family in the first floor of the house was settling down for dinner. The father had beaten his children very hard before dinner—their feverish yelps served as an alarm clock. In the dim light, they prepared their things, grabbing the food and supplies they’d been scrimping for years. Alma stopped by Adin’s little stash, leaving it alone.

“Do you remember—” Alma said.

“Yes,” Elias said and reminded her of the beginning. They had signed the life-agreement for the house, with the expectation of grabbing a nice place before they escaped. They had planned to live there for about two years, as they constructed the map. Then, they’d flee. But the map took far longer to memorize than they had expected. And then, in the second year,

along came Adin.

“He was so quiet,” Elias said.

“He couldn’t talk,” Alma replied. “He would just draw on the walls.”

Adin had infuriated Alma. All of his behaviors seemed so random to her, as she could barely remember the last day. Alma hadn’t known how he had moved from gibbering to lyrical sentences. She didn’t know how he had become fourteen in what seemed like seven years.

Elias hadn’t known what to do with Alma and Adin. It had seemed a choice—he could only love one or the other. Who, the woman who barely remembered her own name, or the boy who could hardly speak at all? Alma had won most of his hours; the only time he spent with his son was an hour before he went to bed, to give him whatever stories of the City that he remembered. Adin blossomed, never begging him for more stories, but going out and finding them. As he started work, he asked all of the older folks for their City Stories. Whether they told him lies, myths or memories, it sustained him.

At that moment, Elias wondered where Adin was, whether he had already started wandering about the neighborhood. The stories had made him obsessed with location, with the City. When he worked in the body recycling areas, he used to take home bits of cloth or shoes from the corpses, because he swore that they came from different parts of the City. He transformed their section of the house, making paintings, sculptures, mostly of towers, facing the bay. When he was older, he made women, shaped and lovely, their hips cut out of curved glass windows.

Elias looked at one of the models Adin had made him for a birthday: a cityscape made of scrap metal. He wondered if he should take it with him, feeling its weight. He packed it in with the food, which they tied to their bodies in small sacks, as if their torsos were dotted with paunches.

As they left the house, Elias watched the sun fall behind the City, its fires swallowed up by the City’s electric glow. Outshone.

“Are you ready?” Alma asked.

“Yeah,” Elias said. He looked around the room, seeing more of Adin’s scraps littered around the room.

Alma folded a copy of the map and tucked it into her shirt. In her purse, she collected food and a small portable light. While his wife tidied, Elias deposited a little letter onto Adin’s pillow. As he lay it down, he twitched a little, seeing a little bit of Adin’s hair lying on the sheet.

At work, Elias and Alma started out normally, their boots pulled high, coveralls neatly shielding their entire bodies. They took an extra few minutes to pull up their suits, making sure all the clothes formed tight seals. Elias

repeatedly reached for the portable light, laying in his pocket. Alma kept her right hand on their map. Through their chemical masks, the air smelled more like sanitized coffee grounds than refuse. But after a moment of half-hearted cleaning, their eyes met.

Elias dropped his rake. Alma dropped her bucket. They started to walk, away from the sewer mouth.

Though the tunnel darkened abruptly, Elias felt enormously lighter when they moved farther in, closer to the city. Quietly, he began to sing to himself the silly lullabies he made up for Adin: songs about stars and moonbeams, dragons and angels.

In the claustrophobia of the sewer and the weight of their supplies, Alma remembered her pregnancy. As they traveled up the tubes, the sludge grew thicker and thicker, the way the world felt when she was full with child. When morning sickness consumed her at work, she couldn’t peel off her suit in the midst of the sewer to throw up, so she would puke within the suit, and let the vomit dribble down her chin. The sweat swam down her neck and collected through her suit. The smell clotted in her mask and she grew distracted. Elias grasped her shoulder.

They kept walking.

He visited every day for two weeks solid, always with new stories. Sasha wondered if he could be fantasizing, but there were too many meaty, dirty, detail-ridden secrets in there to be anything but truth.

She thought about it as she did her chores and surgeries. All of his stories were old, from generations past, tales of women who wore small hats and men with soft hands resting in softer gloves. Construction workers on the solar towers who would spit their watermelon seeds thousands of feet down to blind nearby strangers. After the war, when the pride flowed thickly through the streets, small threads of the national anthem would break out in the streets. Small voices cracked out the tune and like kindling, the harmonies would swell, in a faintly atonal, arrhythmic beat. Troubadours lurked in the trains, prostitutes traveled around in laughing packs, their garish lipstick catching the fluorescent lights. Manicured nails. Thai food. Private showers. Vending machines.

Sasha laid out food for the infirm and thought about Adin’s story of the hedonistic New Years celebrations. An hour before the year changed, two lovers were put in a dark-tinted glass ball and lowered above City Union. From the street, one could see only writhing, no gender, no parts. But yet, millions gawked at the lover’s embrace.

“You could see them fit into each other, as if all of his parts were just made precisely for her. Even when they weren’t engaging with each other, they were still touching, wrapped around each other.” His voice just above



a whisper, Adin described the lover's furious embraces, lasting from one year into the next.

They spoke as she cleaned bedpans and sterilized scalpels. In between stories, he would ask her about the hospital, her father and her perpetual projects. There was a strange ease to their conversations, the conversation dipped and curved easily. Silences didn't seem unnatural, but a necessary lull between each verse.

"No, I don't remember much," she said over and over.

Sasha knit knees to new plastic shins. She splinted, pinned and sewed wounds; mended, comforted and held. As she patched the people together, she thought of the City, miles and miles away, and waited for Adin.

There were some books in the waiting room about the City. Mostly architectural. Her favorite was a photographic history of the subway tunnels: small women in stretchy shirts, wooing most of the homeless with warm meals. Large men blasting and digging, laying mortar and smoothing concrete. There was one crew of children whose job was to paint the walls all different colors. The picture showed them hanging onto a ladder, their clothes and hair splattered with paint.

Sasha started to miss the City in the way she missed her mother: something so long gone that only the ideal remained, locked in fuzzy photos.

It didn't take Alma long to determine what was the worst part of the escape. The darkness, the smell and the strange bubbling noises of waste slapping against concrete were deeply unpleasant, but there was something else. Something far larger and more terrifying gripped her.

Time. They didn't know what time it was.

As the lights grew fainter, the hours stretched on and on. Alma started counting to herself, just to feel the comforting ease of numbers again. She counted the beats of her boot sloshing through roughage. She counted each tunnel they walked through, each ladder they climbed. Sometimes she used primes, odds or evens to keep the time rolling away. When the darkness was complete, she recited all of the countries she could think of. Then, their capitals. Rivers. Mountain ranges.

They had been there for nearly two weeks.

Elias was silent, except to recite the song-mnemonic. In the narrow passes, he lead her, but through most of the passages, they walked hand in hand. She could hear little sections of the tune, "3-4-5 through the right," or "right-by-left-by-right three times." Somewhere along the way, they'd taken a wrong turn, or a few wrong turns. Alma's leg cramped, one section of her calf feeling pierced by several thousand spikes. She kept going.

At one point, the moisture around Elias's mask collected until he spluttered and heaved for air. She wiped away the strange stickiness on the res-

pirator until he could breathe again.

They couldn't really stop to talk or eat, unless they reached one of the little storage lockers insulated from the wastes. The engineers had called them "dry rooms," though they were colloquially known as "fuck-holes." There was one by the sewer mouth that had safeguarded hundreds of couples in their unsanitary adventures. In their day, Alma and Elias had not frequented the fuckhole—it seemed gross, tasteless and far too dark.

Now, the lockers were their saving graces. There was one every few miles offering a sink with sanitizer, toilet and a narrow cot. "Space and cleanliness," Alma said to herself, wishing they had just a bit of light. She spotted their third fuckhole, tucked within the wall. They had been walking for nearly six hours. "Three," Alma said. "Three to the third. Times three," Her breath rushed in faster through the mask. "Times tree. Trees. Thirty-three trees in the park."

Elias gripped her shoulder and she quieted.

They popped with door open and stepped in the anteroom, and a shower of sanitation water soaked their suits. Alma gagged on the reek of the disinfectant fluid clotting her respirator. A harsh burst of wind shot through the anteroom, then the door shot open. The fuckhole was pitch black. They peeled off their clothes and as Alma collapsed on the bed, her leg twitching, Elias rooted around the sink cabinets for food, unable to see a thing. Sometimes, the plumbers left things: such as apricot preserves, in this case. Elias grabbed the jar and sat next to Alma on the bed. He had no spoon, so they just tilted the jar down and let the apricots plop into their mouths. All of their food was gone.

They slept, cocooned around the other on the cot. Underneath the thin blankets, they didn't speak, but gripped the other. In the dim light, time seemed all the more amorphous. They slept in the small bed until they were rested, perhaps for six hours, perhaps for twelve. It didn't matter now, they believed.

Outside, the valves opened and the waste flew at full blast. Tons of gallons of filth streamed past at a pressing speed, a brown oceanic wave. In its socket-hinge, the door wobbled a bit.

Before they left, Elias put Adin's cityscape model in one of the cupboards, a present for some future explorer. It took longer to leave this fuckhole, to pull on their suits and tug up their boots. Elias's eyes weren't focusing as they should, his movements shaky. A few of his facial tics returned, gone after years of marriage. Alma's knee wasn't bending properly anymore. He kissed her, slowly and deeply, before they left the space.

As they walked, and walked, they noticed the geography had begun to change. There were more air ducts, more strange tubes and fans on the walls. The walls seemed thicker. Slowly, they grew warmer, though they

were walking fast, so the sweat seemed natural. But Alma's hands felt hot, a heat that migrated from her fingers to her palms and wrists and elbows. As they passed from a small passageway into a larger room, Alma saw saw crawlies everywhere. The squeals of rats or mice became a constant patter in her ears.

They found another fuckhole after a day's walk. There was no food in the cupboard. Elias could barely see Alma unless he was within arms-length of her. The inner skin of his eyelids burned, the tear-ducts feeling full of sand. He ground his teeth in hunger. As they lay on the bed, Alma grasped Elias's arms, wrapping them around her, pressing his fists into her aching stomach.

It took them a long time to sleep. Over the days, it had grown harder and harder to rest as the food had grown sparser.

Work was normal until the accident. Adin was moving packages from one cubby to another, his legs and back growing steadily more tired. As each site wore on, the materials got heavier and heavier. Today, his superior had called in a crane to lift the refrigerator and some of the coolant parts into the dumpster. Adin hated the cranes, the twisted, noisy dinosaur machines.

Though he hadn't seen the crane drop the metals, paranoia forced his glance upwards when he heard the lifting hook fail. As he looked up, and saw the pieces of metal hurtling towards him from a hundred feet above his head, he jerked up his arms to cover his head and dropped to his knees. He heard the sound of the metal hitting and a strange series of thumps. The force leveled him and his face hit the dirt.

Everything was dark and dusty.

For a few minutes, he lay there, as the boys gathered around him. His mind meant blank and the next thing he could remember was Dooler kicking his leg and asking if it hurt.

"No," he said, surprised to be telling the truth. His legs felt fine. But his arms. He tried to wiggle a finger and found the limb limp and cold, as if someone had filled the flesh with cream cheese. He tried to pick himself up and collapsed inwards, coughing.

As he lowered his arms and tried to stand, the pain began. There were long wounds torn into his skin; strips of flesh were missing from his arms. There was no systems manager on staff. There was no lidocain, or hydrogen peroxide. The cuts looked ugly and smelled worse, hour by hour.

As the sun sailed higher and higher in the sky, he moved slower- each little motion elongated. The packages slipped from his fingers. The other boys ignored it. He felt his stomach churn, as if a cluster of leeches dwelled with his gut, slowly sucking away at his intestines. Each bit of metal detritus slid from his grip. A wad of dirt felt trapped within his throat; he knelt and

choked, trying to jerk out the dust. After a minute of coughing, he felt his mouth begin to heat, saliva drowning his tongue.

Standing in a hurry, Adin felt his gut tremble. There were never any toilets for the boys—they found a private spot when they needed to do something more than piss. Placing a hand over his mouth, he ran to the back of the Quiznos. At the rear of the building was a narrow alleyway with an abandoned baby carriage sitting forlorn. Adin stooped beside the carriage and uncovered his mouth.

His throat choked and he coughed and hacked. Whatever tapioca-smelling gloop had dwelled within his stomach flew out of his mouth. With a delicate patter, his vomit splattered against the plastic wheels of the baby carriage.

As the puke slowly dribbled out of his mouth and nose, Adin wiped a few tears away. His knees shook as he stood.

He looked inside of the baby carriage, and saw a mass of mewling black fuzz. It was a litter of baby skunks, sleeping fitfully. The skunk-cubs were frightfully small, many still blind from birth. Adin sunk one hand into the moving pillow of fluff—the sensation tickled his fingers, he twisted his palm around the tiny bodies.

He stood beside the skunks for another few minutes, feeling them tease through his fingers. He smiled and knelt beside them. They were so beautiful.

The bus ride home was a blur, the land blurring together through the windows. He flew through the teddybear cactus, past the spikes and needles. Adin saw Sasha as he stumbled out of the bus. He ran towards the house, his arms heavy. She was building something on the lawn, some small engine. He ran up to her.

"Hey," she said, her voice dropping as she saw his body. Some blood oozed onto the grass.

"How... the day?" The words were sticky and hard for him to ease out.

She stared at him. "Your arm..." her tone was soft.

She smelled like oil and fresh fruit. He found it hard to concentrate on what he was saying. The falling light found the highlights of her hair and the raised plains of her face. All of her skin seemed perfect, made of some far-finer substance than his. Her cheeks looked very soft. Nothing hurt—it all felt fuzzy.

"You know... you're very pretty? You know that?"

Sasha blinked at him.

"Because you are. It's hard for me not to tell you that every day, to think that there's someone who's more amazing and lovely than anyone else

and it's a torment to just walk away every day."

"I like when you visit too," she said carefully, watching him tremble. "But I think you need to come inside for now. You're injured—"

"You're like a cardinal," he said, lost within, "When you're here, the day has color and form. You make the world real, you make it more than the purgatory next to the City." Her face was so close to him. "You're like a litter of skunks every day—something normal and human and comforting. I don't feel at ease with anyone else- not even my parents."

Her eyes bulged a little, with emotion or discomfort; he wasn't sure.

His words come out jumbled, and he could only hear a phrase of what passed out of his lips, "Nothing to do but get out- can't go without- because I threw up today and I don't think I can work very well any more—but why should it matter."

He gesticulated wildly, furious with his own voice.

She was saying something, but it was muted and fuzzy, as if listening to a radio signal, just out of range: "You—Adin—should probably sit—arm injured— you need help—I think about—you don't look well—City—" Adin shook his head violently.

"Your arm," she said, her voice vanishing into static fuzz.

"It's nothing," he roared over the distortion. He passed out in her lap.

The Doctor loved his patients. He loved all of them, regardless of whether they loved him or not. They all had something new to teach him, even the ones who could barely speak. "Doctor Martin," they would call, and hug him, regardless of contagion issues. When he started out in Central City, many of his patients had treated him like a sophisticated plumber, who might one day wrench a tube too tight. For so long, his love was unrequited.

But in the Reclamation Zone, and among the defectives, his patients shared a wonderful behavior—they all loved him in return. Few could pay his full fee, but most brought him presents of some dubious quality, or cleaned his home. In his bedroom, the Doctor kept the spoils: coconut rum, rations, family heirlooms, jewelry and sweetcakes. They were never much, mostly trinkets, but the thoughts mattered. There was nothing better for him than to watch their faces change from the choked-up veneer of illness to the pained shrieks that preceded the beautiful smile of health. Martin loved each phase of the process, watching the patients through surgery the way a young boy studies a bruise change colors.

Doctor Martin looked around the sofas of the waiting room, looking for his next patient. Each spot in the waiting was filled, at various stages of need. The hypochondriacs played Chinese Checkers in the corner. Gio, an older man with scars running down his face yelled with joy as he won another round. Like a trumpet's exultation, three of the patients sneezed

at once, spraying snot. He frowned when a pregnant woman's water burst open across the cushioning. He'd need to get the special dustbuster to get that slime out. The woman started to wail.

Sasha tugged on his arm, "Daddy, new patient. I already set him up." She wasn't blinking, her face frozen in alarm.

Doctor Martin nodded, wondering what troubled her.

The boy lay on the bed, his wiry muscle exposed to the florescent lights. He took a stock of the boy's vitals and the curious wounds on his arms. Every patient had something to teach. The boy was very slim, the muscles slapped over his bones. He was young, the body still gawky and unrefined. He had yet to grow facial hair, though a bit of fuzz lined his armpits.

Sasha stood beside the bed, biting her lip. Martin glanced at her, the dots lining up.

Adin's wounds had character. The metals that had cut through him had been dipped in something, left to soak in some caustic substance now ruining the composition of his flesh. The tissue was inflamed, the whole area red and puffed up.

The doctor loaded the diazepam bag into the IV, and gently inserted the catheter into the vein beside his elbow. His veins were easy to spot, little risen lines of blue.

The doctor shook the hydrogen peroxide container in the cupboard. It was mostly empty—there certainly wasn't enough to clean the wounds.

Martin kept all of his supplies in the depth of the garage, in many large, organized piles. Years ago, he had tried to consolidate, to make space for the ambulance. But over the years, Sasha had always needed a bit more room for her work, and the amount of supplies he used increased. There were new problems, new infections; patients who were allergic to multiple antibiotics.

He trekked down to the basement, running a hand along the wall to check for any dirt. On the landing, he passed by his daughter's newest creation. Her construction skills exponentially increased the love he felt for her. It was so much easier to love a capable child.

Her creation was a spaceship: a sphere, made of flexi-glass with small jets on the side. It looked like an oversized hamster ball. He rested a hand on the shell, and peered into the inside, poking around a bit. The roof mechanism seemed a bit faulty. He toyed with the door for a minute, tweaking the amount of pressure to trigger opening.

Overall, it was a very fine piece of work. He took a few minutes to stare at some of her earlier work, mostly anatomical pieces, all of which he'd treasured. Back when they lived in the city, she mucked about with whatever tools he left out in the store room. He would open the door and find her

crouched over her toddler creations—abstract toys and tools.

As she got older and they moved to the Reclamation Zone, Martin brought her more into the family business. She showed a lot of talent with implant construction, building her first pacemaker at age nine. He looked at that first one, which he kept in a jar, suspended in antifreeze.

He stared at the metal heart, tinged green in the liquid—beautiful and frail, a testament to the precious human organ, with its many tubes and vessels. Each chamber could spring open, like a cluster of lockets; the aorta could be removed and used as a straw. She had taken weeks to fit all of the parts together, covering the walls with her designs. These days, she designed experimental prosthetics, double jointed thumbs for amputees; super-acute eyes for the blind. Parts of the prosthetics littered the floor: he stepped through puddles of gooey-eyeball, leaking from its plastic shell, metal fingernails, false toes, models fashioned out of rubber tubing and paper maché.

She was nearly eighteen now. How strange.

He spotted the large green jug, filled with hydrogen peroxide, and lugged it up the stairs to the operating room.

Adin's eyelids flickered and in the slow instance of fever-dreams, the world swept around him, like an odd screen.

The Doctor was standing in front of him. He was not a tall man, but there was something very old and terrifying about him. His dark hair was slicked back, his face neat and unemotional, like a well-kept desk; all the office supplies set at right angles. Very lightly, he lifted Adin's injured arm. As he saw the boy's arms twitch, he flashed his diagnosis smile. There were muscles in his face, ones that could become smiles or frowns. He controlled them as he controlled his biceps, to flex or relax.

The Doctor's voice was very calm when he said, "You're going to have to stay awake for this." His grip tightened on Adin's arm. The pain lanced through his stomach. He clenched his jaw.

"I think you have a fondness for my daughter," the Doctor said softly as he massaged Adin's shoulder. He squeezed harder when Adin did not answer. "She's too old for you, you know." Adin realized that he was naked. Very, very naked.

"That's alright. You don't need to talk right now. But I would like to know your intentions at some point."

He released his grip and patted the boy on the back, a bit harder than necessary.

"My name is Dr. Martin, son. I just want the best for both for you."

Doctor Martin gestured Adin to the vat in front of him. Cautiously, Adin leaned over and peered in: the vessel was filled with a clear liquid that

had some bubbles suspended in it.

"This may hurt," the Doctor said soothingly. "This may hurt considerably."

Adin did not recognize the limbs before him as his own. They were brown-purple and molten, the skin flaking off around the cuts. The Doctor took his hand very gently and touched Adin's fingers to the top of the vat. The liquid was viscous, forming a slight jello-like layer.

It felt cool, but didn't hurt.

Then, the Doctor pushed Adin's hands into the fluid. The boy screamed, instantly and piercingly. He struggled and shook, trying to rip his hands out of the Doctor's grip. He could no longer hear himself howling over the terrible pain in his marrow. The ice was sliding into him and his entire body convulsed again and again.

It continued for a few minutes.

When the Doctor let go, the feeling had left Adin and he collapsed onto the bed. As he left, dragging the vat with him to dispose of the liquids, the Doctor said, "We should talk soon, son."

Adin wasn't sure how long he lay prone on the bed. He sobbed, his arms aching. The skin around them was white, the flesh bubbling with soapy bubbles that made soft hissing noises.

He gurgled out the word "No," a few times, just to make some noise. The word clenched within his throat- he retched it up and swallowed it down, a tide of "No-No-No-No-No."

There were a few knocks at the door. Stifling his refrain of no's, Adin burrowed under the sheet.

"Hello?" he gurgled.

It was Sasha. Adin quieted himself.

"Hi." She held up a roll of bandages, smiling. "I'm here to help."

Adin felt sleep pucker his eyes. "Thank you." The sleep washed over him as Sasha sat behind him and started stroking his hair.

"Give me your arm," she whispered. He felt weak, but not weak enough to refuse her. an moved the object to her, as if ants were stinging the inner flesh of his muscles.

"Tell me something," he said. "Tell me what you know about the City."

She lightly touched the pad of his hand with her fingernails, sending little shocks into his spine. As he adjusted the sheet to cover him, Sasha tugged his arm out.

"We lived there when I was little, but I don't remember much. I want to go back there one day." Grabbing a bandage, she lightly wrapped the arm.

"You have beautiful hands," she whispered.

She laid another brown bandage over the arm and tightened. The pres-

sure in Adin's mind drowned out whatever she was saying.

"You should sleep," he heard her say. He didn't remember anything after that.

When Adin woke up, his nerves had forgotten how to function. The veins in his upper arms and legs were raised; his wrists and knuckles sore and creaky. His forearms were bandaged tightly, they looked stickly thin, each limb a narrow cylinder encased in white gauze. He had no idea what time it was—by the light in the window, sometime in the early evening.

"You've been asleep for a long time," Sasha said as she opened the door. She had tied a towel, around her waist, her hair mussed and wet.

Adin nodded, trying to sit with some dignity.

"I don't mean to be a jerk, but we'll need this bed."

Adin nodded again and tried to stand. With the first step, his legs slipped out from underneath him; by the second, he spilled onto the floor. Sasha laughed; he looked like a baby bird, flopped onto the ground. Her laughter was over-loud, booming through the room.

Adin lifted his arms and keened, pantomiming a bird. Sasha grasped him around the waist and lifted him to standing. They stood uncomfortably close to one another. Sasha smelled like rain.

"I can leave," Adin said, letting his hands fall at her waist, for lack of a better place to rest them. The towel was damp.

Sasha looked at him, eyebrows quirked. "I'm going to walk you home, you know." As she spoke, a few drops of water splattered on his face.

Outside, it was the clearest it would ever become. The ovens had begun to burn, but the smoke had yet to disperse. As they walked home, Adin found his mouth running away with him, telling Sasha the intricacies of his small life. When they reached his door, he led her up to the top of the stairs and up to the roof.

From the rooftop, it looked as if a long dirty window had been dusted in the thin lines of the buildings. They watched the shape of the city, the moon a dim bulb overhead.

"Before we settled here, my father and I once drove far away, towards the mountains. We loaded all of Dad's telescopes into the ambulance and spent a week out there, just looking up. That was the last long drive."

"It's beautiful," Adin said.

Sasha looked at him. Her pupils were dilated. "I'm hungry," she said.

Adin nodded, his stomach having spent the last forty hours in some state of disgrace. He flew down to his room and dredged out his meager stash, swiped after a workshift at a destroyed Food Emporium. In one of the rear dumpsters, he had found a plastic bag filled with a variety of foods,

preserved to immortality. Candy lived through the wars. Candy, cans and crap: piles of candy corn, melted M&Ms. Jolly Ranchers. Condiments: mustard lived; bottled ketchup, pickles, gherkins, little containers of instant soup. Powders in little packets: sugar, salt and basil. Liquor. He had filched all that he could.

Out of the stash, he pulled out a few Twinkies and some spam.

"This is all I got."

Sasha blinked at him. "...Really?"

Adin shrugged and unwrapped two Twinkies. "There's some Skittles too. I don't really like them- they're pretty stale, but if you want them. I think my parents ate all that we had shared."

She took a bit of the proffered the Twinkie, then asked: "Where are your parents?"

"Dunno." Adin half-smiled as he choked down half of the Spam. "Why?"

Sasha licked the cream from the corners of her mouth. She looked hungrier now. Something about the shape of her face, the sharpness of her eyes, the glint of her smile made him wonder how much older she was than him.

They lingered in an awkward silence.

"Can I show you the things I make?" he asked.

The paintings of the city hung all around them, pictures molded from toxic slime and tar, grease, gloop and whatever he could wrestle home from a site. The city buildings were as bright as he could make them, constrained by his materials. She gazed at them, all of the drawings, all of the imaginings of the city of glass and perfection.

Adin stopped before one of the pieces, a model of the Sunsky Tower, and reshaped the top, finishing it to a point. His fingers had no trace of fat. He smoothed one of the little windows, wiping some of the excess clay on his shirt.

She thought of the city she could still remember in drops, the smell of overcrowded, the slight hint of smoked meat hanging over everything. She remembered broken machinery and the sounds of the clinic.

"I want to see you," Sasha said.

Adin turned from the model, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Over his mewling protests, Sasha rested her hands at his waist. Fingers deft from years of disrobing patients, she peeled off his shirt. Sasha stared at him.

He was not intensely ugly—he barely looked disfigured at all. There were some subtle tells, some darkened stretch marks and mottled skin. He bruised easily and little clouds of purple and red covered his limbs.

"Adema-Adin," Sasha whispered, trailing a finger against the bruises. "That's so lovely."

Adin shivered, but said nothing. There was a single-minded focus in her look, a strangely distant intimacy, as if she was spotting him through a telescope, capturing him in her lens.

"You're very sweet," she said, her fingernail catching on one of the scabs on his back. She continued to catalogue his body, the tensed muscles, the strains. Each strange misaligned tendon and overly bruised surface, she brushed over. Sasha played with the little bruises dotting Adin's ribs. There was a low-grade disfigurement—a melanin-deficiency, a splotch of white on his tanned backdrop of his abdomen.

"That's wonderful," Sasha said, studying the mark.

And then, his pelvis. She saw the hints of chafing skin, of twisted flesh around his hipbones. The skin curved like swaths of rope, puckered a bit, with little grooves. It looked utterly alien.

They passed a few minutes in silence, Sasha staring at him. Adin felt both small and enormous in her eyes. Slowly, she stepped out of her dress. Her body was eclipsed by his wonder. He was reminded of his father's description of the skyscrapers: majestic, toned and perfect.

Onto his parents' bed, the two merged together.

In his dreams, they flew.

## Silence of a Dinnertime

by Stephen Burrows

If you don't know what vampires are  
you didn't come from my home town.

*Only Jesus can save you.*

If I die here, don't hold a service, don't claim  
I was good, just burn my body  
and publish my poems.

*Only science can save you.*

This is my vegetarian statement:  
there is too much certainty  
in a world where you are food.

*Martial law will save you.*

What I remember:

Sleeping curled to hide  
the organs in my exposed  
unexercised stomach.

Seeing a man sucked dry  
in a parked car and then later  
seeing him flushed with blood  
and wandering the fairgrounds.

The day I killed my next door neighbor  
and buried him beneath the interchange  
with a white wooden cross  
through his heart. Every vampire  
has a different style of writhing.

*Nothing can save you.*

I don't love your blood-blue eyes  
as my blood vibrates  
in your body  
with my heartbeat.

*Afterwards it's so much easier.*

I would not mind—  
if only I had gotten  
that deep sad look  
you read about in books.

*Defeat is the vehicle of change.*

I will miss eating  
chocolate crosses.



## Untitled

by Sara Purvin

## Untitled

by Julia Rosenfeld

I will not weep for you,  
lost in your watery grave, no  
nor for your dragon friend,  
the one from the poems.

What will find my tears is the last hour.

The drop of honeysuckle dew  
falling from stamen's end  
that you did not turn your head  
to see –

(the way it  
scattered the sun in every  
direction like  
marbles spilled on a summer afternoon,  
childhood)

The moment that it hit the ground  
when you realized its importance too  
late.



## Untitled

by Bryn A. McDonald

## How Suzanne Became Relevant

by Alyssa Zullinger

“I used to be normal,” Suzanne complained to Patrick over her chai latte.

“I’ve known you for ten years, and you were never normal.”

The first time they met, they had been sitting in the back seats of two different cars. Suzanne was fourteen, and she liked to look through the windows of other people’s vehicles. She was afflicted with that quality long condemned in literature, from *Frankenstein* to *Outlaw Star*: the greedy desire to *know*. She liked to look in at people’s private places and see what they were doing with their hands while steering, and what expressions they wore on their faces while contemplating the road.

She had met Patrick while riding with her parents in traffic. He had turned instantly to meet her eyes, and she swallowed her shock by smiling at him, and he smiled back. He had always been the type who prepared for anything he could think of. As she stared, he pressed a yellow sheet of paper with his phone number on it up against the window. She had scrambled to write it down.

Patrick now practically glowed from across the table, in his brilliant pink shirt. It wasn’t his style; he was only wearing it because his boyfriend had given it to him.

“You thought *I* was weird?” Suzanne said. “Your parents barely let you leave the house. I thought you were the most *interesting* thing.” They had talked on the phone constantly, but she hadn’t seen him in person again for three years.

“It’s about what’s in your *mind*,” Patrick said, tapping his brow with a coffee stirrer.

Suzanne fiddled with a small biscotti. “So I’m crazy after all.”

“No,” he said, not for the first time, his tone so definite that she had no doubt that he meant it.

She understood so much more about him now than she had two weeks ago. For instance, she knew now that he always wore his hair funny because he had furry yellow antennae growing out of his scalp. He had finally given in and allowed her to touch them yesterday. They felt like horse hair. She was learning all sorts of new things, and with each passing day, she realized even more how much danger she was in. It was all Lisa’s fault, really. Lisa was one of Patrick’s friends. He had introduced her and Suzanne to each



other at one of his boyfriend's dinner parties no more than three months ago, and Suzanne had fallen so hard for her it took her several days to even realize she was off-balance.

At Suzanne's begging, Patrick had arranged a casual lunch date and invited Lisa. They met at the Panera two blocks from Suzanne's apartment. When Lisa showed up, Suzanne thought she was stunning: a black cap over her brown curls, a t-shirt, a backpack, and baggy black shorts. Her light coffee skin was beautiful in the sun before she walked inside.

"Hey," she said, sitting next to Patrick in the booth and sliding her hands into her pockets.

"Hey," said Patrick.

"Hi," said Suzanne, who knew she was staring and didn't plan to stop.

"You order yet?" Lisa asked.

"Yes," said Patrick. "Bianca pizza for you."

"Perfect." She had a strange accent, similar to Patrick's but stronger.

"Excuse me while I use the bathroom," he told them, and then abandoned the table. The Panera was almost empty; it was a Monday, and a late lunch.

"So," Suzanne said, "you've eaten here before?"

"All the time. I like bread." Lisa shrugged, and her foot slid forward so that the toe of her sandal rested against the toe of Suzanne's shoe. Suzanne struggled to form a coherent thought.

"Yeah," she said as Lisa stared into her eyes. "I... live a couple blocks away. So I come here. Too. I've had every single kind of the cookies they have here."

"Do you want to ditch Pat?"

"What?" Suzanne glanced through the warm-colored restaurant to the bathroom nook.

"Ditch Pat? I know he's just here to get us together. He won't mind."

"Yes he will. We ordered already." Lisa's foot had lost its sandal and was sliding gently up Suzanne's leg. "...Okay."

"Let's go to your place."

Lisa had two secrets. One was that she had a man's body. She took her breasts off and put them in her bag. Suzanne was surprised, but didn't care. The second was that Lisa had wings. They were brown, the kind you usually see on hawks, except larger.

"Prosthetic fakes," Lisa stated as she reached around Suzanne and unhooked her bra. "I'm a body art nut."

Suzanne decided that Lisa must turn her on so much that it made her delirious, because when Lisa climaxed, the prosthetic wings tensed and flared toward the ceiling.

The problem began the first time they went back to Lisa's place instead of Suzanne's. Lisa said she had had to trust Suzanne before she brought her there. Suzanne thought she understood.

"I'm glad," Lisa said, leading Suzanne inside. "It's also because Gillian, my roommate, she's away this week. But I can't ever bring you over while she's here."

"Why?" Suzanne asked, anticipating a horrifying explanation.

"She's weird," Lisa said after a moment. "And it would really piss her off to hear us having sex."

They had walked into Lisa's bedroom. Lisa clicked on a lamp and threw her shirt over it. The bed had dark blue sheets on top, no comforter. Lisa pushed Suzanne gently back onto it.

Suzanne woke up to darkness and the corners of unfamiliar ceilings. Lisa was warm next to her. Her bladder ached; she slid tentatively onto the rough carpet, trying to remember where the bathroom was.

She padded out of the room, rubbing her arms to fight off the cold. She hadn't bothered to put any clothing back on. As she stepped into the middle of the living room, she noticed that the doorway to what must be Gillian's room was wide open and emitting a pleasant blue glow. Suzanne did not have to pee so urgently, now that she was standing. She crept to Gillian's doorway, shivering and curious. Pausing on the threshold, she saw the source of the glow: a bright blue bulb on a shelf on the far wall. She crossed the room, walking over an irregularly shaped rug that became fur beneath her feet. Suzanne shuddered as she stepped forward onto the hardwood floor and faced the blue bulb.

She squatted on the floor so that the light was almost at eye level. It wasn't a bulb, but a shining blue sphere, pulsating in all the colors of a tiny flame. It seemed to be floating between the two shelves; it had to be hanging on a string. Suzanne reached out and clasped it between her fingers and *it was warm, hot, it was fragile like tapioca it burst, spilled down her arm like radioactive blue mercury. Everything was pure blue; two boulders were crushing her arm between them, breaking it in twenty-three places, angry hammers to her bones. She shouted.*

*She shouted blue.*

*Blue peace drained her eyes.*

This time when she woke, she was in the same bed, but now the ceiling was awash with light. Lisa paced back and forth, dressed again, moving small things around on her desk. She was muttering frantically to herself.

"... No, definitely can't tell her. We're going to have to hide this. Okay. Okay. Suze, are you awake?"

"Mm-hmm."

"We need to leave right now. Hold on, I'm going to help you stand up."

"Why?"

"Because you messed with something of Gillian's and now it's stuck in your arm. Here." Lisa lifted her off the bed and set her on her feet, and left an arm around her. "Can you walk?"

"Yes." Suzanne found her balance. "It's too hot."

"I put a long sleeve shirt on you to hide your arm. You have to keep it on. C'mon, we're going to my car."

They made it into the living room; and at that moment, someone burst into the apartment. She was small and pale and powerful, and there was a golden gem stuck to her forehead, a four-pointed star that gleamed even though she was in shadow.

"Lisa," Gillian said, and then marched into her bedroom, and stormed back out, her flower-patterned dress tense around her. "Where is it?" She glared over at Suzanne. "And who is that?"

"My lover," Lisa said.

Gillian groaned and pressed her hand over her eyes. "Lisa, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The portal ball. You know, that neon blue globe I had in my room. It's gone. Did you move it?"

"No. You sure you didn't take it with you?"

"Yes! I had it here, and I had an alarm on it. Somebody took it. Lisa, don't you dare lie to me."

"I have no idea where it is, Gil. Maybe it finally seeped out of the world."

"No! Dammit, that was the last procurable portal fluid on the *planet!* Do you even know what I went through to get it?!" Her voice dropped an octave. "Did your *lover* steal it?"

"No. We'd both know if she had."

"*Dammit.* Get out of here, skanks," she demanded, waving her free hand.

"What'd you expect, Gillian?" Lisa said. "They always fade away. Even if they didn't, no one knows how to use them."

"Out!"

In the car, Suzanne finally felt awake, a square of sunlight warming her hands and knees. She rubbed at her eyes and looked over at Lisa, who was steering and glancing at her often.

"Lisa?" she said, sitting up with her left ear against the headrest.

"Yeah?"

"What's going on?"

Lisa made a right turn before answering.

"We're going to Pat's place."

Suzanne rubbed the corner of her eye. "Not just that, though. There's a lot going on."

"Pat will explain it," Lisa told her, glancing in the overhead mirror.

"Patrick? Why Patrick?"

"He's like me. And Gillian."

"Why can't you explain it?"

"Pat can explain it better," Lisa said.

"What happened to my arm? It hurt really badly... Did you say something is *stuck* in it? Did a shelf fall on me?" It didn't hurt any longer. Now the sensation in Suzanne's right arm was something she had no words for. It was similar to the whooshing drop in her stomach as she went down a steep hill in a car, except it was localized in several places along her arm, in regions that felt like they were twice the size of her body. It dizzied her to focus on them.

"No. That blue thing that Gillian was freaking out about. You touched it?"

"I did. It was very bright. And blue," Suzanne said. She began to roll up her sleeve.

"It attached itself to your arm, somehow – stop that!"

Suzanne paused. "Why?"

"Wait until we get to Pat's."

Suzanne went wide-eyed. "Is it that bad?"

Lisa murmured, "No. It's very bright." Her voice stumbled into a whisper, "And blue."

The first thing Suzanne did when Patrick let them into his apartment was to walk into the bathroom with the big mirror and pull off the shirt. She hadn't bothered to turn on the light, and the small, dark room turned blue at once. There were three ellipses on her arm, rising from her wrist to her shoulder. Each was a wavering blue pool, pulsating in dozens of hues, that, when she looked into them, seemed to stretch endlessly into space. She had been staring into the one on her forearm for about ten minutes, blue *and blue continuing, the twist of the flowing sky, blue trees stroking like slow, slow drops of rain,* when Patrick knocked on the doorframe of the open door.

"Oh. Hi. Do you need the bathroom?" Suzanne said.

"I'm fine. How are you doing?"

"Surprised, I think. I'm very surprised. And I have *three* blue pools in my arm. I wonder what would happen if I dipped my hand in –"

"Wait," Patrick said, catching her hand before it reached her arm. "You should avoid touching them."

"Why? What will happen?"

"Maybe the same thing that happened the last time you touched the substance. You should come sit down," he said as he led her to the living room. "Lisa wants me to tell everything to you. Why she couldn't have told you already," he sighed, "I don't know. It would have saved time, and it's very possible we need it."

Lisa was lying on her stomach on Patrick's backless couch, her chin resting on her arms, her wings spread slightly.

"Hey," she said as they sat down.

"Lisa, where should I start?" Patrick asked. Perhaps, thought Suzanne, he had never anticipated this situation.

"Hey Suze," said Lisa. "My wings are real." She lifted one of them and stretched it slightly.

"I know," Suzanne said. She wanted to ask Lisa what she was, and what it was like to have wings, but she wouldn't ask with Patrick in the room. She'd ask later, and reassure Lisa that she still thought the wings were beautiful, now that she knew they were real. Instead she asked, "What's the deal with you two? And Gillian?"

"We're magical beings from another world," Patrick said. Lisa nodded briefly.

Suzanne sat up a bit straighter. "Really?"

"Yes. At least, that's the theory."

"Oh." That was disappointing, because at this rate Lisa's wings were probably some medical experiment that she had escaped with, and the blue in Suzanne's own arm was a strange alloy that was going to kill her. After thinking this, Suzanne decided that perhaps she had watched too much science fiction.

"All we know about ourselves is what our parents and elders have told us, and of course, what we observe," said Patrick. "The story that has been passed down for many generations is that many centuries ago, a group of select people from our world came here to explore. They remained for a single generation, and then left by a hundred portals. But when the final portal closed, many people from the other world were left behind – because they had been too slow, or because they had been out-cast, or because they were half human. Longing to return, those of us left behind pried with all their might at the portals, to no avail – no one with advanced knowledge of the portals had been left behind. The last thing we did before the sites of the portals faded entirely was to notice that the portals left a residue, a blue liquid. That residue was collected, and we worked magic upon it in the hope that it could be used to create a new portal, so that those of us left behind could return to our world. It's said that in the centuries since, a couple groups have gotten it to work, have successfully formed portals with it and

have been able to return to their world, but they were selfish sons of bitches, because they sure didn't leave any instructions behind." Patrick paused. "My parents made me memorize that. I think my grandfather added that last part."

"Wow," said Suzanne, gazing at her arm.

"It's just a story," Patrick said. "I don't believe we came from another world. And if we did, I have no desire to go back there. But there's no denying that we're unusual, and that *magical* things tend to follow with us. And Suzanne, now you know what's stuck to your arm. It is, in theory, residue from ancient portals. Most importantly, to a lot of people like us—to Gillian, for instance—it looks like the way home."

Lisa sat up slowly. She had changed clothes while Suzanne was in the bathroom; now she had on a white, backless shirt that tied around her neck and her waist. She adjusted her wings and her legs.

"There is another world," she said, "and we do come from it." She stretched her arms. "I'm not that big on going back either, though."

"I believe you," Suzanne told Lisa, taking another moment to stare down into the blue.

"Really?" said Patrick. "You're usually more empirical than that."

Suzanne was lying in bed with Lisa. Lisa had both arms around Suzanne, something she had been doing a lot lately, and her cheek rested against Suzanne's shoulder. Suzanne's right arm was spread far away from them with a sleeve fastened on it, which Lisa had cut off of a shirt so that Suzanne could safely share her nudity.

Suzanne was worried. How long was it going to go on like this? Patrick and his boyfriend would let them stay indefinitely, but Suzanne had a job to get back to, and she also wanted to go to the library on the other side of town.

"I don't know," Lisa murmured. "But we won't stay here forever. Gillian *will* find us."

"Can you read my mind?" Suzanne murmured back.

"A little bit. So can Patrick. And so can Gillian. But she won't because she's afraid of sex. But she'll go to a soothsayer, and then she'll know it's you." Lisa held her tighter. "I don't know what to do."

"Isn't there some way to take the stuff out of my arm?"

"I don't know. I didn't know it could do anything but float around in a blob. Humans aren't ever allowed to touch it."

"Why does Gillian want to go back so bad? She's never been there, right? Isn't it pretty good here?"

"'Cuz her momma told her."

"Really?"

"Really." Lisa sighed. "It's a nice place, there, too. Gillian's heard about it in stories. It's so beautiful there. And here, it's starting to look ugly, don't you think?"

"Mm." Suzanne brushed a lock of Lisa's hair behind her ear. "It's not so bad here."

Beneath Lisa's wing, Suzanne dreamed: green-tiled floor and the door jangling open. It was Gillian, her eyes flaring like the gold diamond fixed between them. She had a sword – a sword, of all things! A scimitar. She spoke in a thunderous voice. Suzanne's blue pools trembled and shrieked and Gillian drove the scimitar through her chest.

"I'll take that back now, thank you very much," Gillian growled.

Gillian strode toward her with the scimitar, grabbed her blue-jeweled arm away from her body, and hacked it off at the shoulder.

As Gillian slid the scimitar out from its sheath Lisa stepped between Suzanne and her, her back to Suzanne. "No, Gillian," she said. She wrenched off her shirt and unfurled her wings. The blue sleeping in Suzanne's arm woke and slithered down to her hand, whipped down to her toes, snaked around her neck, and poured down her throat. Lisa turned around, wings relaxing, as Suzanne tried to scream. It was too blue. There was another world inside her stomach.

"I'll have to rip it out, then," sighed Gillian.

Suzanne was suddenly awake in grainy darkness, her heart racing, Lisa holding her and murmuring in her ear, "*Won't let her.*"

"Nightmare," Suzanne whispered back, breathing hard. She was still afraid. "Do you care if I turn on a light?"

"Sure."

In the lit-up room, Suzanne drifted through many pockets of half-sleep, in which she stood on a marsh in a downpour, grabbed at a blue sky, and walked in a wide plain where the grasses reached her elbows. Lisa slept encircling her, barely stirring.

"Yeah. I'm not crazy." Suzanne sipped her chai latte. "If anyone's crazy, it's Gillian."

"Maybe." Patrick circled the wooden stirrer around in his coffee. "I sent off letters to everyone I know that I can trust with this. Maybe someone has something in their family history about how to remove 'portal' fluid from human bodies." Over the past two weeks, Patrick had gradually injected more and more skepticism into his pronunciation of the word 'portal'.

"Mm." She wasn't sure she wanted it removed. She was growing at-

tached to the blue pools. But she understood that it would be impractical and dangerous to keep them.

"We may need to relocate you in the morning. Maybe even tonight."

"Oh. So suddenly?"

The door to the café whooshed open and Lisa stumbled in, catching herself on an empty chair. "Suze!" she growled, looking around. "You need to get out of here!"

Suzanne stood up. "What's going on?"

Lisa relaxed some when their eyes met. "Gillian knows. She won't take long to find you."

"So we're leaving now?"

"Yes."

Suzanne sighed and picked her purse up off the green-tiled floor. "Where are we going?"

"My car." Lisa was at her side.

"I mean in the long term."

The door to the café opened again. It was Gillian in a blue sundress, her face passive. By this point, the people in the café had busied themselves muttering to each other and stealing glances. At Gillian's entrance, they stopped and stared.

"Is Lisa here?" she asked. "Ah. Yes. Is your lover here, Lisa? Oh, she's right there." Gillian's eyes met Suzanne's. "Good. Will you step forward and face me please, whore? You have something you stole from me."

"I didn't mean to steal it," Suzanne said. "But it's embedded in my arm." She pulled her shirt off over her head so that her arm was bare. The café-goers went back to whispering.

"If you'd be patient, Gillian," said Patrick, "we're trying to find a way to detach it."

The blue pools in her arm shimmered more than ever. It was the most inconvenient time to lose herself gazing down one of them, but the temptation was hard to resist. It was very blue.

"I already know how to detach it," Gillian said, finally stepping further inside. The gold gem on her forehead shone like the eye of a cat. She drew a silver scimitar from the sheath at her waist and held it up.

Lisa darted between Suzanne and Gillian, dropping her backpack. "No, Gillian." She yanked off her shirt and whipped her wings out to half her wingspan, like a wall in front of Suzanne. Her right wing glimmered bronze in the sun coming in the window. Suzanne gazed down at the blue pool on her forearm. She wanted to try something.

Gillian looked Lisa up and down, agape. She did not make a sound the entire time it took Suzanne to lift her hand and place it on her arm. Suzanne dipped her fingers into the glowing blue pool. It was warm, and heated at

her touch. She let it spill up her left arm. As she led it in circles around her, it began to silently answer questions she had not yet asked.

"That emblem! You're from our world!" Gillian finally exclaimed at Lisa.

"Suzanne, what are you doing?" Patrick whispered, terrified.

"Shh," she said. "I have to try something."

"You are too," Lisa told Gillian.

"But you've been there!" Gillian insisted.

Lisa denied and continued to deny Gillian's statement as Gillian babbled and pointed to the stomach-wide tattoo below Lisa's bra. Just a fashion accessory from her teen years, Lisa said.

Suzanne stood in place as the blue liquid coiled more and more thickly around her arms, and began to solidify. "I have an idea," she said, and this time the other two women remembered to pay attention to her. "I think I know. Do you have something from the other world, Lisa, that I can use?"

"Do you need it?"

"I think it will help."

"Wait, Suze, what are you doing?" Lisa asked.

"Opening a portal."

"Why?"

"Because I can."

"Gillian?" said Lisa. "Promise us that if Suze can open the portal, you won't hurt her."

"If she can open the portal, then I'll impale anyone who gets near her. Do you really have something from the other world?"

"Mm." Lisa pulled something out of her pocket. "Here," she said, handing Suzanne a dirty piece of white cloth with many black symbols on it.

Suzanne accepted it delicately, peering at the symbols. "What is it?"

"An exile ordinance. Most of one."

"Oh." Suzanne pulled two empty chairs to either side of her and held their tops. "I think this is going to work." She let the blue liquid slide down a chair leg on either side of her.

"If it doesn't work," said Lisa, now standing sideways between Suzanne and Gillian, "you're still not going to cut her arms off, Gillian."

"Well, it's clearly much more extensive than her arms now."

Two very significant things happened at once. One was that a hole opened in the world, running along Suzanne's chest and arms and the legs of two chairs down to the floor, a window staring across a prairie where the day was slowly dawning. The gravelly song of a strange bird trickled into the café. The second thing was that Suzanne found herself gazing upon a foreign land. The cool air drifted up her arms, and amber feather flowers *rising, rustle of grasshopper wings like eyelids*. She found she could look where-

er she wished: up and elsewhere, *a black snake, roar of plunging wind, water and forward motion like forever leaping. Down, the roots, the rocks, undulating bodies, fins. Then to the ocean, to a marsh at low tide, crabs swarming over the mud, chatter of bugs, and the murmur of voices speaking tongues, and bodies through bushes.*

"Hey Suze," Lisa murmured in her ear.

"Mm? Oh." She turned to meet Lisa's eyes. "Hi." Suzanne forgot the portal and lifted her hands. The hole in the world disappeared. She knew she could make a new one whenever she wanted. Perhaps Gillian had thought so too, because she was nowhere in sight.

"Gillian said she's bringing a whole group to go through your portal in a week," Patrick sighed. "And now I'm going to imagine I never saw that happen."

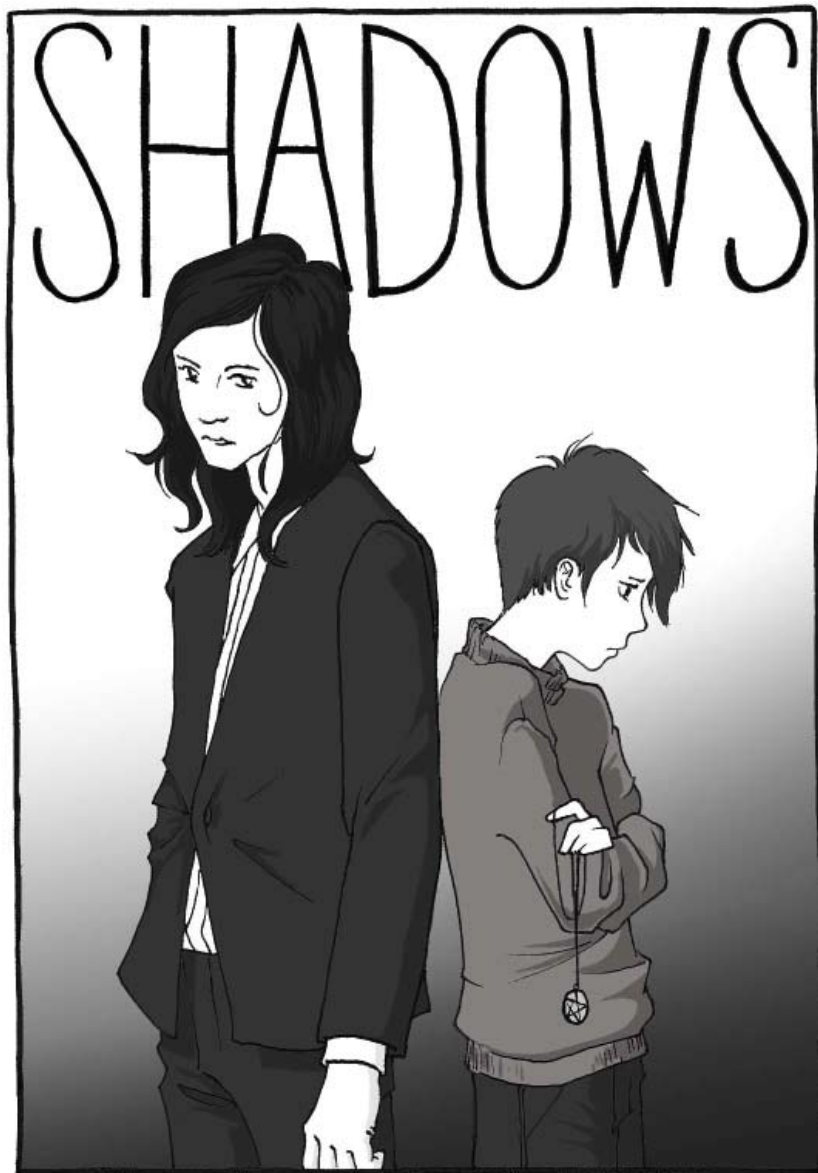
"No one who's here is supposed to go back there," Lisa said, wrapping herself more and more around Suzanne. "I don't like where we're headed."

"You're just mad your girlfriend turned herself into a portal," Suzanne said, kissing Lisa's arm. "Put your shirt back on and let's go home."

## Cloistered

by Abby Mansfield





by EJ Landsman

## Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

### Part Three: Articles & Advertisements

**O**n a sunny, mild Monday, a horrified scream rent the air surrounding a certain apartment in London.

It woke Sirius with such force that he nearly rolled right out of his bed. It took a while for his half-asleep mind to determine that it had, in fact, been a scream that woke him up.

He pushed aside the blankets and ran out of the room.

Nettie was in the kitchen, making tea. She turned around when she heard him.

“Siri-san, good morning!” She tilted her head. “Why are you wearing your nightshirt?”

“Someone screamed,” he panted. “Is a demon attacking?”

Nettie stared at him. Then her face lit up in recognition. “Oh! No. No demons. *Amo-chan* is just scaring the bejesus out of his editor again.”

A despondent wail made them both jump.

“He must have told her he didn’t actually write the article yet,” Nettie said.

Sirius blinked, trying to force his still mostly-asleep brain to function. “Then, what was the first scream in response to?”

“The first time he said he didn’t write it,” Nettie answered. “It usually takes more than one time for it to sink in.” She pointed. “Neh, Siri-san, your hair looks terrible.”

A frustrated shriek rose from Amos’s tiny little office down the hall. In fact, it had originally been a closet, but when they moved in, Amos announced he needed an office. Since this meant they were short one closet, all of Nettie’s cleaning supplies led a somewhat precarious existence stacked on top of one corner of the kitchen counter.

“Oh, dear.” Nettie sighed. “Perhaps I wasn’t quick enough with the tea. It may be too late to calm them down now.”

Sirius glanced at her. “Ears,” he said.

Nettie blinked at him. Then she let out a little gasp and the kitten ears

\* This piece is the third in an eight part series. Please read Volume 1, Issue 2 and Volume 1, Issue 3.2 for the previous parts.

that had sprouted from her head quickly disappeared. "It happens when I'm nervous," she said glumly.

The "office" door flew open and a woman careened out of it, wailing, and practically tearing at her hair. She lurched down the hall, reached the kitchen doorway, and stopped. Her wide, slightly crazed eyes focused on Sirius. She hiccuped.

A moment later, Amos appeared from the ex-closet and skidded down the hall. He drew up beside the woman. "Now, now, Miss Smith, I'm sure we can . . ."

His voice faded as he noticed where she was blankly staring. He turned and followed her gaze. His eyebrows rose. He glanced up at Sirius's face. "You do realize you aren't wearing pants, right?"

Miss Smith let out a little sigh and keeled over.

Amos leaned over her. "Miss Smith?"

"Amazing," Miss Smith murmured. "My life is a dream . . . a complete dream. I knew I shouldn't have had that drink before coming over here . . ."

Nettie hurried over and knelt down at her side. "Miss Smith? Can you sit up? Would you like some water? Let's get you some water and then Amo-*chan* can tell you how he already knows exactly what he's going to write the article about and he'll be finished with it in no time!" She glared at Amos. "Right?"

He gave Miss Smith a smile. "That's right."

"Right . . ." Miss Smith tried to focus. "Right . . ."

Nettie helped her sit up.

"Of course," Miss Smith murmured. "It's really not so bad . . . not the end of the world . . ." A glare split her face and she leapt to her feet, grabbing Amos by his collar. "MR. CHRISTOPHER . . .!"

Amos let out a shriek, wriggled out of her grasp, and took off down the hall.

Miss Smith took off after him.

Amos reached the ex-closet first and tried to close the door, but it was a bit stuck, and before he could work it free, Miss Smith careened through the doorway, grasped his sleeve, and dragged him into the office.

"Help me!" Amos cried. "Have mercy! Mercy!"

The door slammed.

Nettie and Sirius blinked.

Someone knocked on the door to the flat. A moment later, it opened, and Emmeline came in, wearing a light yellow dress and carrying a pie.

"Look what I brought!"

She reached the kitchen and stopped, staring.

Several awkward seconds passed.

Then Sirius turned away. "I'm going to get dressed," he said, and

walked down the hall.

A few hours later, Sirius returned from a walk to find Nettie had pulled the little table from the kitchen into the parlor. When he came in, she was setting up a few chairs behind the table. "Siri-*san*! You're back! Good, you can help me."

Sirius took off his jacket and hung it up on the stand beside the door. "It seems quieter," he said cautiously.

"Oh, Miss Smith left," Nettie said. "I gave her a piece of Emmeline's pie to take with her. Perhaps it will make her feel better."

Sirius glanced toward the office.

"He's working, if that's what you're wondering," said Nettie. "Which is sort of a good sign, I suppose, but you still might want to—"

She was interrupted by the sound of the office door opening. Amos appeared, his hair ruffled, his suspenders hanging from his waistband, and his shirt collar unbuttoned.

Sirius and Nettie watched him trudge into the kitchen. He banged around for a while. Then he trudged back in the other direction with a piece of pie. The office door slammed.

"It would appear he dislikes writing articles," said Sirius.

Nettie sighed. "Rather. He always wanted to write fiction, you know, but somehow he never really made an honest go of it."

Sirius looked down at the table. "What are you doing?"

"Oh!" She grinned. "Well, you see, I put an advertisement in the newspapers around town—anyone with supernatural difficulties should contact us, and we will take care of it for them! You know, hauntings, ghosts, spirits, demons, and so on. It's just . . . Amo-*chan* has made money that way before, but cases come along so rarely if you only rely on word of mouth to spread a reputation. Of course"—she looked a little doubtful—"plenty of people think Amo-*chan* is rather crazy to believe in supernatural things." She shrugged and brightened again. "But it's a good idea, neh, Siri-*san*?"

Sirius frowned. "What is the table for?"

"I said in the advertisement that people with supernatural problems should stop by today starting at noon. We can interview them and determine which cases we should handle."

"We?"

Nettie's eyes practically twinkled. "I thought you and I could interview them. I know enough about what Amos can do, and you know more about the supernatural stuff than I do, and then Amos can keep writing the article so Miss Smith won't have a heart attack!"

Emmeline appeared from down the hall, toting a white sheet behind her. "Is this one good, Nettie?"

"That's excellent." Nettie took it and spread it over the table like a tablecloth. "There! Now you can't see the scratches."

Sirius looked down at Emmeline. "Is she going to help us?"

"Of course I am!" Emmeline held up determined fists. "Ghosts and things are scary! People shouldn't be scared if they don't want to be!"

Sirius raised his eyebrows at Nettie. "I didn't think she knew about this sort of thing."

Nettie looked rather guilty. "Well, she startled me the other day, and when I get a fright like that, sometimes I . . . change. Anyway, after the voices . . . and, well, it turns out there was a shape-shifter that used to live in her backyard."

"It was just a little one," Emmeline explained eagerly. "Not as powerful as Nettie. It couldn't become a person."

Sirius sighed. He opened his mouth, but a knock at the door interrupted him.

"That's our first case!" Nettie grabbed his arm. "Quick! Sit down and look professional!"

Sirius let himself be dragged behind the table and plunked down in a chair. Nettie and Emmeline sat down on either side of him.

"Come in!" Nettie called brightly.

For the next several hours, the three of them sat listening to long, complicated, often vague stories about the strange phenomena haunting the people who showed up at the flat.

"A phantom . . . diner?" said Sirius.

The toothless old man clutching a felt hat nodded vigorously.

"That only appears to people in their drunkest hour?" said Nettie.

The old man nodded again.

Emmeline looked up at Sirius and Nettie. They were both blinking. So she turned back to the old man and blinked, too.

"Well," said Nettie, recovering, "we'll take it into consideration and let you know."

The old man gave them a lopsided grin and tottered out the door.

There were a few moments of awkward silence.

Finally, Sirius said, "There aren't phantom diners." He paused.

"What *is* a diner?"

"Not something that haunts," said Nettie.

The office door opened again. They turned. Amos trudged out, looking as much of a wreck as he had before, but this time he paused in the hall and looked up.

His face brightened immediately.

"What are you doing?" he asked, hurrying over. He leaned over their shoulders, surveying the notes Nettie was carefully taking. "Do you need

help? I can help!" He sat down on the edge of Nettie's chair. "What should I do?"

"Is the article done?" Sirius asked.

Amos shifted. "What article?" he asked innocently.

Sirius got up from his chair, walked around the table, and grabbed Amos by the shirt collar. "Go finish it," he said, hauling Amos off Nettie's chair.

Amos tugged himself free. "I will. But first, I was thinking I need a walk. Walks are inspiring." He went to the coat rack, picked up his jacket and a hat, opened the door, and twirled gracefully in a circle. "*Sayonara*, my friends!"

The door closed behind him.

After a while, Nettie said, "His pronunciation really hasn't gotten any better."

Emmeline tilted her head. Her pigtailed bobbed. "How does taking a walk help with an article?"

Sirius glowered.

Amos came back that evening.

It was rather late, actually. The sun had gone down a while ago and even the twilight was fading into night. Amos noticed the lights in the flat were out when he opened the door, so he shut it quietly.

He slipped out of his jacket, hanging it and the hat back on the coat rack, and started across the parlor.

"Fully inspired now?"

Amos jumped and whirled around.

Sirius was leaning against the wall by the door with his arms folded.

Amos sighed. "Must you do that?"

Sirius didn't move. "After several hours of listening to dull, stupid people, Nettie finally managed to pin down an actual case for you."

"Oh." Amos ran a hand over his eyes. "That was nice of her." He turned away.

Sirius pushed himself away from the wall. "What are you going to do about it?"

Amos turned back. "I assumed we would take care of it tomorrow." He looked doubtfully at the door. "Unless you really like London streets at night."

"*We* will take care of it?" Sirius turned on the lamp on the table. Amos squinted against the glare. "I don't particularly feel like doing anything with *you*."

Amos shielded his eyes. "Sorry?"

"Between you and all of the people I have seen today, I would have to



conclude that humans are indeed the stupidest creature ever invented.”

Amos dropped his hand. “Really? So would you rather I’d left you sealed in that stone thing for who knows how many more decades?” He let his breath out and turned away. “I’m going to bed. I’m tired.”

“You gave me this name, so I cannot completely leave you,” Sirius said, “until you release me from this contract.” He took a step forward. “But that does not mean that I have to obey your every whim. And I am sick of your whims. The entire world is nothing but a chessboard to you. Everyone around you is a potential pawn.”

Amos gave him an irritated look. “If you had to deal with Miss Smith, you might also—”

“I am not going to be your pawn,” Sirius said flatly. He turned for the door.

Amos blinked. “But . . . the case . . .”

“You can go by yourself.” Sirius tugged the door open. “Go to bed.”

He walked out of the flat.

Sirius was nowhere to be seen the next morning. Amos and Nettie had a rather silent breakfast. As Nettie was cleaning up, Amos went out to the coat rack in the hall.

Nettie came out of the kitchen. “I’m very glad I seem to have gotten the mud out of those clothes!” The smile faded from her face. “Amo-*chan*, you aren’t going out, are you?”

Amos pulled on his jacket. “I have a case to take care of, don’t I?”

Nettie blinked. “But . . . we don’t know where Sirius is! Hadn’t you better wait for him to come back?”

Amos only gave her a vague smile, turned, and left the flat.

He got down the stairs and all the way out onto the street before Nettie caught up with him.

“Wait!”

He turned back as Nettie skidded to a stop before she ran into him. For several seconds, they stared at each other. Nettie was clutching fistfuls of skirt in both hands.

“What is it?” Amos asked.

Nettie let go of her skirt. “It’s . . . er . . .” She swallowed. “Your tie’s crooked.” She tugged on the faded ribbon around Amos’s shirt collar. “Maybe you shouldn’t go,” she said quietly. “It can wait a day, can’t it?”

He smiled. “Can’t get a bad reputation now, can I?”

Nettie lowered her hands. “Amos . . .”

“Don’t worry. It won’t take long.”

Neither Amos nor Nettie noticed the still figure sitting high above them, on the roof of the apartment building. But even though they were on

the ground, several stories below, Sirius could hear them clearly.

“It could be dangerous.” Nettie looked away. “If you go alone . . . Maybe I should come.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“But if Sirius . . .”

“Sirius will come,” Amos said. “Don’t worry. He’ll come.”

Nettie looked at him. “He’s not here. How do you know he’ll come?”

“I just do.” Amos smiled. “He’s that kind of person, after all.”

On the roof, Sirius blinked.

Amos turned away. But after a few steps, he paused and turned back. “Say, Nettie, if Miss Smith should happen to stop by today . . . tell her the article is on my desk, will you?”

Then he gave her a wave and started off down the street. Before long, he was lost in the thickening crowds.

Nettie stood in front of the apartment, looking up at the cloudy sky. “Don’t rain on him,” she said, and went back inside.

Sirius sat on the rooftop for a while longer, watching the people moving through the streets below him. Then he stood up, unfurled his wings, and silently took off, in the opposite direction.

Amos rode the trolley as far as it would take him, which, sadly, was not quite as far as he had hoped. He stepped off onto the street and took the small slip of paper from his pocket again. On it, Nettie had written the address he was supposed to go to—an old deserted warehouse on the edge of the city. The man who owned it had come to the flat the day before, complaining that he couldn’t sell it because every potential buyer claimed it was haunted.

Amos tucked the slip of paper back inside his jacket, sighed, and started walking.

It took him over half an hour to reach the warehouse. Several times, he heard a rustle and turned quickly, expecting to see a tall slender figure behind him. The first time, it was only a man pulling on a jacket. The second, a woman bundling old sheets into a cart. And the third—even worse—just a stray breeze.

The warehouse wasn’t in the prettiest part of town. In fact, the whole area had fallen into disrepair and seemed mostly deserted. Amos wondered whether the warehouse itself had anything to do with that. He stopped in front of it and looked up. It was a huge building, covered in lichen, its windows boarded up.

He couldn’t really imagine anyone wanting to buy it, haunted or not.

He touched the silver pentacle in his pocket and walked up to the door. It was stuck, so he gave it a kick. It sprang back on rusted hinges.

Amos walked into the warehouse. He coughed as dust rose into the air

around him. It was dark, except for the dull light coming from the doorway behind him. He looked around. There didn't seem to be any light fixtures at all, and he supposed they wouldn't be working anyway.

The bells around his wrist tinkled softly.

He glanced down at them, and then squinted back into the darkness.

He walked forward, and his eyes gradually grew accustomed to the dark, until finally he could make out the opposite wall. The warehouse was indeed huge—huge and empty. Large square beams braced the ceiling. A few shorter beams supported a shaky second floor that only spanned about half the length of the warehouse. The floor itself was made of wooden slats, many of which were broken or filled with holes.

Amos reached the center of the warehouse.

The bells around his wrist tinkled again.

And then, abruptly, the door—at least thirty feet behind him—slammed closed.

Amos jumped.

“Well, well, well. What a surprise.”

A figure melted out of the shadows. A tall, willowy figure wearing a long white dress.

It was a woman. A coldly beautiful woman, with long pale hair. Her dress was too heavy and elegant to be a nightdress, but too light and flowing to be an evening gown.

Amos pulled the silver chain out of his pocket. The pentacle chinked against it.

The woman smiled. Her lips were full and red. “I don't think that's going to work,” she said in a deep, throaty voice, “my dear Mr. Christopher.”

Blinding hot pain seared through Amos's chest. He bent nearly double, struggling to breathe.

The woman tilted her head. “Especially with that annoying little scar around.”

The pentacle slipped through Amos's fingers and clattered to the floor.

Sirius's wings folded and he landed gently on the pointed steeple of a church. No one would notice him up here. The churches were the tallest things around.

He wrapped an arm around the base of the steeple's tall silver cross, watching the gray clouds roll slowly by. They were low; their thin, misty tendrils grazed the top point of the cross. It was going to rain today—Sirius felt sure of it.

He wondered idly how large that deserted warehouse actually was.

He jerked as he became aware of the thought. He pushed it quickly from his mind, and stared hard at the street below.

*He's that kind of person, after all . . .*

Sirius closed his eyes. But he couldn't stop seeing a faint smile—the kind of faint smile that might be fake, but still somehow seemed more real than any of the innocent grins he'd seen before it.

Sirius opened his eyes and glared up at the clouds. Amos knew nothing. No more about Sirius than Sirius did himself.

And Sirius didn't remember anything . . .

What use did Amos have for him? Why was he keeping him around? This world he didn't recognize had no use for the powerful magic he felt he had been a part of, even if he couldn't remember it. Most people here didn't even believe in it anymore.

Perhaps it was just the thrill of having a powerful daemon at your command.

But he wasn't at Amos's command. Amos had broken his seal, given him a name, and he couldn't turn his back and desert Amos—fly to the other end of the earth.

But he didn't have to obey Amos's every command.

Sirius frowned. It wouldn't have been that much harder for Amos to perform a different binding spell. When he broke the seal, he could have said a few extra words—words that would have tied Sirius even closer, turned him into just an instrument for Amos to use—he'd had the time.

And if there was one thing Sirius had learned, it was that Amos liked to control people.

The same faint smile flashed through Sirius's mind.

He spread his wings and let go of the cross. He would fly farther.

Amos staggered, his fingers twisted into his shirt. For a second, the floor blurred and tilted. He closed his eyes.

The sharpness of the pain passed a little, and when he opened his eyes, the floor had steadied. He straightened up. There was a deep, dull ache in his chest.

“How do you know who I am?” he gasped.

The woman in front of him smiled thinly. It was only on her lips—her pale glassy eyes continued to bore into him. “I could tell you a lot more about yourself,” she said, “if you gave me a little time to, shall we say, extract the information?”

Amos drew a ragged breath. “You aren't a demon. Or a spirit.”

“Oh, of course.” She swept her long hair over one shoulder. “You came all the way here to get rid of that little haunting spirit, didn't you? Don't worry. I've saved you the trouble.” She looked at her hand, inspecting her long, pointed nails. “It won't be making any more noise.”

Amos's eyes widened. “You killed it,” he whispered.

She turned her hand over to stare at her palm. “You mean instead of saving its soul, or whatever you call it that you do? Spirits who remain too long in this world become overtaken by desperation, the longing to see loved ones again, and hatred at those loved ones for forgetting them. And they turn into demons. Those are rather evil intentions, wouldn’t you say? Better to make sure there are no such intentions in this world.”

Amos was shaking. “It’s nothing more than possession. You can free them of it, and they can go to the place they’re supposed to be.”

“Heaven, or what have you?” She laughed. “The only kinds of demons I’ll put up with are the real ones—the ones that have always been that way, that were never pitiful humans. If there’s going to be an evil force in them, it might as well be genuine. You should know that, I imagine.” Her eyes rose from the hand in front of her. She looked at him. “You’ve certainly been courting danger recently.”

With a sharp shriek, almost like metal on metal, her fingers suddenly grew, spraying outward into long, slim, black spikes.

They glinted a little in the dim light. They looked like black steel. “Now, my dear . . .” She turned her hand until her fingers, now nearly two feet long, pointed directly at Amos. “Where’s your loyal sidekick?”

Amos moved. He launched himself sideways and made a swipe for the silver chain on the floor.

She was quicker.

With another sharp shriek, her index finger shot forward into a thin spear, catching Amos and propelling him backward. His feet went out from under him and he skidded across the floor on his back.

He stopped, at least twenty feet from her. He blinked the room back into focus and could see the slim metal spike that had been her finger filling the distance between them.

The point was buried in the shoulder of his jacket, but except for what felt like a scrape, it had missed his skin.

“That won’t do,” the woman said. “I want to talk.”

Something warm trickled over Amos’s shoulder, leaking down toward his back. He shut his eyes, trying to shut out the memories, and twisted.

“You really are naïve, aren’t you?” She watched him with her glassy eyes, and frowned a little. “You have no idea who I am.”

Amos finally got free of his jacket. He rolled over and pushed himself up.

“Stupid, frustrating boy!” The point of the spike wrenched free of his jacket, and with a shrill scraping sound, the spear retreated back to her hand, until in a second her fingers were nothing but ordinary fingers again.

She reached out her other hand. A swirling ball of fire collected from

nothingness on her palm. She lifted her hand over her head. The fireball grew.

She swept her hand through the air.

Amos forced the room to focus, drew in a ragged breath, and threw himself toward one of the beams.

A fiery explosion ripped through the warehouse.

Sirius paused.

He was in mid-step, his wings already out, about to catch the wind and step off the roof of the church—about to let the wind carry him farther away.

He hadn’t reached his limit. There would be one, eventually. A place where he was as far from Amos as he was allowed to be, and then he would feel a pain—a deep restraining pain inside him. A pain that would make his muscles seize and prevent him from moving farther.

There was no pain.

But he couldn’t go any farther.

He set his foot back down, lowered his wings, and turned back. Through the low clouds, the trailing mist, he looked back in the direction he had come.

*I just do . . .*

Sirius turned away again.

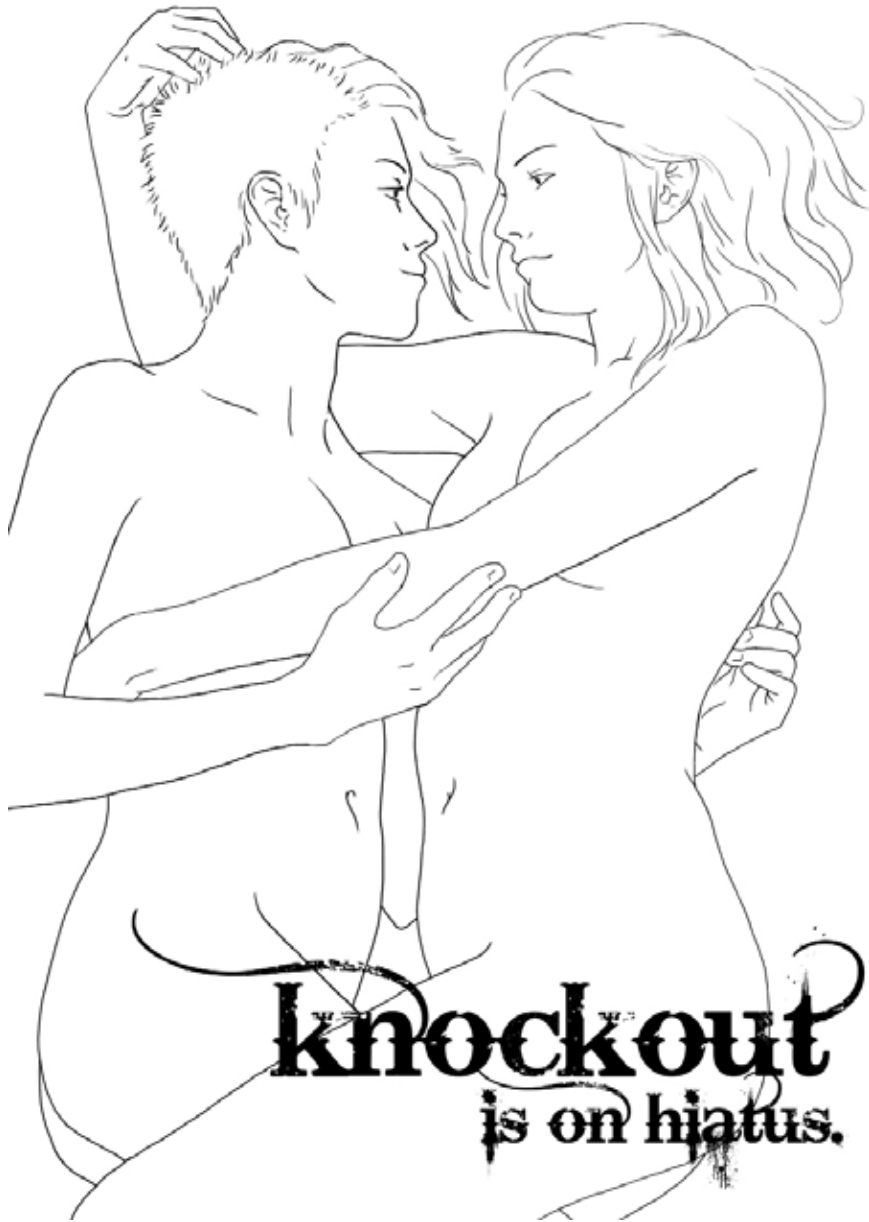
Once again he spread his wings.

*He’s that kind of person, after all . . .*

Sirius took off. He glided into the air. His wings flapped to take him higher.

And then he tilted, and swerved, and glided around in a half circle.

His wings beat again to lift him above the steeple and the cross, and he started back in the other direction.



**knockout**  
is on hiatus.

by EJ Landsman

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