

# Spiral



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# Spiral

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# Do Vampires Ever Get Overweight?

by Justin Murphy-Mancini



Can there be  
A corpulent vampire  
Gorged on too many feasts  
Of local peasants?  
Would he resemble a tick,  
Fresh from feeding  
On its latest victim?  
Or is gaunt the only size available  
To the the most posh undead?

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# The Family Jove:

Wisdom With Understanding

(In lumine Tuo videbimus lumen)

by Julieanne Lopresto

**M**arta Aphrodine is waiting by wrought-iron gates for a blonde-haired girl who was not, in fact, blonde haired. The girl—Daphne Jove, Marta’s cousin—wanted to have blonde hair, and so she did. She could very well have had black, brown, or purple hair, or no hair at all. Every inch of Daphne’s appearance was constructed; she herself was a blank canvas.

Daphne was a senior in her illustrious Manhattan private school; Marta was a second year at her college, one which someone like Daphne was a shoe-in for. It was commonly accepted that essentially anyone from an all-girls school who applied to an all-female (or, in Marta’s college’s case, almost all-female) college would be accepted, practically on-sight. Marta’s school was essentially a safety for Ivy-minded Daphne. Her cousin would end up at Yale or Princeton, and Marta couldn’t be happier; the last thing she needed was one of her cousins at her school.

Daphne is precisely five minutes ahead of schedule when she pulls up in the black sedan cab which had taken her from the train station. She is dressed in private-school chic—pale blue jeans, light pink blouse, tailored blazer over. It is a perfectly constructed look, much like the rest of Daphne’s appearance. It is designed to tell an onlooker who Daphne Jove supposedly is, and where she comes from. It is casual without being *too* casual; it was formal without being *too* formal. In short, it said nothing at all of substance.

“Marta,” says Daphne in greeting.

“Daph,” replies her cousin.

After a beat of silence, Marta mutters for Daphne to follow her through the wrought-iron gates.

In Manhattan, fifteen miles south, in the house which Daphne had left earli-

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\* This piece is a continuation of a piece begun in Volume 1, Issue 3.2 and continued in Volume 2, Issue 4.

er that day, the family Jove is also waiting. The house is bathed in white, artificial light as Lilith sits on a couch and swings her nine-and-a-half-thank-you-very-much year old legs. An almost new book, stolen from her father, is spread open on her lap. It is a book which has been described as a book people want to have read but do not want to read. The fact of having read it was supposed to denote some form of intelligence. Lilith has nothing but a vague knowledge of this book and its status, and is finding the quite dull. She considers putting it back where she found it when she looks up to the other person in the room.

Her sibling—brother, at the moment—Billie is pacing about the room, nerves translating to perpetual motion. “Are you ever going to stop that?” Lilith asks.

Billie shakes his head.

There is a noise from outside the room. Lilith decides that their mother, Philomele, is picking up the slack left by their easily flustered and excitable sister, Daphne. She has been moving around the house for the past half-hour, tiding and rearranging nearly everything in sight. Flynn, her husband, is nowhere to be found, probably driven away by the realization that some of Daphne’s personality came from somewhere. Philomele enters, and immediately begins fluffing the pillows on the couch, moving around her pale, youngest child as she does so. “It’s fine, Mom,” says Billie. “Just give it a rest.”

“You’re one to talk,” she responds. “Please sit down, Bill. You’re getting me anxious.”

Billie rolls his eyes; Lilith hides a chuckle. She’s still smiling when their mother leaves.

“What’s so funny?” he snaps.

Lilith turns her eyes back to her book. “Oh, nothing.” It’s clear that her brother is nervous because of who’s coming to visit them—their cousin Aubrey Apollonian, someone they haven’t seen in years. Normally, family gatherings just bore Billie, but this one is different.

The doorbell rings. Lilith involuntarily flinches. The days are getting shorter; the sun is setting. Lilith tries to concentrate on her book and pretend she had no reaction to the prospect of the door being opened.

Their mother answers it and guides their visitor through the unusual double door system.

Aubrey is dressed simply in a t-shirt and jeans, with a light jacket. There is a bag slung over her shoulder, and she wears her strawberry blonde hair in a ponytail. Billie can’t help but stare at his cousin, since he knows that Aubrey is just like him. Aubrey looks at her cousin and smiles. Her green eyes are heavy lidded.

“I’ve put you in a guest room upstairs,” says Philomele. “Don’t get too

settled in; we’re going to be leaving shortly.”

Aubrey nods, but is still looking her cousin. “Thank you. Billie, can you show me the room I’m staying in?”

Billie opens his mouth to argue, but her mother cuts her off. “Of course. Billie, why didn’t you offer in the first place? Show Aubrey the guest room, please.” Her son finally turns away from his cousin to glare at her. Philomele is already looking away. He glances back to his cousin.

Aubrey says nothing. Billie notices that Lilith is staring at them. He turns away and begins to climb the stairs. “Come on,” he says, like an afterthought.

Marta walks through the dead leaves littering her campus, Daphne following shortly behind her. “My dorm is just over here,” she says, attempting to make some kind of communication.

Her attempt does not work; Daphne is still silent. Marta sighs, and attempts to remember what she and her cousin used to talk about when they had been young and friendly. Nothing more than a dim memory of Daphne changing colors for fun in her backyard the weekend ten years previously when Simon had broken his leg. She drives thoughts of this event away as her phone buzzes in her pocket. A cursory check reveals it to be her friend Paul. She ignores it, knowing that it’s probably him inviting her over yet again. While walking to class with their friend Sasha two days previously, Paul had invited them out to a movie on one of the nights Daphne would be staying over.

“I can’t,” Marta had said. “My cousin is coming to visit.”

Sasha had stared, wide-eyed, and said with a giggle, “Oh, so the famous orphan Marta Aphrodine actually has a family?”

“I never said I was—”

“You might as well have,” added Paul. “I’ve never heard you mention your family other than your brother a few times.”

*Simon*, Marta had thought. *I’ve probably never even mentioned Thad.*

“I’ve known you for a year now,” Sasha had said, “and I barely know anything about your life pre-college. It’s like you came here as a blank slate, sometimes. I don’t even know your brother’s name.”

Marta had been on the verge of snapping at her friends when she came to a realization. She had obliterated her family life when she had come to college, not wanting to deal with the intricacies and eccentricities of the family Aphrodine and of the larger Artemisian clan. Back in school, she had never been able to successfully live with her family and, because of her family, she had never truly integrated into school life. She had no long-standing friends from high school to talk about or to. She had hoped that, in college, her reluctance to talk about her family would seem normal around

teenagers who wanted nothing more to do with their parents than she did. Apparently, she had been wrong. Though her friends had never mentioned it before, it had been weird to never bring up anyone she was related to in conversation.

She had assumed that being here, far away from the town in which she grew up, in a place where no one knew the names 'Jove' or 'Aphrodine' or the strange isolation that went with them, she would be safe, and would be able to have a normal life, with normal connections to people. There was still a barrier between her and most other people because of who she came from. She slid the silver bead that hung around her throat along its chain.

"Simon," she had said. "The brother I talk about is named Simon. I have another named Thad. And a younger sister named Marie." She looked up at her friends, trying to find some note of approval in their faces, all the while thinking of how she must have looked to her friends this entire time. Away at college, she couldn't escape what her mother always considered the "strangeness" of her family.

As Daphne walks behind her in the town that she now calls home, she wonders if she has done the right thing by allowing her two lives to finally intermingle. She wonders if the floodgates have now opened.

Flynn has a habit of only taking important or special people to his own restaurant. Most visitors were treated to excellent New York fare, but the most illustrious visitors accompanied the family Jove to the Nightingale, the restaurant Flynn had owned for nearly a decade, since shortly after the birth of his youngest child.

He said he had named the restaurant after his wife—after the mythical Philomele, transformed into a nightingale—and, as the family knew, after his winged self. His two oldest children rolled their eyes at the name, their private school upbringing leading them to associate the word with the homonymic school, and would occasionally refer to it as the "Nighthawk" in jest.

Despite himself, Billie misses his older sister. He and Daphne rarely have what could be described as a functional sibling relationship, but, given the situation, Billie could have used another comforting presence at the table. Being surrounded by his family in a restaurant where the waiters, who know him as female, deftly avoid having to address him is not Billie Jove's idea of a night out, especially given the person sitting on his right.

Billie, male, is wearing a white button down shirt, a black tie, a tailored sport jacket, and neatly pressed trousers. Aubrey, female, is wearing much the same. The only concession to femininity is the slightly tailored waist of her shirt. Somehow, the outfit only serves to accentuate her figure and draw her cousin's attention to it. Aubrey reaches up to brush a hair out of her

face. Her cloth-covered arm brushes Billie's cloth-covered arm. Billie swallows and attempts to focus on the fact that his nine-year-old sister is having a conversation with one of the waiters in perfect, if strangely accented, French.

"So, Aubrey," says Flynn Jove after taking a sip of wine, "why exactly are you looking *here* for school?" His tone made it seem like he thought it was the most peculiar thing in the world that a teenager who had spent most of their life in a small town would want to come to a big city once given the choice.

"You came here for college, Dad," says Billie, wanting to remind him that he had once been in almost exactly Aubrey's situation.

But Aubrey smiles. "Curiosity, mostly. I don't really have that much of a vested interest in Columbia, or anywhere else here. But Mom said if I came here looking I could stay with family here." She flashes a winning smile at Flynn and Phil, and then turns to Billie, heavy lids partially covering her green eyes. "And I couldn't pass up that offer."

Billie's own eyes narrow.

Philomele presses, and Aubrey rattles off a list of schools she's also looking at. Billie's parents nod approval at some names and try to pretend that they know where she is talking about when she mentions an unfamiliar place. Their food comes.

Billie attempts to be extremely engrossed in his salmon while his parents attempt to understand whatever it is their youngest child is currently talking about. Aubrey turns to him, strawberry blonde ponytail falling elegantly over her shoulder, a golden embellishment to her black blazer.

"I didn't imagine you'd be the quiet type," she says.

"Who gave you any idea about me?" Billie snaps.

Aubrey smiles. She shows no teeth, but there is something feral about her expression. "See?" Billie tries not to pout; Aubrey plucks a brown hair off his lapel. "You're taking me to Columbia tomorrow."

"I've got school."

Though they're both sitting and almost level with each other, Aubrey still manages to look down at Billie. "After school is over, cousin. I think you can manage that." Aubrey's eyes slide over to the other assembled members of the family, who are still together in conversation. They snap back to Billie. She leans in and, without touching him, says in his ear, "And afterwards we can go somewhere, just the two of us. Okay?"

Although Aubrey goes back to sitting normally before Billie can respond in any way and is no longer looking in his direction, Billie finds himself nodding, almost against his will.

It's only when Marta takes Daphne to a small café in town rather than the

nearby dining hall for lunch does she acknowledge that she's avoiding fellow students. She doesn't want to be seen with her cousin, she realizes as she sips her coffee. Marta almost chokes, nearly sputtering it over her copy of *Cymbeline* and her cousin.

Daphne narrows her eyes, but says nothing; the two aren't exactly speaking very much. She continues thumbing through the paper in front of her. Marta tries not to roll her eyes, but doesn't know if she succeeds.

She is trying to propagate the myth of Orphaned Marta Aphrodine. Despite the fact that she has come to the rational conclusion that this is not what she needs to be doing, her subconscious apparently disagrees with her. She bites her lip, and looks up at Daphne. "What time is your interview, again?" she asks, hoping for more than a one word response.

Billie arrives back at the house in the mid-afternoon. The October sun is still shining outside as she walks through the first door of the Jove household. The outside is entirely blocked off before she opens the second door, revealing Aubrey sitting in the entrance hallway on a seldom used chair, thumbing through a magazine. Billie inhales sharply. Her cousin looks up at her and smiles. "Right on time," he says. She shuts the door.

"Lemme drop off my bag," Billie mutters, and darts up the stairs.

She had met Aubrey before, she knew; in a family like theirs, it was difficult to avoid anyone, let alone your second cousin. Billie tosses her bag on her bed and tries to remember the last time they had been in the same place together. The last time she can recall was a family reunion when she was twelve and Aubrey fifteen. Billie had just started going to school and was fed up with being a young girl all the time, and was reveling in all that being a pre-teen boy entailed. She remembers her mother pointing Aubrey out to him, telling her child that the teenager in the corner was just like him. Billie looked to his cousin, sitting in a corner alone with a book, and tried to discern what sex his cousin was. There was no clear outward sign; the shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair could have belonged to either a boy or a girl, and the clothing was decidedly unisex. Billie, in the present, tugs on her skirt and recalls Aubrey's outfit from the previous night.

"We're running late," Billie says as she walks down the stairs. "We'll just take a cab."

Billie has lived in Manhattan all her life and knows how to get a cab in a hurry. She steps out onto Park Avenue, making sure her jacket is open and that she didn't pull down her skirt *too* much while she was upstairs. She throws out her hand and one practically comes running to her. A man at the other corner throws her an obscene gesture; she blows him a kiss. Aubrey's eyebrows are raised. "What?" she asks as she gets into the car. "And aren't you coming?"

He follows and slams the door behind him. Billie gives the driver the address. "I just didn't expect that, I guess." He shrugs.

"If you can, why not?" Billie responds, a phrase which is practically her motto.

Her cousin smiles at her. It is a genuine smile, not the half-smirks he has been giving her since he arrived. "I guess that's something that more people in the family should think." He glances towards the cab driver. If he's listening, he gives no indication. He seems more involved in careening through the gaps in the pre-rush hour traffic.

A lull falls over the conversation. Billie turns to watching her city through the window.

"I guess it goes to show that we all deal with it differently."

Billie's head snaps over to Aubrey, like a dog that had heard a high pitched noise. She notices that the driver has closed the plastic screen between the front and back of the car and is engaged in a conversation over the phone in a language that Billie doesn't recognize.

"What d'you mean?" answers Billie.

Aubrey shrugs in reply, and then adds, "Some people in the family. They kind of cut it off from themselves—what they can do, I mean. I've never seen my mother use her gift; you use it to get cabs."

"And what am I supposed to be doing with it?" Billie can't help but feel that he's judging her.

"I guess...gain some wisdom from it. We—we two, specifically—get to experience the world much differently than a lot of people. We should learn something from it."

Billie snorts. "Oh, and I suppose you have?"

There's that maddening smile again. "I like to think so. Perhaps I can teach you some of it."

Billie opens her mouth to respond, but the driver is asking her whether she wants the right or left side, the far or near corner. She tells him where to go, and when she hands over her father's money, she tries to hide the fact that she has no idea what to say to her cousin.

The admissions office is small, quiet, and neat, much like every other admissions office Daphne had ever been inside. It is at a strange counterpoint to the rest of the elegant, Gothic campus and seems frighteningly flavored of middle America on this English-inspired campus.

Marta was clearly uncomfortable being here, more so than she had been around her before. She had briefly chatted with a friend who worked as a tour guide, but her eyes had kept sliding to Daphne. She played with the silver bead around her neck. When her friend had left, Marta came over to her cousin and said, "You'll be fine here, right? You have my number; call

me when you're done." She had left the room as quickly as she could, as if she had wanted to avoid being seen by any of the passers-by.

So it is Daphne alone. She thumbs through the contents of the folder they had given her, bright, shining, and emblazoned with the college's seal and three-word motto. The information which is trying so hard to influence her decision is just leaving her with nothing. She sighs, closes her eyes, and tilts her head back so it is touching the creamy wall behind her, the color of every other admissions office in the world, it seems. She hears a laugh, presumably from one of the interviewers' offices, and a part of an anecdote being told:

"So we were all there in our bikinis and, y'know, they've got books like *Twilight* and whatever. Some people are off swimming. And so after a while they came to try and find me, and Molly's all like 'What the crap, guys, Sarah's off reading *The Feminine Mystique* in the changing room'...."

That girl, Daphne realizes, will go to this school—wants to go to this school, and will be accepted. Meanwhile, Daphne has no idea. The college guidance counselor at her high school had placed this school on her list, unknowing of the fact that her cousin attended the school and she would therefore be forced to visit, regardless of her own feelings. Daphne loves the reactions of adults when she says "Harvard," in response to the question of what her top choice school is.

That's the reason it's her top choice. The reaction.

In truth, Daphne realizes, everything she wants is based around appearances and the expectations around her. Everything she is. She looks down at her hands and—after glancing about to see if anyone is watching—changes her nails so they have the appearance of being covered in purple polish. She smiles at this change. It is a genuine smile.

"Daphne Jave?" calls a voice. She recognizes it as that of the interviewer.

"Jove," she corrects, and shakes his hand. He introduces himself and they go into his office. He settles himself in a desk chair, and thumbs through a few pages, all about her. He squints down at it, giving her glances occasionally, sizing her up, it seems.

"So, Daphne," he says, still looking down. "I understand your cousin is one of our students." He looks up at her, straight in the eye for the first time. "Tell me about your family."

Daphne allows herself to breathe.

Sitting outside the small room in which Aubrey is having his interview, Billie considers the idea of college.

Of course, she's considered the idea before. Her sister is currently in the middle of applying to seemingly every college and university in the con-

tinental United States, and the topic of Billie "going off to college" has come up before in family discussions. Still, Billie has never considered any sort of secondary education in direct relation to herself before. It's rather like a foreign country that she has no real desire to visit but has been told is a wonderful place to go—something in the back of her mind. Billie, however, has never been one for travel or for schoolwork. She's used to Daphne rolling her eyes when she puts off her work and Lilith's small sigh when she responds that she's never read or heard about whatever it is her younger sister had been trying to explain at the time. It's these details, plus the real fact that she's never given 'college' a single thought which makes her pause while Aubrey is having his interview.

Billie Jove realizes that there's a life after her parents' house, and that one day she'll have to live that life. She swears under her breath.

It always seems that whenever she encounters members of her extended family that she is forced to consider ideas bigger than she is. Less than a month previously, when her grandmother had died, a similar event had occurred. She remembers her cousin Brian, and wonders where he is for a moment. They haven't been in contact since September, and Billie thinks they probably won't be until some future family reunion, and maybe not even then. Her thoughts, without any conscious direction, turn to Aubrey. She tries not to draw a connection.

Aubrey makes her feel uncomfortable, somehow. He's confident and comfortable in everything he does and is. Billie changes with every transformation; Aubrey is the same. She pulls on the hem of her skirt again. The door swings open, and Aubrey steps out, smiling as if he's just stopped laughing. Billie wonders if the laugh was real or faked, but realizes that while watching his cousin's face, he doesn't really care.

Daphne is on the phone to her mother. She answers the expected questions—*how was the interview, do you like the college*—but when her mother gets to the unexpected question—*how are you and Marta getting along*—she finds that she doesn't know how to answer. "Okay," she says slowly, and her mother accepts her answer.

Once off the phone, she reenters Marta's room, snapping her phone shut as she does so. Her nails are still purple, and she spares a glance at them for a moment. Marta is looking up at her. "Hey," she says.

"Hey," Daphne responds. She pauses. "Look, I'm sorry I've kind of been a bitch. I've been thinking about some stuff, and realized that I've kind of been off the mark about a few things." She looks her cousin in the eye. "I don't really know what I want—I mean, I don't know where I want to go to school, or what I want to do with myself in the long run. I've just kind of been basing things off what people have expected of me, and, well, I only



came to this conclusion now." She can't read Marta's expression. "So I'm sorry."

Truth is, Marta does not know how to feel or what to say. She knows that this is the longest speech she's heard from her cousin in several years, let alone during this visit. The silver ring on her finger is pulsing, almost, flattening out then scrunching back to thinner than it normally is. She breathes in time with it. "Daph." She stands. "I don't know if you're the one who should be apologizing. I've...been avoiding my friends and other students, 'cause I've built up this stupid thing about never talking about my family. I've been pretty much hiding the fact that I have a cousin from the student body." She stops for a moment, and adds with a chuckle, "Look, I'll be frank: I didn't really want you to come here."

Daphne has to laugh. "I didn't really want to come here, either. Staying with you at a school I never even thought about? Why would I have wanted to do that?"

Marta smiles at her cousin. The ring snakes off her ring finger and slides to her thumb like a sigh. "Do you want to go to a movie with two friends of mine and me tonight? One of them's been bugging me about it the last few days." She hopes that Daphne will see this invitation for what it is: an offering of sorts.

The two leave campus and begin walking south in a slow, serpentine pattern through the city blocks. Billie, the only one who knows this island, steers them as subtly as possible towards the Jove household. Aubrey asks her if she wants to get something to eat. She does, if only to learn whatever it is that her cousin wants to teach her.

The two slide into a nearby restaurant. Billie, the child of a chef, tries not to be scandalized at the menu, and immediately looks for dishes that, in her words are, "hard to fuck up." Aubrey smiles and calls over the waiter. Their food comes promptly.

Billie toys with a French fry. "So," she says.

"So what?" responds her cousin through a bite of his sandwich.

Billie rolls her eyes at him. "Tell me," she says.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," responds Aubrey. "Clearly, you need to learn how to express your desires better."

"Among other things, apparently. What did you mean when you said you had things to tell me?"

"How do you normally get things that you want without asking? I saw you with that cab. It's sex and manipulation, sometimes both. Learn to ask."

"There's nothing wrong with anything I've done today," Billie says with a snort. "Every girl in New York —"

"But you're not a girl, Billie."

"Right now I am."

"You're female, sure. But are you a girl? Does your mental state change when you become a male?"

Billie considers. "I'm the same person, if that's what you mean."

Aubrey smiles. "See?" he says. "You're already learning."

"Learning what?" Billie responds.

The bill comes and Aubrey pays, chuckling slightly about chauvinism and chivalry as he does so. "I'm paying for you, cousin, and not for a stereotype," he says. Billie bites her lip. The two leave and catch a train at a nearby subway stop. They don't talk much on the rest of the way back home. Aubrey stands far enough away from her that when the train lurches and turns, their moving bodies do not even brush against each other.

When the two arrive at the Jove household, Aubrey guides her without a touch or a word to the guest bedroom in which he is staying. Billie thinks she knows what's coming next and when he closes the door, she reaches out to Aubrey, laying a hand alongside his jacketed shoulder. "Don't," Aubrey says, quietly but forcefully. "Sit." Not entirely knowing why, Billie obeys, taking off her jacket and throwing it on the ground first. She sits by the head of the queen-sized bed, legs straight in front of her. She feels like a child. Aubrey shucks his jacket and shoes. Instead of coming around the side of the bed, he grabs the railing at the foot and climbs over it, crawling up the length of the bed before stopping right in front of her.

"So what have you learned, Billie?" he asks when he comes to a stop.

She frowns. "Nothing. You're too fucking...cryptic. I've got no idea what the hell you're trying to tell me."

"Listen to me. Watch me."

But Billie is; she can't do anything but. "Tell me," she repeats, a whine sneaking into her voice.

Aubrey shakes his head, strawberry blonde ponytail shaking with it. He reaches out his hand to hers, fingers not quite touching — hovering over skin, disturbing body hair enough to cause sensation. "See these hands? There's no difference. Hands are hands. You can feel that?" Billie reaches out, trying to catch him. He's too quick. The two have not yet touched skin to skin.

The bedsprings creak as Aubrey leans in. His hands are alongside Billie's legs, one hand touching the hem of her skirt, the fabric of which is pushed up slightly. Billie's chest rises and falls with her breath, her breasts moving closer to, then further away from her cousin. No part of them touches. Aubrey's face is above Billie's; his hair inches towards her cheek.

He tilts his head and smiles. "Would you still want me if I were currently female?" he asks.

"Yes," Billie breathes. She cranes her neck, attempting to capture his mouth in a kiss.

Aubrey stops her with a finger to the skin between her upper lip and nose. He laughs. "I don't put out on the first date. Not even for you, cousin."

"Then what are we *doing*?" Billie feels like a child.

"*In lumen Tuo videbimus lumen.*"

"What?"

"Listen and watch."

Billie was watching; Lilith was listening. She crouched at the keyhole of the blank, bronze doorknob and listened to the exchange between her sibling and her cousin. As soon as conversation stopped, she scrambled away to the bathroom next door.

The guest bedroom door creaks open and out walks Billie, looking confused and dejected. Lilith goes through the motion of washing her hands, and exits the room, timing it so she runs into Billie when she leaves.

The young girl examines the face above her "What's up?" she asks.

Billie shrugs. She walks away.

Lilith steals a glance back to Aubrey's door. While she understood every word (and, in truth, probably understands what Aubrey was trying to say better than Billie does), she does not understand the feelings behind them. She does not understand what Aubrey is doing to her sister, or how he is doing it.

The wall is behind her shoulders now. She allows herself to sink down, her hands buried in the plush carpeting. Her head dips back, touching the unadorned, cream-colored wall. For all her intelligence, she lacks the wisdom that only comes with truly understanding. She, like Billie, must be content to wait and to learn how to see the light and what it illuminates.

Sitting in the same café in which they'd eaten lunch, Daphne marvels at her cousin's interactions with her friends. She considered Marta's transformation remarkable—from the girl who had been trying to make stilted conversation with her the past two days to someone who was overflowing with things to say.

Paul and Sasha were entirely unlike any of her friends at home. Admittedly, Daphne had very few close friends from her school, for many of the same reasons that Marta had no existing friends from high school. The Jove house wasn't receptive to outsiders, and Daphne found it hard to give more than cursory details about her family without omitting details that betrayed the more arcane details of what it meant to be in the larger Aphrodine clan.

"Hey, so, Daphne," says Paul, leaning over the table. "You've got parents, right? Not like your cousin, right?"

Daphne glances at Marta, who smirks. "Paul has this idea that I don't really have parents, since I never mention them." She turns to her friend. "Daphne has parents, I promise. I like them a lot better than mine, in fact."

Paul shrugs. "I was just poking fun, Marta. You were so taken aback the other day when we joked about it before."

"Yeah," Sasha adds. "You seemed pretty upset about it before. We don't think it's *bad* or anything; it was just a little shocking to hear that someone related to you was coming to visit." She laughs.

A wave of embarrassment washes over Marta. Looking back, she realizes how much she had assumed, that her friends weren't in fact as close as she had previously thought they were because of the stupid fact that she hated to talk about her family.

"It's not a big thing," assures Paul. "Look, if it means a lot to you, I'll—we'll—try not to bring it up again, okay?"

Marta glances at Daphne, and remembers her worry about open floodgates. "No," she says, "it's fine. Plus, Daphne's applying here, so you'll have another person to badger for details." Daphne looks a little nervous; Marta nudges her and laughs.

"Welcome to our stupid little family," says Paul. Finally, Daphne smiles.

He barely slept that night. Despite the fact that it was a Saturday, Billie was up early. He descended into the kitchen, expecting to find his father making some sort of elaborate breakfast, as usual, and did so, but unexpectedly found Aubrey already eating it. He starts, and then sits next to him like it is the most natural thing in the world. "Morning, Billie," he says. His voice is calm and soothing, and Billie smiles.

Flynn greets his son, offers him food, and continues bustling around the kitchen, whistling softly. Billie declines, and says to Aubrey in a low voice, as to not be overheard, "I get some of it now, what you were trying to say. Probably not all of it, but some. That we get to experience the world in two different ways, but, no matter how we're shaped, we're still the same people, just male or female. Is that it, or at least close? I've been thinking about it a lot, so I hope it is."

Aubrey nods, once.

"There's more to it, I know," Billie adds, "but I'm a slow learner." He tries to emulate Aubrey's frustrating smile. "You'll have to keep teaching me."

With a swift glance to ensure that Flynn is looking away, Aubrey leans

in to kiss Billie, quickly and softly. Flynn sees out of the corner of his eye, and says nothing but whistles a little louder and brighter.

“Is that a promise, then?” Billie asks.

“Of course,” Aubrey responds. “Anything for you.”

Billie feels like they’re trading one for another that afternoon when, in the span of less than an hour, Aubrey leaves and Daphne returns. There’s an awkward silence between the two siblings where they should be sharing anecdotes of the last few days. Billie has no idea how to describe what has just occurred or how he now feels, and Daphne is having some difficulties with articulating the conclusions she has come to about her future.

The family is at home, alone, without any part of the outside world to deal with. Billie helps Daphne unpack, and wonders if he should speak first, or wait for his sister to say something. They are silent for a long time.



## Still —

by Sam Power

I don’t know what to do. Damn it, I never know what to do. Just keep breathing, Michael; just keep moving. You have to keep moving. Right, I need to get to the top of the steps; I need to get back to the house; I need to help Jacob. I am doing the right thing, right? Two at a time, two at a time—just get up the steps, away from the beach. I’m leaving Jacob down there, is that really okay? I can’t do anything else for him, I—I just can’t. But Mom and Dad’ll know what to do. Mom always knows what to do. Okay, top of the steps, just need to catch my breath—No, I’ve got to keep going. God, it hurts. Jacob, please be okay. I need to—I just need to—

God, I wish I knew what to do.

Martin was sitting in the beach house’s living room when his son ran into the sliding glass door. He loved the kid, but he’d be lying if he said that Michael wasn’t a bit of an idiot sometimes. He didn’t even look up from his book for a moment, knowing that the boy would sort it out soon enough. Then he heard his wife running.

Martin turned, and, in an instant, he pulled himself out of the recliner and stood, staring at the spectacle of his son, shaking and near collapse, gaunt and wild-looking in the harsh lights of the deck. Karen threw open the door and hoisted Michael up, Martin a step behind her.

“Jesus, Michael, what happened?” Karen said, looking petrified over Michael as the pair half-carried their son to the couch.

“Karen, get some water and a blanket,” said Martin, not taking his eyes off the boy. What was the matter with him? He didn’t look hurt, but he was drenched with sweat and shaking.

“Michael, can you—Michael! Listen to me; I need you to tell me what

## (opposite) The Promise of Soup

by Ben Tobin

happened." He heard Karen's steps across the hardwood floors, hurrying back to the room. "Michael, are you listening to me? Look, just — where's your brother? Where's Jacob?"

"He's at the beach —" Michael said, and coughed. "He's hurt. Something —"

Karen handed a blanket to Martin and put the glass of water down on the table just a little too carefully. Martin looked up at her. His wife was breathing heavily and her shoulders were so tense that she was almost shaking. She nodded once, more to herself than to her husband or her son. She went to the door, then quickly and deliberately put on her sneakers.

"I'm going," she said, her voice measured and steady as she gripped the doorframe. Her knuckles were white. "Come after me as soon as you can." And she was gone, doing the only thing that seemed to make sense. In the absence of street lights, Martin could only see her for an instant out the door, but he heard her steps quicken into a run on the gravel path that led off the property and down toward the beach. How long would it take her to reach the beach? It was only a half-mile or so, and she knew the path well. There was no way he'd catch up to her on the trail, but she might need him once she got down to Jacob.

Martin glanced at Michael, still pale, but sitting up now. He draped the blanket over the fourteen-year-old and placed the water glass in his shaking hands. He rushed to the kitchen and grabbed a flashlight and the first aid kit from the utility drawer. Returning to the living room, he tried to think of anything else he might need, but came up blank. He put on his shoes, glancing back again at Michael, staring blankly into the water glass. There was something there in Michael's expression, something that made his throat clench, had made him hesitate when Karen had known exactly what she needed to do. He silently cursed himself, but acknowledged that he didn't have time for self-pity.

"Michael, I need to go after your mother. Are you sure you're alright? Michael?"

Michael mumbled something into the glass.

"Look, Michael, just stay here. You're going to be okay, but I need to go find your brother." He knelt by his son and put his hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be alright, Michael. Everything's going to be alright." And he was out the door, the flashlight shining its irregular, bouncing beam as he jogged along the path, both hopeful and afraid of what he might find. He ran faster.

Karen wasn't used to feeling out of breath, but she knew it wasn't just because of how fast she was running. Her eyes had barely adjusted to the darkness, but she was practically flying over the rocks and dirt. She didn't

know if she had any time to waste.

She didn't know anything, really. If only Michael had been able to tell them more. Of course, even if he had, she would have reacted the same way. Maybe she should have waited with Michael, but he was fine, Jacob might not be. Maybe she should have already called 911, but an ambulance would only be able to get as close to the beach as the house anyway, and she couldn't help but hope that one wouldn't be necessary. There might have been a lot of things she should have done, but this was her son she was talking about. As long as it was her son at stake, she couldn't stop, couldn't think. She had to keep moving, keep reacting. Martin was much more of a thinker, and she needed that too. She hoped that he would be with her soon. But at that moment, when fear clutched at her chest, she could only push it down if she kept moving forward.

Karen arrived at the top of the steps and started pounding down them as fast as she could, keeping her hand outstretched, just above the railing. Her heart was racing, her breath was catching, but somewhere below, she knew her son was waiting for her.

Michael sat on the couch, trying to remember what he'd thought would happen when he got to the house. What was he supposed to say? Wasn't everything supposed to be okay? That's what Dad said, but —

"Something happened," he said, recovering the litany he'd recited during his panicked run, the words that had fallen silently from his lips when he'd finally gotten the chance to say them. "At the beach. Jacob's at the beach. Something happened. Something — something hurt him."

It had been like any other vacation night, running across the night-scape of the beach, barely cast in moonlight. They'd been playing catch with the big plastic Frisbee that they knew could be lost to the waves or the darkness with one bad throw, despite the fact that it glowed in the dark. In that way, it was Michael's fault, wasn't it? The one long pass that Jacob had to strain to catch, had had to run too far, into the grasping fingers of the waves. They'd both been laughing, gasping for breath as Jacob hit the water, snatched the disc from the air, then somehow slipped and fell. Michael laughed even harder, then planted his hands on his knees and tried to calm down and catch his breath. He didn't see Jacob get up.

As soon as Michael registered the fact that his older brother might be somewhere beneath the waves, he saw Jacob rise from the waves. In the instant that he should have been able to feel relief, he heard his brother scream.

Michael ran to Jacob's side and struggled to pull the seventeen year old away from the water line as he thrashed and clutched at his foot. It was difficult to tell in the faint light, but Michael saw something dark that he

thought must be blood.

“Son of a bitch!” Jacob screamed, half-coherent in pain and still spitting sea water, “Son of a bitch bit me; it fucking bit me!” Michael tried to put his brother down slowly, but Jacob still gritted his teeth and groaned in pain.

Michael looked back at the water line, suddenly thinking of something fearsome, something dangerous in the dark water. He saw nothing. No—there was something just beyond the crashing waves, something round and—it was nothing. It couldn’t have been anything at all.

“It’s okay,” Michael said. “It’ll be okay, Jacob, I’ll get Mom and Dad and we’ll get you out of here. Just—just keep pressure on it and I’ll get them. It’ll be okay. It’ll be okay, Jacob. It’ll be—Jacob?”

Jacob was silent, and Michael was alone with the night and the waves. Michael had thought that Jacob’s scream and his moans had been the most terrifying things he’d heard in his life, but this was worse. He touched his brother’s forehead. It was cold.

But that had to be just from the water. It was clammy too, so it was just the water, right? Jacob’s breath was coming in rough, ragged gasps. Michael stood.

He froze, but only for a moment. He ran.

Martin fought down vomit as he hoisted Jacob’s slack, ragged form along the path. He had the boy’s shoulders, and could feel his head bouncing back with every step. Karen had his feet, but she was staring straight ahead, catching his gaze from time to time as her deliberate, backwards steps carried them towards home. She refused to look down, avoiding the sight of Jacob’s mangled foot, bloody and covered in a hastily wrapped bandage. Neither of them wanted to see that again, didn’t want to think about what must have happened, or what they’d seen. The perfect horror of the bite, the piece of their son that was so disturbingly absent, wouldn’t leave them for a very long time. Martin silently hoped that that had been all his wife had witnessed. He hoped that she wasn’t imagining what he could see even now in the shadows around the path, in the lights of the house ahead, even in Karen’s face, staring back into his eyes.

Back on the beach, Karen had taken the flashlight and the first aid kit from him and started wrapping the wound, and Martin had been left to kneel by his son’s head, hearing his feverish breathing even as he felt his unnaturally cold skin. He looked around the beach. It was empty and lifeless. Then, he saw something by the water’s edge, just a strange lump on the sand. He walked towards it. Maybe it was the bite, maybe it was just the night and the wind on the sand, but Martin had to go look at it, to see what it was. When he was a few feet away, he thought he saw a faint hint of

movement. He stood over the object and looked down at it.

It was a human head. He blanched as soon as he realized that, worn and wave-beaten as it was, even if it was little more than a skull, it was still definitely human, and decidedly horrifying. It had barely any hair left, and the skin, which must have hung tightly, stretched over a gaunt face in life, had peeled away in patches. The mouth was particularly bad, the skin having peeled or rotted away to reveal a perpetual, ghastly grin. One of the ears appeared to have been nearly bitten off entirely. But the worst part was the eyes. While the rest of the head had remained intact in parts, the eyes had been eaten away entirely, either by scavengers or simply the rigorous machinations of the dark ocean. Still, the empty sockets stared up at him, almost as if the tattered nerves and scraps of flesh still held the power of sight. He stared in rapt horror at those black pits, even as his eyes caught a glimpse of the jaw twitching, just a hair’s breadth....

Karen called for him to take Jacob’s shoulders, and Martin tore himself away, trying to forget the image he’d witnessed. He was still trying to forget.

Michael stood by the couch, still numb, but at least able to move, to process, when his parents laid his brother down. Still, his limited attention was focused solely on Jacob as the two adults spoke to each other about this option or that. He noticed it first.

“Mom, Dad,” he whispered, plaintively, “listen.” They turned to him and stared in silence for a moment.

“Listen to what, Michael—” his mother began to ask. Then, in an instant, she understood: Jacob had stopped breathing.

Again reacting faster than the other two could think, Karen was around the couch, next to Jacob in seconds. She felt for his pulse, not even bothering to check his breath again. She shouted at Martin to call for an ambulance so she could begin CPR. Again, it was in that moment of distraction that Michael was the only one to see.

Jacob opened his eyes.

Martin would never after be able to explain why he reacted the way he did. He almost never spoke of his subsequent actions, but he could still remember every instant, every fleeting burst of thought perfectly. All reason aside, he’d lingered a moment when Karen had told him to call 911. And without thinking, when his son, his first, Jacob, had sat up, gripped his mother with cold, unyielding hands, and dragged her towards his yawning mouth, Martin was there to knock the boy away and pull his wife away.

For another moment, Martin was unsure of what to do. Karen looked between him and their son, eyes wide with confusion and fear. Jacob began

to rise from the floor. His movements were slow and jerky as he lifted himself onto his feet. Martin thought that the boy somehow looked wrong, even before he saw the eyes.

He would never after try to explain what those eyes were, and not even the few people who heard the story asked more than once. He would only say that they were the same. All he could see was the head on the beach, holding him in its depthless gaze. His son wasn't in those eyes anymore. His son was dead. Jacob's jaw twitched.

Martin had to half-drag Karen out the door with him, but he was glad to see that Michael had reacted faster than he could have hoped under the circumstances, already bounding up the drive, the flashlight clutched in his fist. He must have started running before Martin had even thought to tell his remaining family to run.

Martin could hear Jacob behind them, breaking into a stilted, loping run, but he did not look back. He didn't want to see anymore. It was hard enough to hear the cries, the inhuman moans. They rang in his ears, plaintive and terrifying. He didn't think he'd ever get them out. Finally, Karen seemed to catch on and started running too. He saw tears in her eyes and felt his own face burn in the wind as they sped on into the darkness.

It hurts.

Mom, Dad? Mom, Dad, it hurts. Please, guys, it hurts so bad. Please...

Michael? Mike, where are you. I need help, I need—ah, God, it hurts.

Where am I? I can't—I can't remember. I can't think; words don't come right. I feel like I'm floating. Mom, Dad, is that you? I'm not a little kid anymore, you don't need to carry me. Guys? Hey, do you remember that time when I was eight and you threw me up in the air and...I don't remember after that.

What was I trying to say? God, it's starting again. The pain. And it's so cold. I'm not sure I can feel my—what was I saying? I'm so—

Oh, that feels good, it's so soft here. It's still cold though. It's not as cold here, but I really need to get warm. I need—Oh, God! It hurts, it really fucking hurts, it hurts so bad, it—Ah, I can't take this! Please, God, please, oh God, make it stop, please God oh God oh God it hurts it hurts it hurts it hur—

I'm so—

I'm not sure what.

Where am I? Oh, it's so bright. I feel so much better, but there's still something—Mom? Is that you? What's wrong—that's it. That's what's

wrong. I need—I. I'm so h—It's so hard to think—I'm so hungry.

Guys? Where are you going? I'm sorry, I'm just so hungry. I just need something to eat. Guys, wait. Mom, Dad, why did you look at me like that? Why won't you look at me? I'm okay; it doesn't hurt anymore. I just need to eat something. I'm okay. But I can't keep up. I can't run right. Mo—Da—guys, wait up. I'm still—

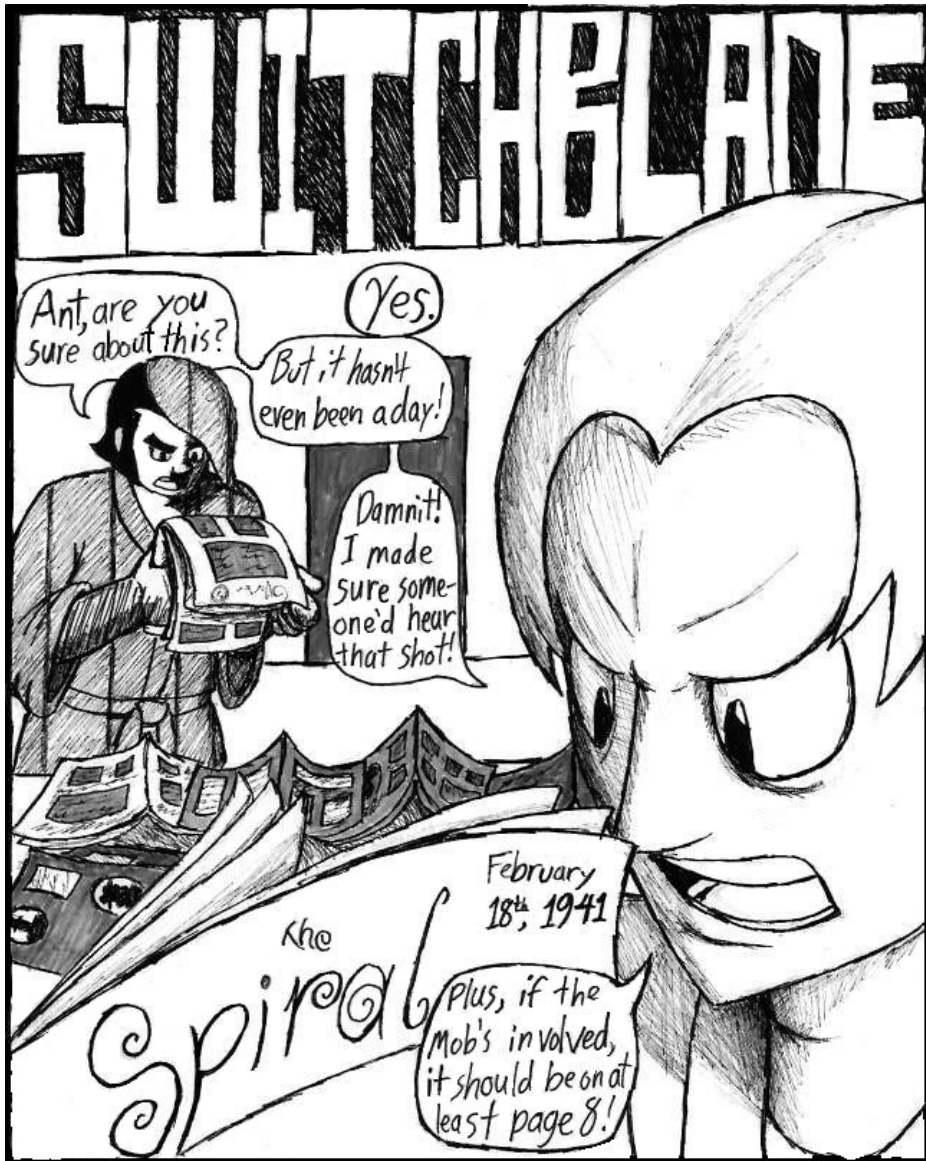
Who are you again? I feel like I know you but I can't see you when you're so far away. Seriously, all I can see is your flashli—that little light you have up there. Can't you just stop and give me some food, please? I'm just so hungry. I'm still—

Where did you go? Won't you come back and help me? Where are you, I can't see you anymore. I'm hungry, so I just need some food, please. I'm still—

Hello? I'm still—

I'm still here.

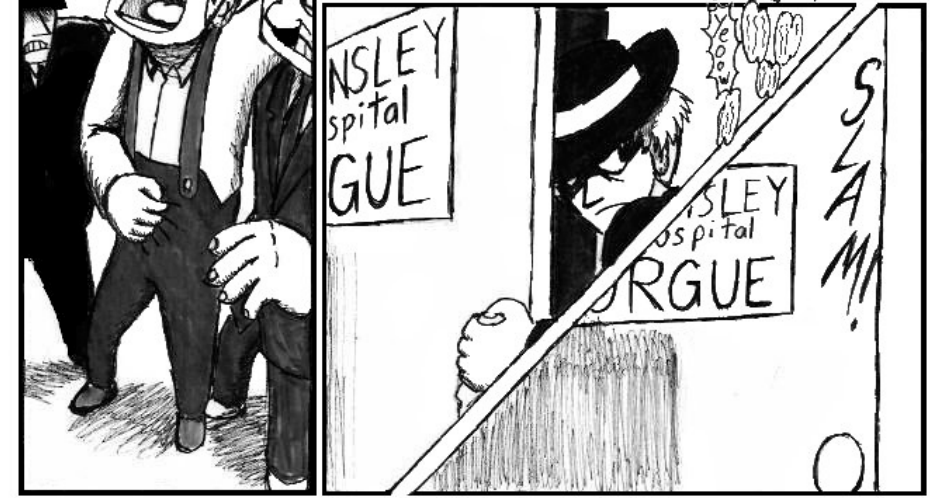
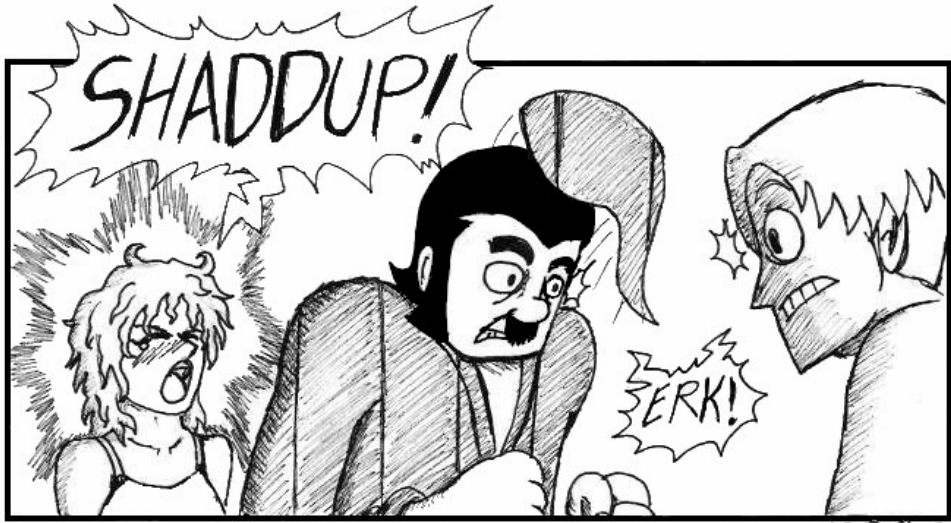
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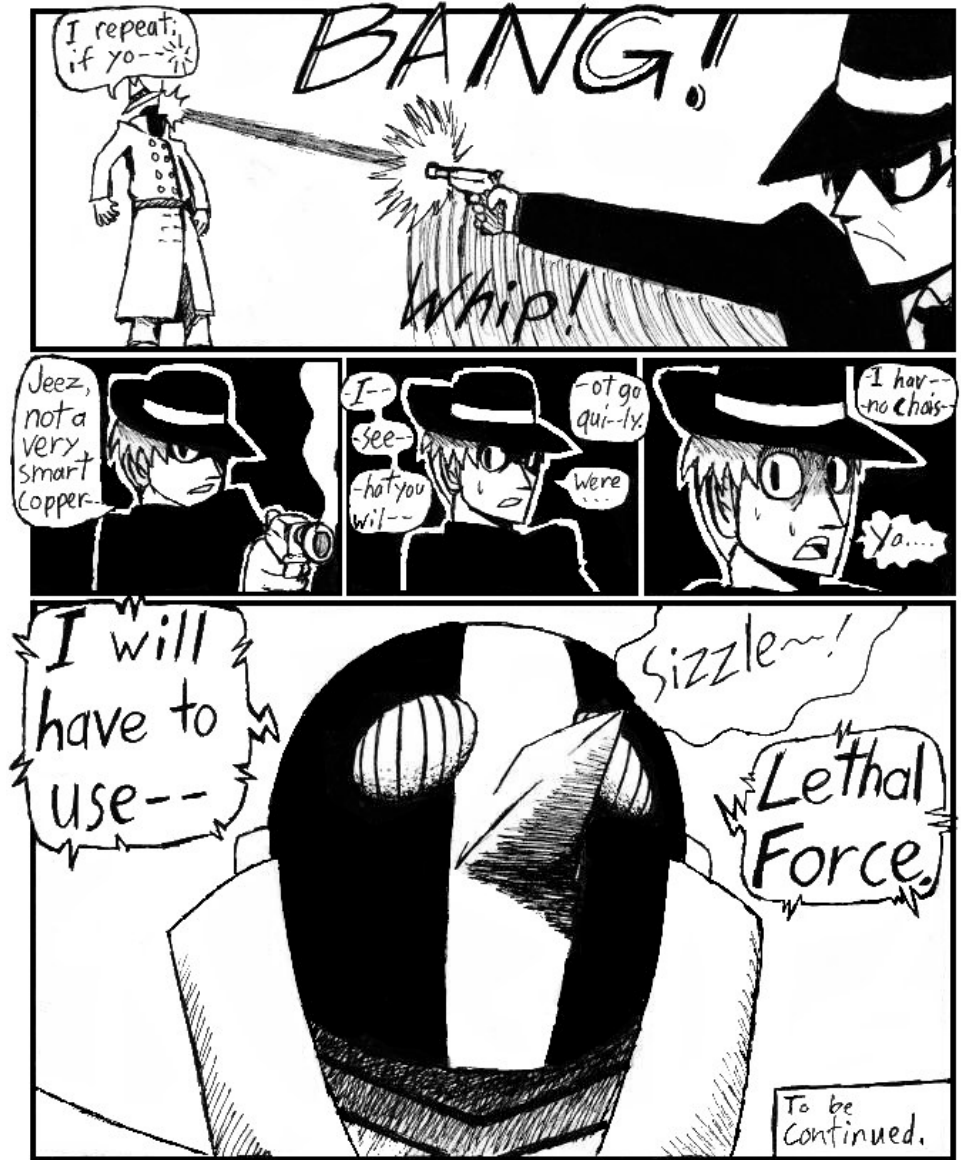
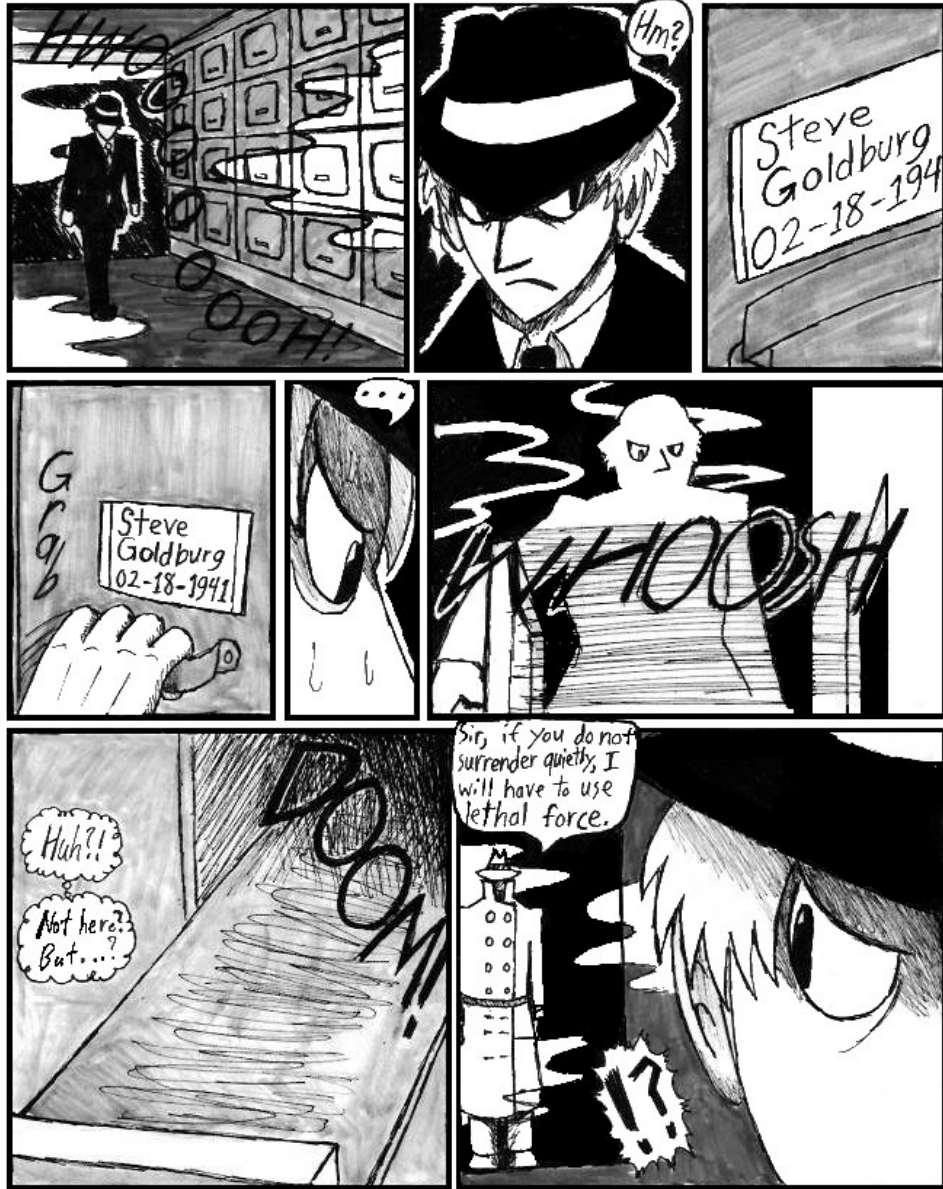
by Jeremy Ledgister

\* This piece is the third in an indefinite series. Please read the last two issues of *Spiral* for the other parts.









## Roller-Coaster

by Mike Rauscher

Fuel lines draped from the Mercury-Atlas interceptor emerging from its coffin bunker; fingers grasping an enormous knife to stab the sky. Colonel Adam rode the tip of a magnificent penis becoming erect, a primal joy beyond words or religion or sex overcoming him as the horizon disappeared from the tiny viewport and the parched blue sky leaked gorgeous music into the cockpit. Adam's hands tensed with the eagerness of a billion years of bleeding ancestors in the pathetic throes of coitus. Already the great plains were silent as the winter. Millions dead in New York and Washington. Countless thousands erased in the blinding perfect bursts of light.

Colonel Adam was sixth in the 1973 class at the air force academy. Colonel Adam didn't talk to his friends on the telephone. Colonel Adam smoked forty-three cigarettes every day. Colonel Adam had a six-inch penis. Colonel Adam had brown hair. Colonel Adam had never registered to vote. Colonel Adam had been planning to buy a muscle car. Colonel Adam still planned on buying a muscle car. Colonel Adam wore sunglasses. Colonel Adam had had sex with thirty-four women. Colonel Adam had had chlamydia twice and a daughter he would never meet. Colonel Adam felt no rage at an unseen and cowardly enemy, no moral reflection or righteous indignation. No condolences for the untold faceless dead. No respect. No worry. No nationalistic fervor. No sadness or fear. No feeling in his head but the all-consuming lust of a puppy for the one thing in all the cosmos that it must kill and consume.

Liquid oxygen met kerosene in the infinite combinatorial madness of thermodynamics, and the rocket clawed into the sky like a mayfly piercing the tension. Up and up into the mounting twilight, Adam's body sinking into the all-consuming thrust. He had three targets in nearly perpendicular orbital planes. He had four missiles, half a tank in the upper stage and eight tanks of monopropellant to feed his nuclear stovepipe when the time was right. The NERVA stage lay dormant, an unstoppable force of modernity idling its atomic heat like a car revving up at a red light. Klaxons and warning lights flooded the cockpit as the staging sequence progressed automatically, teetering downwards and pulling the fisheye horizon from the top of the viewport. The mounting passion for the hunt swelled as the Atlas booster shed its booster ring and lurched forward with the sustainer

engine.

Five more minutes and the sustainer stage would be empty and the Agena upper stage would heave the interceptor complex into space. Ten minutes till the autopilot disengaged and Adam was orbital. This was bad. This meant the acceleration would stop. Traveling seventeen-thousand miles per hour in silence is worthless sadness. It robs the hunt of its gorgeous specific violence. But Adam was sieved into the cockpit by the most beautiful of blind forces. To be selected for interceptor training required the delicate accident of internal heuristic calculus to steer rockets at full acceleration and breath direction to expanding gas. Adam could make the lines cross on the map with manual controls. And he would.

First on the list: a polar-orbiting Soviet Soyuz-fighter falling south one-hundred and thirty kilometers over the north Atlantic. It would be appearing on radar soon, and Adam would disengage the autopilot, yaw the last bit of sustainer stage to put the Soyuz back into the corner of the radar screen and ride the prograde indicator until the last possible opportunity to fire a missile. The Soyuz crew would be doing the same thing, except they'd only start accelerating after the missiles were hot. And they had a gun. The whole thing was a perpendicular joust folded over the map, and if nobody died there wouldn't be a rematch. Adam's strictly prograde burn raised his apogee so that when the lines crossed again in the south Pacific he'd be almost one hundred clicks higher than the Soyuz. Still no sign of it.

The Atlas sustainer stage cut out and fell off, sliding silently against the freshly lit plumes from the Agena upper stage. There was no break in the acceleration, but Adam was adrift in a deeper void, dripping rage and panic. Precious beautiful reaction mass seeped into space and no sign of the Soyuz. Had he climbed too fast? The altimeter spoke the truth. One-hundred and fifteen kilometers and climbing. The radar screen swept out across time, and the next time it spun, there was a blip. Another sweep, another blip. The Soyuz and an incoming missile. A basal grimace overcame Adam's face as he heaved back on the manual fairing release lever, sending four sheets of metal careening behind him and canting the missile launch rails outwards like the delicate petals of a terrible flower. Gorgeous trumpets illuminated the sky in a fit of medieval brutality. The joust had started and the Soyuz had a jump on him. ETA on the missile probably two minutes, but it would probably start playing with its IR seeker soon. Fuck. Adam popped a chaff canister, billowing shimmering aluminum confetti behind his atomic space-dragster. If the missile took the bait that would be enough, it only got one chance. The Soyuz crew probably had another bird ready by now too. Fuck. The next two sweeps confirmed Adam's suspicions. The missile was still following him. Adam failed to put together the half-sentence "Russkie piece of shit," when he glanced at the fuel gauge for the Agena upper stage.

Hey, there's an idea. Ditch the the Agena. The missile would almost certainly go for it and if not the two heat signatures would royally fuck with the IR seeker. The Agena had about a quarter tank left, which is a hell of a lot to just abandon in space but more importantly, it meant the acceleration would stop. Adam, couldn't just light up the nuke-jet because he'd rupture the fuel tanks and cause a gas explosion or collide with the booster if he didn't give the reactor enough juice to out-accelerate it. Fuck it. Maybe he would. Who gives a shit. Adam emasculated all the relevant overrides and toggled all the relevant switches, pulling the control rods from the solid graphite NERVA core and circulating the primer coolant to begin its controlled meltdown while the Agena began an automatic fuel dump-and-burn. The dopey-eyed wonder of a trillion eight-year-old boys with live hand-grenades had returned to Adam's face. He stirred and kicked two of his eight liquid hydrogen tanks. The reactor had just begun its one-night stand with our friend the Atom. A plume of irradiated expanding hydrogen burned right through the Agena's guidance computer and gutted critical system after critical system, sheering and popping the explosive separator bolts connecting the two spacecraft.

Thus freed, the Mercury thrust violently forward, escaping the booster's descent into a tangled mess of differential calculus. Without skipping a beat, Adam toggled the radar into track mode and painted the hell out of the Soyuz. A minute and a half till the lines crossed, twenty seconds until the inbound missile hit or missed. Adam popped a second chaff cartridge, flipped up the fire-guard, armed his first missile, and sent it streaking into the black. Feathering the attitude stick, Adam put the capsule into a gentle roll towards the earth, eyes hunting for the glint of the Soyuz in the vastness. After all that he wanted to see the fucking fruits of his handiwork.

Thirty seconds passed seconds passed in the thunderous violence of the NERVA engine's thrust and the inbound missile overcorrected this way and that, its proximity fuse bursting it uselessly between the conflicting countermeasures. Home free. Fifty seconds passed and there it was. Pay-dirt. The ephemeral white flash over the blue mess of ocean and air from the Soyuz popping open like a water balloon full of quicksilver. Peals of terrific laughter filled Colonel Adam's space helmet. The acceleration could stop now, he'd let the two propellant canisters run out and he'd coast like a shit-eating sonofafuck who lasted two minutes in bed just so he could have dinner naked before round two. Imperceptible as the minute-hand of a clock, the eastern seaboard burst apart in miniature through the viewport. Geographic pimples popped by the atomic hammer of Soviet Thor. Apogee in forty minutes, the top of the roller-coaster, then back down into the hot scramble and the building madness. Colonel Adam had never been fucking happier.

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The EPOS hypersonic launch aircraft whined down the taxiway, quaking bits of earth billowing out of the desert in its wake. Soyuz-Fighter number twelve down over the Atlantic defense band. Aleksei and Oleg. Those two guys from flight school. All done. All dead. All gone. The radio crackled. Rosa snapped her gauntleted hands to attention. Yuri had finished taxiing. Slamming the diagnostic buttons in the cockpit of her MiG-105 Spiral space fighter, Rosa waited for a row of greens and told Yuri everything was fine for takeoff. The turbojet whine transfigured into a sucking roar and the lines on the runway blurred together faster and faster. Rosa breathed out, the flurry of takeoff overcoming her. Gentle waves in the electric ocean.

An hour-long ascent, southeast into the Pacific, all by Yuri's guiding hand. The endless war with the throttle in her old Foxbat had perennially robbed Rosa of the austere sense of accomplishment in the climb. Seeing the horizon tense into an arch and the ground shrink into impossible minutia, radiant asymmetries and indifferent unity in the grand networks of the modern world, all made soundless motion. The People's interceptor pilot Rosa--always too caught up in a teetering staring match with myriad gauges to appease the turbine gods. Her Foxbat clawed at the thinning air and shed blackened bits of engine and fuel line into the wind and the sky was still one shade of blue too bright and the stars one or ten too few. The cosmos beckoned. The Spiral began where the Foxbat fought and bled to travel. Space answered the climb. Space halted the rattling of tortured metal. Space muted the scornful wind.

But tension. Rosa had never gone hot before, not even in the Foxbat. When her booster fired she would match orbits with the American Mercury fighter swinging low over the United States. And from there it could go a few different ways. A high speed pass, with or without visual contact, no firing solutions. Lines cross on the map, wait, burn again at the ascending node. Or maybe full-rendezvous, matched velocities or matched accelerations. Utter panic to see who could score a hit first.

Stars leaked into the sky out the window, compressors screaming at the thinning gas. Yuri struck a match on the wind, teardrops of fuel blossoming against the shock-ramps of the ramjets. Phase two. To the upper atmosphere. The EPOS launch aircraft phased through an instant of muted howling. Nose up into the black. Higher and higher, faster and faster. The thrill of the climb. Yuri banked into the mission heading, pulling up against the mounting thrust with a lurch. The faded brown ocean of Central Asia unfurled below, color washed out like an old movie-print. Rosa fiddled restlessly with her hands, in spite of all the sights and wonders, she was never quite accustomed to just being along for the ride.

Inevitably, the experience would dull. After one hour without any

chatter, there is malaise, fatigue. Restlessness, tension. The sights, the stars. All trappings of something utterly basic that's still missing. Agency. The earth can only be so beautiful, Rosa must move her hands to complete the ritual of flight. Alexei and Oleg. Those two guys from flight school. Crew of Strategic Rocket Forces Earth-Orbit Fighter number twelve. They lost their wings when they left the Red Air Force for space. Rosa's fighter still had hers. The minutes passed. This is where she got off.

Yuri signaled his comrade good luck over the radio and the booster peeled away from the launch aircraft with the harrowing delicacy of a bicycle careening down an icy hill. Seconds passed of interminable silence, plummeting indicator gauges and dials before the booster lit with the typical Soviet frugal adequacy. Here was the part where Rosa felt like an interceptor pilot. Spiral pilots were the only cosmonauts who got to fly their own spacecraft to orbit as part of the general protocol. Soyuz and Proton crews rode their rockets, but Rosa tugged the reins of an impossible force of Soviet might. The red star of the Red Air Force tail roundel could appear anywhere in the world in two hours given this concession granted her by the automation gods. Flying in radio silence, passive sensors only, that took an awful lot of trust on the part of the leadership. A lot of trust that she wouldn't take her fighter on a joyride while the world burned and no one would blame her. A lot of trust that she wouldn't fuck up.

Rosa jittered the stick to keep her rocket on the correct heading. The blue faded to black.

Fucking shit. Why does it have to slow the fuck down fucking potential energy thing freefall goddamn cocksucking orbital mechanics. Colonel Adam had twenty more minutes before apogee. You really start feeling it around now, the Earth is smaller in the viewport, the deceleration leaking more and more into the cockpit. This was all his fucking fault. Igniting the fucking NERVA rocket early threw the times off for his date with a Soviet orbital weapons platform. Now the lines crossed on the downstroke, five minutes past apogee and he'd be a fifty clicks too high for round two. An army of physicists could tell him what to do now but Adam wasn't going to get anything but chewed out if he got on the horn now.

Maybe he could sink a few tanks into a plane shift. He had six. Two of those would kick him over a few.... No. That wouldn't do shit. Well wait a minute. Apogee too high? If he was lucky he might be able to find something in the elliptic-band with all the missile-interceptors. Time for a flashlight fight. Adam kicked the attitude into a spin and switched the radar to active sweep mode. Myriad blips flickered into existence onto the green plastic.

There's no way to be stealthy in space; the other guys always know

where you are. Passive sensors aren't there to hide you, they're to show the other son-of-a-fuck that you can't be doing anything. Flip on the flashlight in a low orbit and you're gonna get marked by anti-radiation seekers. If you don't, they won't shoot you till you're closer and there's better odds of a hit. But if you're more than one-twenty clicks up and it's a heavy missile-interceptor Soyuz, you're gonna get the first shot no matter what because that commie pinko piece of shit pilot just needs to get to apogee unscathed. He's too chickenshit to shoot first when he can just countermeasure it all the way past you and burn to circularize at four-hundred clicks up like he's supposed to. If he's got any balls he might shoot back but he won't shoot first. You're not who he's after.

And the hunt was on. One of the blips matched a missile-interceptor profile. Adam wasn't nearly close enough to switch back to track mode. Piece of shit. Space is too fucking big. Well the lines didn't cross but.... Twenty Klicks! Hey waitaminute it didn't matter. His missiles had enough Delta-V for the plane-shift and ascent. They'd be twenty clicks apart total just about when he was reaching apogee. The slide-rule didn't lie. Ask and ye shall receive. Talk about the fucking odds. Two submarines could run into each other every day for a week and they couldn't have better odds. Sure enough, hazy clouds of radar countermeasures started blotching onto the screen. The Soyuz pilot had probably gotten this far thinking Adam was after him the whole time. Space was not too fucking big. Not this time.

Ten minutes till the gap would be at its smallest. He was gonna shoot twice, once two minutes early and once at T-zero. Adam wanted this. The fever. The violence. It was all back. And then it would be apogee: Adam would stop slowing down. The glorious purpose of combat peaked out over the noise, all that was stale erased. The explosive contaminants of gorgeous truth returned to the world. The Soyuz was close enough for track mode. The timer ran down. T-minus-two, light the first bird. Thumping off its rail, the missile streaked right into the track-trace. Now would it be smart enough to go past the countermeasures? Blotches appeared all over his screen.

Jamming? Oh, that rat-fucker. The missile didn't know any better. It was going to follow the ghosts all the way in to nowhere. Fucking hell. Set the second missile for proximity fusing, inertial guidance-only. That's not as accurate but it'll zip right through all that noise. Now to get that fucking lock back. Christ on the cob its time in ten. Piece of shit fucking radar make the lock Christ Jesus piece of cock. Four past ten no fucking good commie pinko ECM. Five past ten farther and farther and he was so fucking. Perfect. Yes. Thank you god almighty.

The second missile streaked out on its own devices. Without any of its senses, only crude calculus across the void. The beautiful torment of the

waiting game as the two blips converged. No visual this time—he'd have to use some other inference.

All at once, the jamming disappeared and was replaced by the reflection of twelve-tons of tortured debris, a gorgeous blob getting wider and wider on the screen. The cocksucker didn't even shoot back. Adam's laughter rattled the cockpit. This was the best fucking day ever.

Molniya-Six down? Which was that? Lev? Alvaro? Vlad? She couldn't remember. And she couldn't ask. Radio silence, her only acknowledgment was compliance. The mission timer had progressed within margins. Rosa was flying on instruments. Once the burn had finished and she was at apogee she should be right on top of the Mercury, somewhere within five kilometers of it. Only one shot at this. The minutes passed in the accelerated patience Rosa was accustomed to. Keep your nose up, keep your fingers from tensing up on the stick. Don't roll too much. Steer with the yaw. The blue arch only popped in as a tiny sliver in the windscreen. Rosa stared at the indifferent chronometer, sweat trickling at the one thing she couldn't control.

This would be a forward intercept. The booster would ditch her while she was still suborbital, and she was to keep passive, firing when he got a lock on her. If nobody died, she'd burn to circularize and open up with her cannon. Staying passive meant she'd be as absolutely close as she would get. This protocol would ensure the best chance possible to catch it on the near part of its orbit. This would give her anti-radiation seekers maximum tracking if her opponent were facing prograde. This would make her a sitting duck. Her ascent profile was for emergency rendezvous, not intercept. It gave her the best shot. It gave him a better one. Her opponent had four missiles, he'd fired two for sure in the past two hours. He'd killed both his targets. But there was nothing she could do. No. This was stupid. She had to shoot first. She had to hit first. The protocol gave her missile a good chance but not her. This was suicide. Rosa tensed her grip on the attitude stick.

Radar warning receivers were the only way she'd know when the game had started. Thumbing the stick to retrograde, she never once let her eyes off the green cone on the display. She should break protocol. She had to shoot first. Her radar was better than his. Her missiles were better than his. She'd have the jump. She'd get her missiles off before he'd even got into track distance. Why wait for him to get a lock? No. She was wrong. The protocol was right. He had to have the first move. He plays too well when he has the second. That's what happened to Aleksei and Oleg on patrol. They shot first. That's what happened to whoever it was on Molniya-Six. He shot first. Rosa would shoot second.

She would. She'd kill the bastard and go home. The booster rocket sputtered, then cut the last bit of its fuel and released its grip on her fighter in the silence. Rosa was adrift.

Minutes passed sliding upwards into the void. The horrible nothing of tension. Did she do something wrong? Space was endless; she could have missed him by fifty clicks and no one could tell. No. Everything had gone perfectly. The People's interceptor pilot Rosa never made a mistake. Forty-six milliseconds deviation from the plan. He'd be here any minute now. Wait for it. Wait for it. There was a flash on the warning receiver. Rosa jumped to attention. This was it! That was him, switch to.... The blip was gone as soon as it appeared. What? The bastard had turned off his radar as soon as he made a contact.

That fucking swine! He wants me to go active! No. Rosa would shoot second. He didn't have a gun, he didn't have his radar on. There was no way he could be aiming at her. Rosa let her hands off the throttle and stick. If she waited he'd just slip by. Then she'd be in a tail-chase. Rosa liked that idea. Maybe the briefing was wrong, maybe he only had one missile left. He'd surely save it for the high priority Orbital Weapons Platform he could hit when he goes back up. He'll try to bug out on this one. But no. What if he does get two missiles and he's just going to shoot you in the ass as soon as passes? You fucking dope Rosa! Stop deliberating and switch to passive thermal. He's close enough.

There was a bright spot right on top of her. The fucker was burning retrograde to synch trajectories with her! He just liked to fight! The warning receiver started flashing, then buzzing not three seconds later. There was lock. Fuck. Fuck and shit. Rosa switched all sensors active. Inbound missile, three clicks. That was practically already there. What do I do? Rosa hammered down on her chaff dispensers and took up the stick, orienting towards the contact on her radar. Fuck it, if the missile doesn't take the bait I have one shot at this. He's already shot first. Rosa will shoot second. Second after interminable second passed waiting for a lock. The high-pitched whine sounded atop the already buzzing confines of the cockpit. Rosa's anger crested with the low hum of the missile doors swinging open oblivious to the tension. C'mon, open, dammit! I have a lock, dammit! Open! Open! The hum stopped, and without skipping a beat Rosa double-tapped the firing trigger. Two missiles slid out into the distance. Not dead yet. Still here. And the radar still intimated the missile's silent menace. Toss out more chaff canisters, dammit! Thump after thump as the void was filled with swirling vortices of aluminum countermeasures.

Then again the silence. Not dead. Still here! The inbound seeker must have taken the bait. The buzzing stopped. The cockpit fell again to silence. Rosa was about to breathe out again when she heard a loud pop and her

forehead slammed into her space helmet. The world fell back on top of itself in Rosa's vision, sucking and klaxons and flashing lights and the world out the viewport spinning with a sudden applied force. Then silence as all the air left the cockpit. Shit! Shit! Ow. That fucking hurt. Rosa heard herself breathing.

Shit, shit! Wake up! Flip your spacesuit to self-supply. Where's the goddamn... there. Shit. Shit. Fuck. What were you thinking Rosa? You haven't been accelerating! That chaff cloud was still right on top of you! It had saved her life from a direct hit but the proximity fuse on the inbound missile still smacked her with the bang. Shit. What was the damage? Find out later. Did I get him? There was power. The radar still worked. Her birds were still hot and homing steady. The blips converged and a flurry of contacts cluttered the radar. Rosa smirked, the world still a mess of lights and sound and her space fighter falling apart around her in slow motion. But she did it damn it.

Rosa shot second.

Son - of - a - Russkie - piece - of - shit - bitch - cocksucking - ass - jockey bullshit. Fuck. Fuck fuck and shit. Light the NERVA again? Burn to match? Make two contacts? You stupid cocksucker, Adam. You sunk that Russkie bastard. Shoulda burned prograde, kicked all your delta-V into escape maneuvering. God christ. No power. No lights. No air. Just Adam and his space suit and a dead space capsule and a bunch of broken radioactive metal everywhere. The NERVA took both missiles dead-on. No flare was gonna hide the fucking nuke-jet. Not at this range. Christ. Fuck and fucking shit. Well calm down a tick. You did the right thing. If you'd lit up prograde they'd still have hit. There was no room to accelerate. He'd just be feeding them kinetic energy. The little Russkie missile can cram four different seekers in that little package because they're moving at orbital velocities. A bang isn't gonna make that big a difference. Sure the Soyuz missiles have a bang for good measure but that little spaceplane? No fucking room.

And they'd rendezvoused. Only a few meters a second difference between them. That was the worst fucking part. He could see the Russkie fighter about a klick downrange. Right fucking there. They were coming down now. Neither of them were at orbital speeds after that fancy bit of flying. He'd see it pop first when they both pancaked on the atmosphere. Shit. Fuck and shit. He was going to die out here, wasn't he. Fuck. Well the heatshield's probably still OK, try and re-orient this—hey what the hell? There was flash in the distance and then two plonks as his head hit the back of the seat. Was he already re-entering? No. No, that was cannon fire.

Oh, that fucking settles it. He'd have seen it if that Russkie spaceplane could still move but it wasn't dead by a longshot. Oh, that's fucking

it. I'm gonna kill him. One more fucking go at it. One more dip in the hill. Adam's gloved hand met the recoilless gyrojet pistol on his calf, the hunting dog's bloodlust renewed. And all that was wrong was right at the promise of erupting coitus from his rocket-pistol into commie-pinko skull. Adam slammed a magazine of rocket-bullets into the butt and returned it to its holster, hunting behind the seat for his handheld nitrogen cold-gas thruster and spare canisters.

Two more plonks chipped away at useless metal, and Adam's hand halted on the explosive bolts to release the canopy. There was no going back. Blow the canopy and leave the capsule and you're a dead man. No way to get two klicks by zip-gun and back before re-entry. Adam looked up. The gutted NERVA stage floated detached forty meters out. You're a dead man anyway, Adam. No way in hell are you gonna stare at the fucking nuke-jet after it's started up and not take a lethal dose. Why was he still alive? Oh that's right. Because it just his fucking day that's why. Now what the fuck are you waiting for? Kill the bastard before you start vomiting your guts out.

Adam pulled the lever. The canopy blew. Adam pushed out, centered the flash in the distance in the rear-view mirror of the zip-gun and pulled the trigger. Ten seconds and the nitrogen canister was out. Switch canisters and repeat. Switch canisters and repeat. Now you're going highway speeds. Time to coast. He'd only get one chance at this. The fighter swelled in the distance amid a cloud of detached panels and twisted bits of metal. One minute or so and he'd be there. Switch out to your last canister You're gonna need to pop the gas gun a lot at the last minute. Slow down and correct and grab.

Any minute one of those cannon shells could split him in half. Don't think about it. There it is. Oh you're right on the fucking money Adam. You're gonna hit it dead on. Point the gun right at it. Slow down. Get closer. Closer. You have to stick the landing. Get ready to meet your maker you commie son-of-a-bitch. The canopy burst open. His opposing mark straddled the cockpit with three limbs and pulled out his Makarov. He could be shooting at me for all I fucking know. Alright, here we go. Adam emptied his gas cartridge, ditched the gun and splayed his limbs like a leopard pouncing from a combat helicopter. Thunk. Here we go.

No wait fuck! Fuck! You bounced! You bounced! Grab the stabilizer there! No the wing grab the... good. Alright. Fuck! There was a plonk in front of his face as his opponent emptied his pistol into the wing. Adam reached for his gyrojet pistol and aimed at the blur in the sights. Miniature rocket-bullets zipped through the void. His opponent ducked into the cockpit, dodging both of Adam's shots.

Adam kicked off towards the cockpit, arresting the canopy rim with his

free hand and menacing his huddled, hapless foe as he fumbled to reload his pistol. Oh, this was gorgeous.

Adam thrust into the cockpit, ramming his pistol pointblank into his opponents' spacesuit and smiling into... waitwaitwaitafuckingminute. A girl? Well shit. Adam felt his finger loosen on the trigger. Not skipping a fucking beat, his opponent thrust her pistol into the nape of Adam's neck. Oh fucking well. Looks like it ends here. He could never hit a girl.

Colonel Adam thonked his space helmet against hers, the resonance between the mated plexiglass would let them speak like a tin-can telephone. The Russian pilot withdrew her pistol, and then thonked it right back into Adam's face.

"You're gonna shoot me, I guess?" Adam said.

"Yes," came a tinny voice in perfect English.

Rosa pulled the trigger.



## Untitled

by Ben Tobin

## Strings

by Ethan Ranis

There's a certain zen trick to remaining completely motionless. You don't go limp; when your body's muscles are totally relaxed, they sway slightly. To be perfectly, completely still, you must train each muscle to find the right balance between tension and release, and hold it there, without adjustment.

That's how I hang when I'm suspended in the back room, during these breaks when he's not using me. I hang so still the wires no longer cut into me. The flesh around each entry point has almost completely healed. I can feel the tension where the steel pulls the new skin taut. I used to gouge wide holes in myself by twitching. They're probably full of scar tissue by now.

My guess is the Director is out looking for his next player after finishing with Bruce the other night. He's been breaking actors with increasing frequency. Either his standards or his temper are rising—maybe both. Of course, the next day he needs to find a new one. Nowadays, he rarely leaves unless he's searching for another actor. While he looks, we're stuck in our separate backstage areas until he returns.

Suspended here in the darkness I have no way to keep track of time. I may have been missing for weeks now. Whenever I have a chance to look down at myself, like when my head's lowered to depict sadness, I look like I've got a real severe eating disorder. One more way the Director makes me feel like a real actress.

I hear the distant sound of a door slamming above me. Somewhere else in the dark, the discordant sound of weeping. Sounds like Susan. She was tough back when I got in here, had almost a British stiff-upper-lip thing going on. The Director even roomed us together so she could show me the ropes before giving me my own area. These days, she seems like she's reaching her limits. I can hear her crying out when we're backstage, and on stage she's barely able to keep up. She's sobbing now because she knows the Director's home. Whenever he's got a fresh catch it takes about two days to prepare the newbie, and while the incisions heal he still wants to be entertained.

I shut my eyes tight, grateful I can move them, and try to get a little sleep.

I wake to the sound of a man screaming in pain. I don't recognize the voice.

The sound is loud and close. I can't turn my head to check, but I place it as being just behind me, on my right.

I'm still backstage. He must not have used me in last night's show. I quickly snap to why: the screamer's the new guy. I'm here to train him, the way Susan trained me. My turn to teach the newbie.

"What's your name?" I call out. He screams again. I make a hushing sound. He doesn't stop. I feel vaguely embarrassed for him. "C'mon, tell me your name."

The screams taper off into whimpers. "Jim. Officer Jim Danielewski." His voice quavers with pain.

"Try and get a hold of yourself, Jim. No deep breaths or screams or anything. That just makes the wires cut deeper." I can hear him inhale then cry out, and roll my eyes. This is going to take some work.

"Focus on my voice, Jim. Just keep your mind on the conversation." I don't have access to any painkillers beyond small talk. "You said you were an officer. You with the police?"

"Special investigations. I work missing persons cases." He replies between shallow, gasping breaths. "And you are?"

"Teresa Jones. Student, I guess." My time at the U. feels like ancient history.

He exhales sharply, yells again, catches his breath and groans. "You're one of the people from my case file," he says when he's able to speak again.

"Well, you've found me." I smile almost sincerely. At least they'd been looking.

"Just before this.... Before he caught me, I was working on your case. I'd received an anonymous tip that told me to meet someone at a street corner in thirty minutes. I didn't bring backup. Got slugged from behind."

"That's how he got most of us." A blow to the back of the head or chloroform over the mouth and nose, same old story every time.

"Then I'm drugged and strapped to a table and he has a drill..." Jim's voice crescendos as it fills with horror, like he's just coming to appreciate the nature of his situation. "What is this? Why is he doing this to us?!"

"Tell you in a sec, Jim." I keep my voice calm and even, thinking maybe it'll encourage him to do the same. "But first, lemme ask you a question. You ever acted before?"

"No." The disbelief in his tone is so thick the word's almost a question.

"The Dir – the guy who caught us, he gets bored real easily. But he gets a kick out of putting people in interesting positions. Situations. Makes them playact scenes for his amusement. That's why I call him the Director."

"So that's why... the wires.... But why do all this? Why not just stick a gun to our heads then make us do whatever he wants?"

I'm sorely tempted to shrug, but I don't feel like blood loss today. "Maybe it's sadism. Maybe he likes the wires. Me, I think he just wants total control."

I hear the jangle of steel. Jim's cry is smaller, sharper.

"Try not to get too stiff or too loose."

"So, most of what I've just taught you will be hard to do well until the holes heal up. Right now, you try to move too fluidly, you'll tear the wires out entirely, and he'll just knock you out and start the whole process over."

"One more cheap shot to the skull, eh?" Jim says ruefully. "I bet I could take him in a fair fight." Jim tries to breathe, maybe gets some blood in his lungs or something and coughs, shaking the wires. He starts to scream, but cuts himself off.

I feel a twinge of sympathy. Some things you just can't control. And he's learning pretty fast. Maybe he's not as dumb as I thought. Fat chance of him getting that fair fight, though. "Just remember, don't talk to him. He hates it when anyone does that, says they're breaking the fourth wall."

The sudden telltale clanking sounds above me make me wince. I try to compose myself for showtime. The wires tug me forward.

"Where are we going?" Jim wails.

"He's taking you too?" I respond, shocked. No one ever gets called their first day.

Susan is already on stage when we arrive, her face effectively blank. Her face looks almost white under the hot stage lights. She's managed to craft an even, neutral expression, lips perfectly straight, eyes gazing blankly forward. The Director has her posed in a seated position, even though she floats a foot off the ground. The teleprompter in front of us is blank, although by her posture, I can tell Susan's just finished a scene.

Sometimes I wish I had a script or even a summary to read beforehand, just to get some kind of preparation in. You never know what he'll have you do on any given day.

The spotlight's on me. The prompter begins to scroll: "T: HELLO, MOTHER."

Well, that's some kind of context. I try to say the line like I'm talking to my own mom, but it comes out sounding stilted. As soon as the last syllable drops I'm already wincing. Sure enough, my arm whips backwards just far enough to stretch the tendons. I grit my teeth. He won't catch me crying out. I'm not giving him any excuses.

"Colder." The voice echoes off the walls, sounding like it's been shouted through a loudspeaker. I wonder if he installed crappy speakers on purpose just to get that effect.

I blink twice in the direction of the light booth to show that I understand.



"Hello, Mother." My voice is now full of icy contempt. I look away from the teleprompter and back to Susan, making sure to make eye contact.

"My darling daughter," Susan spits, easily surpassing my level of barely suppressed venom. "How nice to see you again. I thought you'd left this house for good."

The prompter scrolls – I cock one eye to look at it while keeping my face turned toward Susan. "So did I. But then I found Jake, and just had to bring him back here to show you."

Jim glides over to hang beside me, the wires lifting his hand to bring it down protectively on my shoulder. Jim glances over at me, eyes wide with fright. "Just go with it," I whisper. "And watch the prompter."

"So, this is the new stud for you, eh, slut?" Susan crows. So far, so good. This performance has been her most convincing in weeks, and that might buy her a little goodwill with the Director.

"J: DON'T CALL HER THAT, WHORE."

There's an awkward pause. I look at Jim pointedly. He's staring at the prompter screen without talking. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

The Director takes swift action, snapping his head violently in Susan's direction. "Look her in the eye and say the line." He doesn't sound angry – yet.

"Don't call her that," Jim begins.

"Louder," the Director calls.

"Don't call her that, whore!" Jim yells. A little strained, but starting to sound more natural. Jim's hand is raised and moves laterally to strike Susan across the face. He's a big guy who probably works out, and his hands have some meat to them. Susan's face shakes with the blow but she doesn't turn her head. She's too well-trained, she won't do anything without the wires' instruction. Jim just looks at his hand, like he can't believe what it's just done.

I glance at the teleprompter. The next line's Susan's. "You two disgust me." Her voice shakes slightly, but the Director lets it go. The next line comes up on the screen.

"T: YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND OUR LOVE."

Outside I am all blank and cold stares but inside I'm rolling my eyes. You'd think that night after night of these little melodramas would teach the Director to write. I put a little bit of a whine into my reading, in what I hope is a subtle comment on the character's immaturity. Not like the Director understands subtlety.

"J: LET'S SHOW HER, BABY."

Jim sounds more uncertain than suggestive, but instead of telling him off the Director rolls us up to one another and begins mashing us together.

I think the movement's supposed to be intercourse, though it looks more like Barbie and Ken being shoved into one another. The constant motion is loosening the wires from Jim's tender flesh, blood welling up in the gashes. I wait until a forward thrust to look over Jim's shoulder at the prompter.

"S: YOU ARE NOT MY DAUGHTER. YOU'RE DEAD TO ME."

There's silence except for the dull thwack of our bodies hitting each other. Ten seconds pass. Susan's not saying the line. We stop moving, we just hang suspended inches in front of each other.

"Say it." The Director booms.

Susan's lip trembles.

"Say the line!"

"You are not my daughter." Susan's voice quavers, and she's got that clogged-nose sound of someone who's crying. My insides go icy. I keep my eyes locked on Jim.

"Finish the line."

"You're... you're..." She can't do it. Maybe there's some sort of personal problem this brings back, maybe she thought too hard about this play's plot, or maybe she's just cracked. She can't say the line. She just breaks down in sobs.

"Finish the line!" The Director shouts, his voice massively distorted. "Finish it! Finish it!" His voice pitches up to a hoarse shriek.

I can tell what's coming. I close my eyes. A rushing sound fills my ears. He killed Eddie by snapping his neck. He killed Bruce by contorting him until his spinal cord broke. So I'm waiting for the sound of cracking, gurgling, strangulation.

Instead there's a roaring splatter, like water being dumped from a bucket. I feel the wires turning me towards her. I can't help but open my eyes.

Swaying on the wires in front of me are pieces of Susan, still dripping blood. Each part just hangs disconnected in midair, her head high in the air with no support but the wires, eyes staring blankly forward. They blink.

It takes every bit of strength I have not to vomit. He's never done anything like this before. He just pulled her to pieces. Just like that, a thinking person reduced to a collection of parts...

There's a scuffling sound and suddenly he's on stage, standing right before me. I've never seen the Director. Even backlit by the stage lights he's hardly impressive. Short, corpulent, a sheen of sweat coating his Neanderthal brow. This is the man who's been putting us through hell. This loser who probably couldn't get a date at prom. He gazes up at what's left of Susan, scratching his chin, appraising his own handiwork. Then he looks back to us.

In his fat fist is some kind of remote control. He presses a blue button,

and in my peripheral vision I see the prompter change. I don't read it. I'm putting all my energy into staying still.

"What are you waiting for?" His voice is thinner without the amplification, and it's got a bratty edge to it that is just unpleasant. As a kid, this guy was picked last for dodgeball. When we don't respond, he crosses his arms and leans back, his lip curled. "Huh?"

"What the hell do you do this for?" Jim's voice is hoarse. I shut my eyes tight again, ready for the worst.

There's a pause. "Entertainment," the Director replies.

"Why all this? The kidnappings and the wires and the remote. Why not just watch TV?"

The Director chuckles. "I grew up on that shit. But it just gets so old. The same stupid people always saying the same lines. Even on the reality shows – they're just flat." He held the remote up, letting it catch the light. "But with this, I can make my own stories."

"But they're still just stories." Jim's got some kind of balls to keep talking like this.

The Director steps toward him, pointing the remote like it's a dagger, shoving it in his face to emphasize each point he makes. "My stories have real people. Real emotions are happening there, all the time. Even if they're not the ones I write. And that's what makes it interesting. That, and the control."

The Director's back is to me, just a few inches away. He turned us both toward Susan's remains, but Jim and I are still facing each other. I experimentally extend my arm. The wires, already loose, peel their way further out of my flesh. Like taking off a band-aid. I can do this.

Well, Jim. You said you wanted a fair fight. This is as close as you will get.

I lunge forward, the steel cables ripping their way out of my shoulders and back. I can't help it – I cry out in pain. My vision's gone hazy, but I've got the element of surprise: I reach forward far enough to wrap my arms around the Director and squeeze.

I look up at Jim expectantly. His mouth's wide open. I guess I can't blame him for feeling unprepared. "Come on!" I yell.

He gets it. He throws his whole weight forward then thrashes backwards, the wires whipping out of his fresh holes one by one, blood leaking from each new wound. But Jim keeps going until he's gotten free of each string. Snarling like a mad dog, he's punching and clawing at the Director, heavyweight blows raining down from those thick hands. I let go and the two of them fall to the floor. The Director whimpers and cries, sniveling and moaning. Jim keeps pounding at him until he gurgles. He hits until the Director doesn't make any sound at all.

Pain is stabbing into every part of me. Somehow worse is the feeling of fluid oozing all over my back. "So, now that the floor has a new red paint-job, can you get some help?"

Jim looks up at me, the feral grin on his face softening into a grimace. "Of course. Is there any way to get you down from there?"

"The wires were deeper in me, because I had them longer and all. I'd probably pass out from blood loss or pain. You've got the best chance of staying up long enough to tell people."

"I'll do it. I'll find someone. The police station has to be somewhere nearby..."

"Just tell them the street name. When you get up there."

"Will you be okay?" He's got an almost tender look on his face. From mad dog to puppy, just like that.

"I'll be fine. Just hurry."

He nods and turns to run, half-stumbling up the auditorium stairs. He'll manage to find someone. Any time now.

The wires are only half-supporting me. The entry points in my legs are straining. Well, no point in doing anything halfway. I lean forward, feel the wires loosen and release their hold. I fall forward, splayed on the ground. I let myself go completely limp, take a few deep breaths.

I think I can lie here a while.



by EJ Landsman

## Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

### Part Seven: Memory in Silence

What do you want from me?" Amos whispered. The Sorceress uncurled her fingers. The pentacle fell from her hand. The chain tightened and the little star bounced. She watched it twirling round and round. "I want you to let Sirius go."

"What?"

"He's mine, you know." Her pale, glassy eyes turned from the spinning pentacle to Amos's face. "He belonged to me long, long before he belonged to you."

Amos's thin fingers pressed into his palms. "Sirius doesn't belong to anybody."

"No?" Her eyebrow arched. "Is that how it is, then? Because you didn't put a second level binding spell on him—because he doesn't have to obey your every command—you tell yourself he's free? Do you just ignore the binding spell you have placed on him now? He can't leave you."

"I had to do that to get him out of the Seal."

"And then? What about after that, Amos? You could have turned around and set him free, but you didn't."

Amos was silent.

The Sorceress's thin lips stretched. "You're nothing but a naïve, idealistic coward. Too afraid to let anyone go because if you do, they will leave you as fast as they are able."

Amos tried to draw a breath around the sudden tightening in his chest. "Nettie hasn't."

"Nettie hasn't?" The Sorceress looked back at the spinning pentacle. "That little pathetic shape-shifter? You haven't got a binding spell on her, too, have you?"

"No!" It was weaker than Amos meant it to be. Weaker . . . and more desperate. "I haven't! Not . . . not to Nettie . . ."

"So why won't you let Sirius go?"

\* This piece is the seventh in an eight part series. Please read the last six issues of *Spiral* for the other parts.

"I . . . can't."

"Where is he?"

"I . . ." The tightness in Amos's chest faded. His fingers loosened. "I don't know."

"He left?" The Sorceress tilted her head. Another lock of pale hair fell over her shoulder. "Perhaps you should have put that second level binding spell on him after all."

"I couldn't," Amos whispered. "I couldn't ever do that."

"You don't have the courage to. But there's no point in it now, don't you see? Even though he's tied to you, he's gone. You lost him anyway."

*Don't leave me.*

"What reason do you have for keeping him tied to you this way? If he can still leave you, what point is there?" She reached out with her other hand, catching the pentacle in her palm. She rubbed her thumb across its surface. "The truth is, it only *began* as something you had to do, because he was there. Because you were curious. But *now*, isn't it the most self-centered of reasons? If you have him to help you, you might live a little longer."

*Please don't leave me.*

The Sorceress held up the pentacle, between thumb and forefinger, looking at the sky through it. "Such a darling little ornament." A breeze swung the chain with a soft *chink*. "And it's killing you."

*I won't.*

"Amos!"

Amos jerked. "Nettie?"

"Amos!"

"Nettie . . ." He turned.

Nettie was running down the path between the gravestones, her short black hair flying out behind her, clutching a small shopping bag in one hand and Emmeline's tiny hand in the other. Emmeline's pigtails were a little be-draggled and she was dragging another shopping bag with her.

"No . . ." Amos shook his head. "Nettie, run! Take Emmeline and run! Please!"

Nettie slowed down as she saw the tall white figure behind Amos, but it was too late.

An invisible force plucked Nettie and Emmeline away from their shopping bags, yanking them forward through the air, then around, slamming them into a tall, faded gravestone. Before they could move, white glistening ropes of magic slithered up through the ground, wrapping around them, holding them against the gravestone.

"Nettie!" Amos started back.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," the Sorceress said quietly.

With a crackle of energy, a shaft broke away from the ropes, sharpen-

ing into a point. The point stopped barely an inch below Nettie's chin.

Amos skidded to a halt.

"That's better." The Sorceress clamped her hand around the pentacle, motioning with one finger. "Turn around."

Amos turned slowly. "Don't hurt them." His voice was quiet. "They have nothing to do with this."

"They do now." She smiled. "Why don't you release Sirius from his contract, so that I don't have to hurt them?"

Amos looked over his shoulder at Nettie and Emmeline.

"Don't do it," Nettie whispered.

Amos dropped his gaze and turned back to the Sorceress, the picture of defeat. "I'll need that back," he murmured. His eyes skipped to the pentacle.

The Sorceress narrowed her eyes. She studied him closely for a long time. His shoulders had sagged, his hands listless at his sides, his gaze empty. He barely looked strong enough to stand upright.

She lifted her hand and let go of the pentacle. It hovered in the air, the chain floating around it like a halo.

"Very well," she said, and flicked a finger.

The pentacle slowly moved toward Amos.

He reached out a hand.

The pentacle hit his palm with a gentle *slap*. Amos closed his fingers around it.

Then he clapped his hands together.

*Boom.* The gravestones shook as a glowing blue force field exploded in front of Amos in a rush of wind. The Sorceress threw up a hand to shield her eyes, falling back a step.

One hand still stretched out in front of him, holding the pentacle, Amos looked over his shoulder, squinting against the whirling wind, and reached out his other hand.

Dead leaves swirled up from the ground. A streak of blue lightning raced from Amos's fingers toward the gravestone where Nettie and Emmeline were tied.

White sparks flew up and the glowing white bonds recoiled as if they had been burned, retreating back into the ground.

"Amos!" Nettie cried, starting forward.

The Sorceress recovered and swept out a hand. Three invisible claws slashed through the blue force field. The shield sizzled. Amos staggered.

"Nettie, wait!" Emmeline grabbed Nettie's arm and dug her heels in.

"I have to help him!"

"But then she'll hurt you, too!"

"Amos, don't!" Nettie yelled. "Don't give up this much! Please, it's too

much!"

The Sorceress's hand sliced through the air again. Again, the shield sizzled. Amos winced.

"It's not worth your life," Nettie whispered.

"Very well, then!" The Sorceress's voice resounded off the mausoleum and gravestones around her. It swelled until it seemed to fill the entire air. "If you want to play the game this way, my dear Mr. Christopher, let us have at it!"

Both her hands swept out. Ten crisscrossing slash marks clawed their way through the force field. The shield flickered, crackling, and then shattered into a collection of blue sparkles, which winked out one by one. Amos went to his knees, one arm up to shield his face.

The Sorceress whirled in a circle, her wide white sleeves streaming behind her. Her fingers dragged red lightning behind them, growing brighter and brighter. She hurled the lightning forward.

Amos looked up, saw it coming, and rolled.

The lightning slammed two smoking holes into the ground. Dust flew up in clouds.

Amos scrambled to his feet, coughing. He clapped his hands around the pentacle again. The next streaks of red lightning the Sorceress hurled bounced off a glowing white bubble that sprang up around him.

"You don't have the power for this!" the Sorceress shouted. "You can't harness the Old Magic the way I can! You weren't around; you don't understand it. You can only use the power in this world, and it's nothing compared to what once was!"

Amos's feet slipped. He let go of the pentacle with one hand, curling his fingers into his sweater over his chest.

"Come now, Amos, you might as well give up!" A cold gust of wind billowed the Sorceress's long dress out behind her. "You know I can't kill you if I want Sirius to be free! I'm only going to keep hurting you until you give up, although at this rate you may very well just kill yourself. Why don't you call this off, give me what I want, and go home?"

Amos forced the wince off his face and looked up. Dug deep into his sweater, his fingers were shaking with effort. "Never."

The Sorceress laughed. "Then you must be more power-hungry than I gave you credit for."

Amos straightened up slowly, as much as he could, ignoring the wind that blew his bangs into his eyes. Overhead, the sky grew darker. Towering black thunderheads were rolling in slowly over the cemetery. Over the tall stone cross on the mausoleum's rooftop, lightning flickered deep in the clouds.

"I don't think I'm particularly power-hungry," Amos said.

Far in the distance, thunder rumbled.

"But . . ." Amos looked up and smiled—a thin, carefree smile. "I have occasionally been known to do stupid things."

For a split-second, the Sorceress faltered in the face of that smile. A smile that was simultaneously hopeless and blithe—as if nothing of any concern was going on around it, as if nothing mattered . . . it was frightening.

In that second, Amos lifted the silver chain and put it over his head. The pentacle hung against his chest.

"Emmeline—" Nettie knelt quickly, grasping Emmeline and pulling her close.

The Sorceress started to raise a hand.

And Amos raised his, cupping them on either side of the pentacle.

Spiraling wind gathered in front of the pentacle, expanding in a whirling circle. At the center burned a red ember of flame.

Amos looked up, a reflection of the flame flickering in his amber eyes.

The wind exploded outward in a burst of red light. A towering pinnacle of white shot upward into the sky. Emmeline's fingers dug tightly into Nettie's dress as the ground vibrated beneath them. Dust shook free of the gravestones, raining down in a haze around them.

Streaks of lightning flashed in the bright light. Holding Emmeline tightly against her, Nettie looked over her head, squinting into the light, but she could see nothing—neither Amos nor the Sorceress. They were both lost in the light.

A tear ran from the edge of her eye and trickled down her cheek.

Deep in the whirling white light, amid the lightning streaks, Amos forced his eyes open. He'd closed them against the force of the wind. On either side of the pentacle, his hands were shaking. The pain in his chest was so deep that he could barely even feel it anymore. It wasn't sharp. It was just deep, deep enough that maybe it was going straight through him. Perhaps that was for the best, after all. Perhaps it would go straight through him, and take with it the other kind of pain—the pain he couldn't blame on any scars. And then, he supposed, it would leave a giant hole, but that would be nothing new. It would just mean missing something, and he had been missing something for a long time now.

Something trickled down his chest, warm and thin.

So there wouldn't be a hole, then. Just scars, like there had been before.

His vision was starting to blur. The streaks of lightning were no longer in focus.

For a moment—just briefly—he saw something. Faint, pale, and hazy, but he still knew what it was.

"Alyce . . ." he whispered.

The flickering figure dissolved into a mist, and behind it, a pair of pale glassy eyes opened in the white light.

The eyes came closer, and the Sorceress's tall willowy frame appeared from the mist, her long yellow hair flowing behind her

"It seems so terribly selfish to call her that," the Sorceress whispered. "She was your mother, after all—the closest thing you had. And you used to call her that way . . ."

The pinnacle of light that enveloped them was spreading, out behind the Sorceress, behind Amos, on either side of them . . .

Amos couldn't see it—not through the blur and the haze and the whiteness around him—but he could feel it. He could feel it slipping away from him, out of his control. He couldn't seem to hold it back.

"Thank you for trying to fight me," the Sorceress whispered. "If you hadn't given so much up on your own, it might have taken me much longer to do this."

The whiteness surrounding them was turning into a dome. Amos could feel it taking shape. But somehow, it was also expanding, until he felt like he wasn't even in the cemetery anymore. He couldn't feel the mausoleum, or the stones, or Nettie or Emmeline. All he could feel was white emptiness.

"You have some talent," the Sorceress said quietly. "I will give you that. Not everyone can produce as much magical force as you just did. If it had been a year ago, maybe you would have had enough life left to even hurt me with it. And that little trinket of yours isn't even all that powerful on its own. It's just an object that you've tied your life to—and your life is powerful enough to give you magic."

Amos slowly lowered his hands. He wasn't even trying to. They seemed to be moving on their own.

His shirt was sticking to his chest now. He wondered if the blood would seep right through into his sweater. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he hoped it wouldn't. Nettie would never get it out, and then she'd have to knit him another—and since his suit was already ruined, he'd never stay warm enough if the weather kept up like this . . .

Winter wasn't so far away, after all.

His hands were hanging loose at his sides.

"Is it really worth it?" the Sorceress whispered, coming closer. "Draining your life away bit by bit for ghosts who no longer have lives . . . doesn't that seem like a waste?"

"No one else is saving them from their pain," Amos murmured.

"Who's saving you from yours?"

Amos said nothing.

"Someone was." The Sorceress was right in front of him now, surrounded by the blank, shining whiteness. "For one short month, someone

made the pain lighter. Perhaps it didn't disappear, but somehow it seemed more manageable." She leaned closer, until her lips as she whispered were an inch away from Amos's. "Break his contract."

"I can't do that," Amos said quietly.

"You're weak." The Sorceress drew away and walked slowly around him. "Look at how much you wanted to believe that someone, finally, wouldn't leave you. You came running all the way out here—you let an old man fool you. You let me fool you. You knew that dratted landlady never employed anyone, but you came dashing out here anyway, because you had a silly weak hope that you would find someone who wouldn't leave you."

"I . . . cared . . ."

"You cared for him?" She was behind him now, whispering in his ear. "Amos, when has caring for anyone gotten you anywhere? You cared for your mother, and it only trapped her here. The more you care, the more you hurt others. You might as well just let Sirius go."

"That's not true."

"Your memories tell you it is."

"I can't believe that." It was barely a whisper, and it hurt.

The Sorceress smiled, thinly. "Do you remember when we last met? I said that I could tell you more about you, if you gave me more time. Now I have the time, and you have nothing to stand in the way. I can see all of your memories, Amos. How would you feel about reliving each and every one you'd rather forget? Would that make you remember why you should give up and stop fighting me?"

"You can't do that," Amos whispered.

A new voice whispered back, "Can't do what, darling?"

Amos's breath rushed out. "Mother . . ."

"Amos!" Nettie shouted.

It didn't make any difference.

They couldn't see anything beyond the giant glowing white dome of light in front of them. Nettie could tell that it wasn't Amos's spell any longer—it didn't feel right. Amos's magic had always had good intentions behind it, even as it had been growing weaker over the past few months, but this felt different. Even though it was white, and bright, there was some dark emptiness inside it.

Emmeline backed up against her, grasping her sleeve tightly. "Nettie, what is that?"

Nettie looked at the ground. Her eyes found a small stick.

The stick rose into the air. It took all of her concentration, but the stick slowly moved through the air toward the white dome. It touched the edge of the white light and burst into flame.

Nettie and Emmeline jumped.

The stick crumbled into ash. The ash floated down to the ground.

Tears welled in Emmeline's eyes. Her fingers dug deeper into Nettie's arm. "Amos isn't burning up, is he?"

"No," Nettie said. "I'm sure he's all right." Her voice was shaking. "We just can't get to him. The magic is too strong."

"I want Sirius," Emmeline whispered.

Nettie looked back at the white dome. She couldn't tell how far back it stretched, but it was almost as tall as the trees behind them, and it filled the clearing, bigger than the mausoleum beside it.

Thunder rumbled again.

"There must be a way," Nettie said. "There has to be a way to find him."

Wind tugged at her skirts.

"I want Sirius," Emmeline whispered again.

Nettie was still murmuring to herself, trying to think of something to do. But Emmeline wasn't listening. She heard the sounds but not the words. She only kept thinking of the time when Auntie had come into her bedroom and sat down beside her.

*Emmie, darling, you're going to live with me now.*

*Why?* she had asked.

*Because your mum and daddy aren't coming home anymore.*

A tear rolled down Emmeline's round cheek. "I want them back," she whispered, but she wasn't talking about her parents.

The wind rushed louder in her ears. Lightning flickered in the clouds.

She remembered Sirius's large hand, warm and comforting around hers as they walked down the cold hallway of the mansion.

"Amos, sweetheart." Her long red hair tumbled over her shoulders as she knelt down in front of him, reaching out a slender hand. "Come with me."

"Where?" he whispered.

She remembered Amos falling off his chair in his tiny study once when she had surprised him by bringing him tea. And his smile in the dress shop. It was a sad smile—the smile that was missing something.

He didn't always smile like that.

"It's all right," she said gently. "We're going to find it."

"Find what?"

"Something you've lost."

No, not something. Someone. He only smiled like that when someone was

missing. It wasn't Nettie or herself. Or, perhaps he did smile like that when she was gone—she wouldn't know, because she wasn't there . . .

"Come with me . . ."

Over the gathering wind and distant rumble of thunder, Emmeline heard another sound. Wings beating. She looked up.

In a rush of feathers, his staff in his hand, Sirius landed on the mausoleum's rooftop.





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Are you a fan of Shadows?

*Spiral* will be printing a special edition magazine that contains the collected Shadows chapters by Edward Allen Underhill. This special edition will feature never before seen color Shadows artwork by EJ Landsman.

This Shadows edition magazine is available by reservation\*. Please email spiral@oberlin.edu by Sunday, April 25th to reserve your copy.

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