



Alleys and Doorways
An Anthology of Homoerotic Urban Fantasy Short Stories
For Torquere Press

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Alleys and Doorways

TOP SHELF

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ALLEYS & DOORWAYS

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FOREWORD: WELCOME TO THE GREY WOOD BY MEREDITH SCHWARTZ

In traditional fairy tales the green wood was a place of magic and change, where traditional ties and roles are loosed. There were perils and terrors, and you could lose your way in the dark. But those who were clever and brave -- or lucky and kind, if it's that sort of story -- might see wonders and win through to a new life, one that meets the inner needs that drove them from the safety of village or palace and out into the wild world.

In modern fantasy, the city often takes the place of the green wood: it is where the discontented begin the quest for adventure or fortune or love; where the old rules -- often the constricting conformity of the suburbs, or family expectations -- are loosed. In the magical city, transformation is not just possible, but glimpsed around every street corner.

Gay people, in particular, have often gravitated to the city to come out, become someone new, and find each other. Not all urban fantasy is queer, of course, but fairies have more in common with the gay and lesbian experience than just an epithet to be reclaimed. For many of us, the story of the changeling is the story of our own childhoods -- knowing we are different from the families and communities that surrounded us, never feeling quite at home until we can name and claim the magic that makes us different, and then find others like ourselves.

Of course, there are some differences: the gray wood is not just trees dressed up in skyscraper drag. In urban fantasies, nature and the unknown are far less likely to be the ultimate enemy than is human nature, someone else's or our own. And while the magic of the wood lurked in dark groves where man had never stepped, the magic in urban fantasy is more likely to pool in the corners man made and then forgot: the little spaces on the edges of things, unlikely and rough-edged and disregarded -- the alleys, doorways and docks; deserted parks and poor, artsy neighborhoods. These are exactly the same spaces that urban gay people have often claimed as their own; they also resonate with people who have themselves too often been overlooked.

Urban fantasy also echoes gay experience because it is so often about borders, about negotiating the fluid boundaries of two worlds, at home in both and neither. And about learning to find beauty in the once-feared strangeness of ourselves and each other. Is there a monster in the former horror canon that has not been reclaimed, in recent years, by sympathetic stories getting under its skin and looking out through its eyes?

The stories in this anthology travel to Atlanta, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City and Seattle, not to mention the lands of Fairy and the cities with no name, and meet elves and dragons and stranger things. Some of the characters you're about to meet made their peace with magic long ago. Some are meeting it for the first time, and some have come full circle to become the guides or guardians, mischief-makers or demon lovers or fairies that they came to meet, helping the next generation survive the monsters in the dark and find their way to the heart – whether a lover's or simply their own.

In sum, they are about love and sex and magic and real estate, fighting and fucking and making the trains run on time. We hope something in this book makes you snigger, tear up, jerk off, or look over your shoulder for a rustle of wings.

EVERLASTING BY ROSE FOX

"I wish this night could last forever."

He had been on his back, feeling the damp grass stick to his sweaty skin, speaking with the wistful eagerness of youth. It was his third time in the park. He remembered it so clearly and easily, even now.

It had seemed then, to his uneducated eyes, that the dim orange urban light reflecting from the low clouds had shifted and streaked and blurred. Somewhere, a voice -- several voices? and Philip's foremost among them, harshly human against the eerie, ethereal chorus -- whispered, "It could. Is that what you really want?"

David laughed, softly, so as not to give away their hiding place among the bushes. "Are you kidding?"

"No."

"This is--" He waved a hand, the gesture taking in the whole of the park and the city and the night. "This is what I've dreamed of. All those years, in school, at h--my mom's house, all those stupid years in the goddamn closet, and now, finally... I'm home. Homo sweet home." He laughed again, merrily, a little drunk on the joy of the night. "I could stay here forever."

"Do you wish it with all your heart?" Was he really hearing more voices, or was it just the ringing in his ears from the fervor of their lovemaking?

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

And then the memory shifted abruptly into one where he seemed to see himself from above, crouched in the damp grass as the night breeze slowly eroded the pile of ancient grey dust next to him, and sobbing into Philip's wrinkled shirt for what seemed like years.

David was allotted one question a year. If the elf didn't want to answer, it would allow him to ask more questions until he found one that it would accept. It seemed to enjoy the game. He did not.

It took perhaps two decades of this before he knew all there was to know, or at least all it was willing to tell him. It was pretty simple, really. After that, he asked the same question every year, because he needed to hear the answer.

"Why did I say yes?"

The remarkably hideous creature sitting on the rock took the unlit dog-end out of its mouth and sighed. "Every year you ask this," it chided him. (One of the questions it refused to answer was "Why do you all sound like stereotypical old Jewish guys?", though it seemed to find the idea very funny.) "You wanna try something new this time? Why the sky is blue, maybe?"

"I was a physics major," David told it, for perhaps the thirtieth time. "I know why the sky is blue. Why did I say yes?"

"You could ask yourself and get the same answer."

"I do, every day. Why did I say yes?"

The elf fixed him with two beady eyes that squirmed like cockroaches. They probably were cockroaches. Apparently countryside elves were made of things like moss and wildflowers; city park elves had to make do with dog turds, gravel, and other locally available materials. "You said yes," it told him, "because it was what you really truly wanted in your heart of hearts." It stuck the dog-end back in its mouth. "See ya next year, kid." There was a crackly pop like a static discharge, and it vanished.

All his memories were scrambled around. Without preamble or segue, he could suddenly feel his mother gripping his small plump six-year-old hand in a vise of tarnished rings and sharp fingernails. "Mommy," he shouted as they crossed the street and walked away from the sole brief patch of trees and greenery that he had encountered in his brief time alive. "Mommy, there are fairies in the park! I saw them!"

She laughed hoarsely. "You're too young to know that," she told him. "Who's been putting these ideas in your head? Was it old Metzger? I gotta tell him to quit telling you this crap."

David stared over his shoulder as she dragged him down the street. "But I saw them," he whispered. "They were dancing. I saw."

"That wasn't dancing," his mother said shortly.

She never took him back to the park. It took him years to understand why, and to find his own way there again.

What were the stages of grief? He couldn't remember. Anger, maybe, and... something else... denial? and then resignation at the end. He had done anger and denial, for sure. Maybe now he was resigned. It was hard to tell.

He did at least try to make the best of it. He sought out the men who looked least comfortable among the trees and shadows, got to them before the predators could, and was as gentle and kind as he knew how to be. Not all of the innocents were young. He remembered Arturo, a white-haired man who lay quietly in his arms afterwards and spoke of going to school to be an artist, making money walking dogs, opening a cafe and running it for twenty-six long years when all he wanted to do was go back to Milan and paint. "My wife died," he said haltingly, "and so now I wish to go home. But first I came here, to... to see." He stroked David's arm tentatively. "And now I know," he said, "and I can go."

David did not say that he had been in the park since long before Arturo ever left Milan, did not say that twenty-six years running a cafe and waiting for one's wife to die sounded like the shortest and sweetest of prison sentences. He held Arturo and watched the orange-shaded clouds come up to cover the stars and said nothing at all.

"Why did I say yes?"

"You know the answer. Ask me something else. C'mon, this is getting boring."

"Fine." David tried to think of a new question and found only another old standby. "How do I get out of it?"

The elf snorted. "You know that one too. You go the same way Philip did."

After all this time, how could that name still bring him so much pain? He sucked air between his teeth. "All right, then. How many years have I been here?"

"Nine thousand and twelve." David stared and the elf laughed. "No, no, I kid. A hundred and forty-four. A nice even gross." It laughed harder. "I love it! A gross of gross years." Still laughing, it disappeared.

A hundred and forty-four years. He couldn't even be surprised, really. The language had been changing, slowly but steadily. Some of them had even remarked on his old-fashioned habits of speech. The boy last night -- what was his name? Andrew? Arthur? -- had called him Grandfather in an exaggeratedly antique tone of voice. I'm old enough to be his great-great-grandfather, he thought sadly, and wondered whether a time would come when he could no longer understand their words at all.

If it did, he supposed touch would suffice. It always did in the end.

Once, early on, David had found himself resting his head on a firm young shoulder and spilling out his story. Coby listened, taking it all in silently, asking no questions until David was done talking and sobbing.

Finally he said, "So what's the catch?"

"What do you mean?" David asked, startled. He had never expected to be believed.

"There's always a catch." Coby yawned. It was getting on toward 3 a.m., and clearly he didn't have David's luxury of sleeping all day. "An escape route, a way out. What's yours?"

David shrugged, blowing his nose on his shirt. Later he would have to take it down to the pond and wash it out. "I have to find someone to take my place," he said. His voice was low. Back then he had still been able to feel bitterness.

"And then you're free?"

He thought of the wind swirling through a mound of dust. "Yes," he said slowly. "And then I'm free."

"Rough," Coby said meditatively.

"Yes."

I will not ask, David told himself. It was the first promise he had made after he learned the truth of his situation. Philip had told him nothing, had let him snare himself with idealism and hormone-fueled ecstasy, had left him alone with his terrified questions and his grief. He would not be like that. Not ever.

Coby never sought him out again, but he picked up other men in the park and must have told one of them David's story. For a while there was whispering among the regulars whenever they saw him, and many avoided him. They think I'm just another crazy homeless guy, David thought bitterly, and spent the better part of the next two years repairing his reputation. They were the only community he had. He couldn't bear the idea of losing them, too.

Somehow thinking of Coby reminded him of Jack. Their faces had been similar, he decided, with wide brows and pointed chins and deep blue eyes, but their personalities were completely different. Jack had been a wild one, all long hair and high incongruous

laugh. He barely let David touch him at first. "No," he said fiercely, "I've waited my whole life for a mouthful of cock and I'm not waiting one more minute." Strange, David thought as Jack's hair brushed against his thighs, how he could still be shocked by such brashness after seven decades of sex in the bushes. It was hard to imagine anything seeming new or strange, and yet they were all new and strange, each and every one of them. It was all that kept him going: their variety where he was unchanging, their wrinkled faces where his was forever smooth, their blithe youth and energy where he was old and weary and afraid... and their lack of technique where he was endlessly practiced. "Careful with the teeth, there," he murmured, and laid a gentle hand on the boy's bobbing head. "Take your time. You have all your life ahead of you."

Jack came back looking for him a couple of times, but David had learned how to fade back among the trees. He never let them find him more than once. He watched as the weeks passed, spring into summer into autumn. Jack fell predictably hard for Martin, one of the older regulars, and just as predictably got his heart broken and left in a huff. A few days later he came back and picked up a fresh-faced Mormon boy with wicked dark eyes. David eavesdropped on them for a bit, got bored by the endless giggling, and went off to find... someone. Who had it been after Jack? He couldn't remember. The faces swirled like oil on a puddle, a high school yearbook on a bad acid trip.

The sun was coming up. He pulled himself into his tree, made sure he was well hidden among the leaves, and closed his eyes.

"How long has it been?"

"You're not gonna ask why you're here?"

"I think I know by now."

The elf shrugged. "Have it your way. Two hundred years even, as of... now." It crossed its repulsive eyes at him and vanished.

David wondered what had happened in the outside world over those two hundred years. They had done something about the light pollution; he never saw the clouds now unless they were illuminated by the moon. He was surprised to find that he missed the dull orange glow. For all he knew there was no city at all anymore, and the park's edges had extended into a vast wilderness. But no, the men he saw were still clearly city-dwellers, their voices sharp and sardonic even when they laughed.

Something was different about Matty. Maybe it was the way he looked at everything with dark, thoughtful eyes. Maybe, David admitted to himself, it was how much he resembled Philip. David allowed himself one indulgence a year on the night after the elf's annual

visit, a way to drown his sorrows and numb his memory, and Matty was more of an indulgence than usual. He was no novice, this one. He had come to the park practiced and assured, and David marveled at the ease with which their glances met and conveyed all that either of them needed to know. Their first coupling was almost clumsy in its eagerness; the second was slow and tender, and afterwards they lay barely touching, the late summer breeze slithering over them and doing nothing whatsoever to cool them off. David stretched out on his back, feeling the damp grass stick to his sweaty skin as it had been doing for close on three centuries.

"Sometime lately," Matty murmured, "I've caught m'self thinkin' I'll be doin' this forever."

David bit his lip, and said nothing. Together, in silence, they watched the moon rise.

THE STEEL ANNIVERSARY

BY VALERIE Z. LEWIS

This is not a fairly tale.

This is not a gingerbread house in the woods, not a street where people leave their doors unlocked, not a town where every year there's a Harvest Fest in the village square, and residents harvest hot dogs and Girl Scout cookies from old ladies in little blue tents. This is not a turning point in history, not the beginning of a new era, not an artistic renaissance. Not even close.

This is a front porch where the view is only other people's fences. This is the sound of faraway traffic, and just below it, the rumble of generators. This is weeds and cigarette butts on a sidewalk no one walks on, but my girl and I, we like the quiet. This is the year Xana and I turn thirty, the year we have a baby, and the year we get rid of the guns.

Of course, everything with Xana has to be an argument. I just hope our future child never finds out that we spent months debating over which one of us had to give birth, with both of us insisting our jobs were too important to take the time off. I think Xana just didn't want to spend nine months without a beer. I'll admit that her job is more important; Xana's a doctor, and none of my clients' lives hang in the balance, even if some of them insist they'll die if I don't get their awning designed on time. In the end it, like everything else in this world, was decided by money. The hospital would give Xana an unpaid maternity leave while my company would cover up to three months.

The next step was to decide on a father. I suggested Joey, that way the child would be related to Xana too, but she preferred an anonymous donor. "I trust my little brother to install our pool," she said. "But I don't want his semen in my girlfriend."

The pool was my first household victory in a long time. As soon as I decided to get pregnant I became obsessed with home improvements, and the Playboys that used to cover our coffee table were quickly replaced with Home Depot catalogs. I wanted an in-ground pool, new hardwood floors in the spare bedroom, and a chandelier in the dining room. "For the baby," I argued. I settled for the pool, a throw rug in the bedroom, and Xana's speech about how infants aren't impressed by lighting fixtures.

"But it's our fifteenth anniversary this year," I told her one night as we ate take-out under our sadly inadequate overhead light. "That's the crystal anniversary. So we should get a chandelier."

“Eleven,” Xana corrected me. “We moved in together eleven years ago.”

“What’s the gift for eleven?”

She shrugged. “How the fuck should I know? Who cares about gifts anyway? It’s not like someone’s throwing us a party. Let’s just stay home and fuck.” This is why I love Xana; she never sugar-coats things.

In reality, we haven’t had a lot of sex lately. She usually stays up later than I do, so sex is relegated to Saturday afternoons when we’re cuddling on the couch watching movies. It’s not like when we first met, when I cranked up the volume on the stereo of the van we’d stolen in the Bronx and danced for her under a streetlight, grinding my body against the metal pole and slowly unbuttoning my sweater, until Xana laughed, kissed me, and we did it right there on the sidewalk. It’s one of my favorite memories, but the beautiful girl who danced with me that night, she’s the one person I can never mention it to.

Xana won’t talk about the war, or anything that happened before it. Of course, neither will I. The difference is, I think about it a lot. I’m pretty sure Xana’s completely forgotten the first four years we knew each other. How we met (in our tenth-grade World History class), our first kiss (in her bedroom while her mother was at work), the first time we had sex (in my father’s car in the grocery store parking lot), finding her grandfather missing and his building burned down (an early victim of the Haruspex Army), running away from home and living in stolen cars (until my father tried to take me away and Xana found the Underground), the fighter who died from his gunshot wounds in the basement hideout in Brooklyn (as Xana, who’d only had one semester of Nursing in our school’s vocational program, tried to stop the bleeding, and ended up with dark red all over her hands, her arms, her face, her black hair sticking together in clumps as she bent over his body and cried like she was choking).

There are nights, lying alone in our bed as Xana reads downstairs, when I think I’ll give anything to forget things like that, people we saw die, people we killed, what the Haruspex guards did to me. But I wouldn’t give up being sixteen years old and dancing underneath a streetlight for my girlfriend in the middle of the night. I wouldn’t throw away all my memories. The difference is, Xana has.

On the day my first trimester ended, Joey came to start excavation. It was a Saturday, but Xana was called into work. She left at five a.m., waking me up with a tirade about how fucking Davis can’t handle shit by himself, eventually pausing to lean down, kiss me, and whisper, “We’ll make it up tomorrow, my beautiful girl.”

I spent the morning on the back porch sipping hazelnut coffee and sketching the tree behind the shed. But in my sketch the rusty old shed wasn’t there, just a wide meadow of ferns, wildflowers, branches arcing upward, and millions of tiny leaves. Drawing is like memory; you get to leave out the crappy parts.

"I need a new shed," I told Joey as we ate lunch together on the back porch. Joey was a quiet guy, and we shared many comfortable silences that day when he took his breaks. Anyone overhearing our conversation would think we were reverently gazing at my brand new hole in the ground, admiring its muddy depth. But I was looking at the shed. I'd been looking at that hideous beige thing for eleven years, I realized. Eleven years in this house with Xana. But fifteen years since we met. And fifteen years means crystal.

"I know a guy," Joey said. I waited for him to elaborate, but he just picked up another sandwich with his dirty hands and took a big bite. I flipped a page in my sketchbook and started drawing the neighbor's house with brick instead of shingles. Then Joey asked about the war.

"Were you really in a Haruspex prison?" Joey was five when the war started. I'm sure Xana's never told him anything. Anytime she's around, the war is something huge that you don't dare mention, like an elephant in the room, like a basement filled with plastic crates of automatic weapons. "What's a Haruspex prison like anyway?"

During the war, anyone who wasn't Haruspex or Underground just stayed in their homes, went about their lives, and waited for it to end. It was this strange national passivity that continued easily after the war ended. Then the rumor was that the Haruspex were dark wizards who could control people's minds, which explained why so few people fought them. A client once told me that the Haruspex erased his memory after the war. But this is not a fairy tale. The truth is that a group of White Supremacists had too much time and too many guns, and no one cared enough to stop them. Like the opposite of mass hysteria. Mass silence.

I could tell Joey how the Haruspex formed, how the government allowed them to operate unchecked, how the Underground was created, and how we fought back. But all of it doesn't matter anymore. I could explain how we won, but that's the most meaningless detail of all. It doesn't feel like winning when there's no celebration, no museum of artifacts, no songs written in your honor, and all your friends are dead.

It's three paragraphs in your history book. It's something you only vaguely remember. It's a time your mother refers to as, "You remember when we bought that new sofa; it was after the war, when there were so many sales." Most people who were involved – on either side - are dead now. The ones who weren't never cared. The ones who survived pretend their minds were magically erased.

Imagine the worst thing you've seen in your lifetime. A terrorist attack that killed thousands, a hurricane that destroyed a city, a war, a famine, plague, genocide. You sit on your couch watching CNN and sobbing, because you can see the dead people, right in front of you. You ignore the dinner you don't have the energy to prepare and the buzzer announcing the dryer cycle's finished, because someone's starving to death in prime time, and you just can't look away. And you think, "When everyone sees this, it's going to change everything. After this, the world is never going to be the same again." But it is.

I finished my iced tea and chucked the plastic bottle toward the trashcan at the top of the driveway. When Xana and I first bought the house we used to do this with beer cans, but in my current state I'm limited to sugar highs.

"I won't talk about the war," I told Joey. "I just won't. There will be no heartwarming memoir and no made-for-TV movie. Let someone else inform future generations. Someone who wasn't there." I stood and gathered our paper plates. "Like everything else in this world."

It was the second time this year someone stirred up images I prefer to keep to myself. Xana's hospital had a Valentine's Day party, and at one point in the evening Mark Davis came up to me and said, "Why doesn't Xana do rapes?"

I just about dropped my wine glass. "Excuse me?"

"Rapes," he said a little too loudly, sounding less like a doctor and more like one of those guys on the subway who you slowly inch away from. "Xana takes patients with oozing sores on their genitals," he said as he cut a slice of lemon meringue pie with the side of his fork, "but she always gives the rapes to me." He shoved the pie into his mouth and tilted his head sideways. "What's up with that?"

And suddenly I'm eighteen and escaping from a metal cage using only a plastic fork and my fingernails. When I find Xana, she's sitting in the hallway with a dead guard in her lap and both her legs broken. The whole prison is in chaos by then, but as soon as we see each other the gunfire stops. She looks at me, at my bleeding fingertips, and at the blood running down my pants, so much that it's soaking my socks. "My beautiful girl," she whispers.

"Maybe you're good at rapes," I told Davis. He nodded, took another piece of pie, and walked away.

When I was six months pregnant I asked Xana to get rid of the guns in the basement. I hadn't mentioned it before because I thought it was a given. It was ridiculous to have a baby and a huge stash of guns at the same time. I assumed Xana agreed with me, had a plan to dispose of them, and would be informing me of this plan at any moment.

We were sitting on the couch watching some sort of mindless television when I mentioned it. Xana didn't move, but I saw her face get stiffer, colder, and she answered without looking at me. "We might need them someday."

I should've backed off. I should've thought of her sitting alone in the living room late at night when I'm asleep, watching the front window and counting the steps to the basement door. But I'd worked overtime that day, my back hurt, and I was tired of being silent for her sake. I was tired of pretending that it wasn't my goddamn crystal anniversary. "We're thirty year-old dykes living in the suburbs," I said. "Why would we possibly need the firepower of a small country?"

“You don’t know what could happen,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically calm. If she was shouting and swearing, I would know how to respond, but Xana speaking quietly was just too foreign.

“You’re crazy,” I muttered, and I went to bed. Alone, as usual.

The next morning I got up early and watched the sun rise from the front porch. After a little while Xana joined me, handed me an iced tea (her version of a peace offering), and lit a cigarette.

“I wish I had a fence,” I said. Anyone overhearing our conversation would think I was expressing a desire for a wooden structure encircling our property. The sad truth is that, when I was seventeen, I would’ve easily been able to sell a few hundred machine guns with the serial numbers burned off. But now there’s no place for them to go. Even if we had an incinerator to melt them, the stench would send all the neighbors running. If we rented a U-Haul and took them to the dump we’d surely get arrested. If we threw them in the river there’d be guns washing up on beaches for years.

“Well, we don’t,” Xana said. She flicked her cigarette onto the lawn and went inside.

About a week later we were cooking dinner when I thought about something else the baby needs – a playroom. Somewhere with a low ceiling where it can have a big toy collection and birthday parties. Somewhere where Xana and I can send it when we want to be left alone. I walked to the edge of the kitchen and opened the basement door.

My father did this when I was around eight or nine. He rented half the basement of our building, got his friends together to help finish it, and turned it into a playroom for me. One day he led me down to a door past the washing machines, and there was my Barbie mansion, my matchbox cars, and a new wooden toy box. “What do you think, kid?” He said. I looked up at him. “I think you’re going to join an organization that kills your wife and tortures your daughter, and when it’s all over you’ll still live in this apartment like nothing ever happened.” Memory is like drawing; you can make up the details if you want to.

Xana said my name sharply, a warning, like an angry mother’s voice, startling me into stillness.

When I turned around to face her, I was crying. “The gift for eleven years is steel,” I said through my tears. “If we melt it all down we could have a steel gate at the driveway and a steel bench in the garden. A steel railing...” She didn’t move toward me, just froze with the slotted spoon in her hand as I sobbed into my palm. “We got together eleven years ago and nothing happened before then, Xana, I promise, there was nothing before.”

After a few minutes, when she couldn’t react and I couldn’t stop crying, she put the spoon down and just walked away. I sat down against the basement door and cried for

what seemed like hours. When I finally went to bed, I hadn't calmed down; I'd just gotten too tired to keep going.

A few days later Joey returned to work on the pool some more. He was finished excavating, and was just making some final checks before the concrete guy showed up. When I walked outside to greet him Xana was already there, standing on the edge of the big dirt hole and talking to him in a low voice. Without water it looked deeper than I thought a pool should be, like a mass grave waiting patiently for the army to return.

They ended up sinking all the guns into the foundation of the pool. There's a solid three feet of concrete between the last gun and the floor of the pool, so no one will know until the house is demolished, an event that's unlikely during our lifetimes.

Joey and Xana did it all in one day while I was at work. I can't imagine her carrying all those guns, with all their memories. A resistance movement that springs up literally overnight has few resources, so everything we had we stole from them. We could take a sick pleasure in killing men with guns that used to belong to their fellow soldiers, but it was diminished when we remembered that these could be the very guns used to kill the people who fought beside us, the kids we knew from school, Xana's grandfather, my mom.

Carrying them two or three at a time, Xana could've made a hundred trips from the basement to the backyard, holding the MAC-11 Billy gave her right before he was executed, holding the M60 that shot me in the leg right before she gutted its owner, holding the GPMG with the bipod attachment, holding it cradled in her arms like a baby.

That night Xana came to bed with me. We wrapped our arms around each other tight, like we were desperately in love, like we weren't aging monogamous women who'd been having sex forever. I felt like a tenth-grade girl lying naked in her twin bed with a sleeping bag crumpled on the floor in case her mother suspected anything other than an innocent sleepover, amazed at what she was feeling for the first time, so dizzy with happiness she was sure that, as long as she had her girlfriend, nothing bad could happen to her.

"Tell me one story," Xana said. "Just one before I forget everything."

Her hand, which was resting on my huge stomach, fluttered and shook against my bare skin. I put my hand over hers to still it, only to feel the tremor spread through the rest of her body, and for a second I wished there was a dark wizard army that could magically erase it all. And maybe there was. "My girl," I whispered. "My beautiful girl."

"I'm fifteen," I told her. "I'm sitting in my World History class. I just finished my test, but everyone else is still quiet. I roll up the sleeve of my sweater and start scratching at the tiny scabs on my left arm."

“Then the girl in front of me turns around. I’ve seen her in the halls before, but I’ve never spoken to her. She’s got dark hair and big eyes, and I think she’s the most gorgeous girl in the school. I’m so amazed she’s looking at me that I can’t even say anything.

“The she looks at my arm, and she says, ‘What are you, cutting yourself? That’s fucking retarded. Stop fucking cutting yourself.’

“And they lived happily ever after.”

THE TRUTH OF SKIN AND INK

BY BA TORTUGA

It was damned near closing time, and Aidan was freaking glad. Some nights were better than others, and tonight his head was just aching. Little lights flashed behind his eyes and his ears rang. He knew if he took a few quiet moments he'd probably be okay, but tonight had also been a night for little chickies wanting roses and Playboy bunnies.

Sighing, Aidan put on a fresh pair of gloves and started cleaning up, praying that the little bell over the tattoo parlor's door wouldn't ding again tonight.

Of course he'd known it wouldn't happen that way. The bell went off, the sound of heavy boots echoed on the tile. Aidan looked up at a study in denim and well-worn leather, angular face shadowed by a black cowboy hat, the shape of the man's body hidden by the leather duster.

"Y'all closed?"

"Nope. Not for a bit yet." Aidan looked at the guy, sizing him up. Waiting.

"Heard you did custom pieces. One of a kind things." Square hands, strong chin with a hint of pale stubble -- the entire look was strong, male, unmoving.

"I do. You looking for something special? I don't do much flash work. I do a lot of blackwork." The headache was easing now. It would until the work was done.

"I don't want something that someone else has. I want something I'll remember." One square hand was offered over. "My name's Joshua, by the way."

He took off his glove and shook, feeling strength but not macho bravado in it. The hand had calluses aplenty, and was warm and dry.

"Aidan."

"Aidan. Pleased." The brim of the dark hat was pushed back, exposing eyes the color of dark stone. "So how does this work exactly? Do you usually get a picture or something?"

"Well, some folks come in with a design I can work with, and some folks just tell me what they want and I draw it up." He could see the start of it, not an ancient myth, more a modern one, something Old West.

"Oh. I have this." A piece of soft leather was pulled from a pocket, a scant Native American design of a horse, a feather, a bird in flight. "It was found on my place."

Yeah. That was... yeah. That was perfect, but what the Hell did it mean? He'd figure it out by the time he was done. Aidan checked his watch. "Let me go lock up. You're all I'll have time for tonight."

"Sure. Do you want cash? Credit cards?"

"Actually, I take either." He grinned at Joshua as he came back, admiring the squareness of the man's body, the symmetry. "Why don't I sketch out what I have in mind and you can see if you like it?"

"That sounds just fine. Thank you." The duster slipped off, draped over one strong arm.

"You're wanting this on your chest or back?" He knew it would be one or the other. There would be no room for it anywhere else. Aidan took the duster and hung it up before pointing to a chair. "Have a seat."

The drawing took no time at all. All he had to do was let his eyes unfocus and his hand move.

"My back." Long legs stretched out, grey boots crossed at the ankle.

"Mmmhmm." There. He blinked, looked at the drawing. Yeah. He'd taken the scrap of design and added depth, shadow, and a bright moon. "How's this?"

One callused finger traced the design, the man nodding. "Yeah. Yeah, that's just right."

Aidan listened to the rough skin scrape against the paper for a moment. "You have your own land, don't you? Not just a house, but a piece of land to go with it."

"Yes. I have eighty acres. There's a creek that borders one side, live oak trees, a pond."

"Oh." Wow. He couldn't imagine having that much room. "That sounds real nice. This might take more than a little while. You ever had work done before?"

"No. I knew I wanted something unique. I've been reading about it, talking to folks."

"Then we ought to talk pricing." Some people freaked out and changed their minds when they found out how much he charged. He ran down the pricing schedule, estimating at least an hour and a half.

He really wanted to do this piece.

It seemed like he needed to.

Joshua didn't even flinch, just nodded and dug out a credit card and a driver's license and handed them over. "You sure I'm not keeping you too late?"

"Nope." Heck, his headache was gone, his neck loose, his shoulders relaxed. "Let me get this going, and then we can get started. You'll need to take off your shirt."

Aidan looked forward to seeing that strong body bare, to seeing what tales it told him. Joshua nodded and stood, putting the dark hat up by his coat, baring close-cropped hair the color of dark, dark honey. Then the grey shirt was unbuttoned and carefully folded, followed by the white undershirt. Wide-shoulders tapered down into tiny hips, the man muscled in a way that spoke of hard work.

Not like his own gym muscles at all. It fascinated Aidan, and he wanted to touch. Instead he verified the card, took down the numbers, and got the paperwork ready. Something buzzed at the back of his mind, some story that would speak to him once the ink flowed. The necessary forms and slips were signed, Joshua's signature black and strong, a pointed scrawl on the paper.

"What do I do now?"

"Now you come over here and let me place the design and approve it." He got to touch finally, one hand on Joshua's back to guide him. Warm skin. Muscle. A shiver went down his spine.

The touch registered only a moment before the scent of Joshua, smells of earth and soap and musk. "I think I can manage that."

"Cool." He got Joshua settled, got the design placed, happy to be able to look his fill and not have Joshua see him. A guy like that probably didn't want Aidan, or any guy, drooling. "Here, hold this."

The best way for him to get Joshua to see the design and not move was the double mirror trick chicks and rock stars did to see the backs of their 'dos.

"Oh. Oh, man. That's... Damn." Joshua nodded, cheeks going red. "That works."

"Cool. We'll get going then. Remember to breathe, and if you need a break, or need to sneeze or whatever, you holler right away."

God, he couldn't wait to watch the design take shape on that oddly perfect skin. Made his cheeks hot, too, made him wonder what he would see. Sometimes he saw what was going on right away. The most interesting ones were the ones he had to peel away the layers on. This guy? Had more layers than a late-season onion.

"Okay." Joshua settled, hands under his chin, taking deep breaths. "I'll be still."

Yeah, right, like the little muscles that lived right under Joshua's skin weren't jumping and tight.

"No worries. This part I'm much better at. It's the small talk I suck at, you know?" He grinned, got a fresh pair of gloves, and set to work. He really was best at this part. The actual ink and skin, the buzz blending with Joshua's breathing, sort of a seriously Zen thing.

Joshua relaxed, breathing easy, skin flushed and shiny as he worked. Oh, yeah. The guy was into it.

It went fast, time passing as he lined and shaded and made the design as perfect as he could. He wanted Joshua to be pleased, wanted him to really love the piece. God, it had been awhile since he'd been so into a guy. The scent of the ink mingled with the copper of blood and the musk of Joshua's sweat. Damn. Pheromones.

Aidan started to get hard, but he ignored it. He couldn't afford to get distracted. Not with the needle still in his hand.

Every so often he'd hit a sensitive spot and Joshua would moan, just so softly, skin rippling.

That was a good moan, though, not a bad one. He hated working on people who hated the needle. Sure, it could be damned uncomfortable, but if you knew how to go with it... Joshua was a natural.

Joshua took a deep breath, hips shifting just a bit.

"You need a break?" Shit. He cleared his throat. He sounded like a frog.

"No. No, I'm... I'm good." He wasn't the only one who was hoarse. "I'm good."

"Cool." Cool. That meant he didn't have to lose the flow, didn't have to lose the... connection, maybe. Aidan took a deep breath and started on the moon, the one piece that wasn't in the scrap of design Joshua had brought him, but had been in the original. He knew it, could see it clear as nighttime in the desert.

"Tell me what you're doing, what it looks like?"

"It looks like the moon on red rock. It looks like a horse that's waiting for a rider to return, or maybe it's waiting for the bird to turn into a man, so it can too." He wiped some of the blood away and worked on a feather. "It looks fucking amazing on your skin."

"Feels amazing. Didn't think it would..."

"Sometimes you get into it..." Yeah. Joshua was into it. So was he.

"Yeah." Another of those deep, swallowed moans sounded, echoed.

God. More feathers, more detail, and he was moving on to the horse again, working in detail, letting the moon shine in the single eye he'd put in profile. Damn. That just came to life on the man's skin, practically moved.

"It feels alive, like it's on fire."

"Not hurting bad, though, are you? I can give you a minute." He was so close...

"No. It's not bad. I'm with you, man."

"Good." Hell, he could go on forever, but he'd just end up with junk that wasn't supposed to be there, especially since this was supposed to be a stylized piece. He put one last piece of mane in, then sat back to look, surprised as hell when his back protested madly. Beautiful. Fucking stunning. He reached for the spray bottle, spraying the cold solution over the burning skin. Joshua jerked, the cry sudden and surprised in the silence.

He stroked Joshua's ribs, just to the side of the design. "You all right?"

The man nodded, breath coming quick, skin hot under his hand. "That was intense."

"It was good, man. You're a great subject." Right. It was probably time to back off and get the guy ready to go. It had been... wow, an hour and a half.

Those dark stone eyes met his, heated, burning. "Thank you."

He figured Joshua could read all manner of things in his own eyes. "You're welcome. I... it. I still don't know..."

Joshua leaned, just a little, focused on him. "Don't know what?"

"What it means..." There was no headache, no ringing, just a persistent ache in his crotch, his cock pressing against his zipper. "I usually know."

"Oh. I..." Joshua leaned even closer, their breath mingling.

Aidan breathed in, the scent of them mingling, deep and rich. He leaned too, swaying dangerously close. Wanting.

The kiss was inevitable, their moans mingling, twining together.

The wind sighed, and Aidan would swear he heard the stamping of hooves, the flutter of wings. Joshua's lips tasted like dust and spice, warm and firm under his as he opened his mouth to lick and press.

Joshua's hand cupped his face, drew him closer, deepening their kiss. Stone -- those eyes were the color of stones uncovered by winds and rains.

His own hands rose to sit on Joshua's shoulders, kneading, fingers digging in. They moved closer, closer still, until his chest brushed Joshua's, only his thin t-shirt in the way.

He could feel Joshua's heart beating against his chest, almost hoof beats. It was the oddest sensation, but not a bad one, not bad at all. He slid forward, his thigh riding up alongside Joshua's, his lips traveling along Joshua's cheek and chin. Joshua's hands were warm, sliding over his neck, his scalp, exploring him, awakening his nerves and making his skin tingle.

Soft sounds escaped him, whispers of words he really couldn't understand, but he knew what they meant anyway. They meant want you, and I waited for you, and yes, now. The next kiss simply stole his breath, leaving him gasping as Joshua's tongue pushed into his mouth.

His shirt tugged out of his waistband, Joshua's fingers dragging along his skin. Shocks zinged up and down his spine, his nipples drawing right up and his belly going tight. His hands felt weird, and he realized he still had the gloves on. He struggled, trying hard to get them off without really letting go.

Joshua pushed up under his shirt, drawing circles and swirls along his spine, sliding to trace his ribs. The calluses caught his skin, sensitizing it.

"Please." There. That was a word he understood. Aidan raised his arms, let Joshua take his shirt off, and they were skin to skin suddenly, the hair on his chest rubbing Joshua's skin. Joshua groaned, hands tugging him close, heat pouring off the man. Insane. This was fucking insane.

But so, so good. As good as anything had ever felt. He tried to keep his hands off the new ink, tried not to touch it, but every time his hands slid around Joshua's shoulders, his ribs, he could feel it, like a shock, a little jolt of electricity. Lightning.

"Uhn. Aidan." One of those hands snaked between them, cupping his cock and rubbing.

"Mmm." Yeah. He spread his thighs, let Joshua have more of him, even as his hands slid down to cup that tight butt in even tighter jeans.

They were perched between the chairs, rubbing, pushing, pulling at each other. He wanted to get closer. More. And there was no way he could get all he wanted perched where he was, so he tugged them down on the floor.

The scents of hay and molasses and soap were in Joshua's hair, in the huff of Joshua's breath into his lips as they settled. So not like his usual customer. So not like anything he'd ever had. Aidan touched, careful not to hit the skin that was raw from the tattoo. His ink. On Joshua's body. Jesus, his cock went crazy thinking about it.

"You're something." Joshua worked his zipper down, fingers stroking right over length of his prick.

"Am I?" Yeah, okay, he could. Oh. Right there. Damn. Aidan arched into the touch, his thighs straining.

Joshua nodded, the touch growing firmer, lips on his jaw enough to drive him mad.

"Sweet. Yeah. Man, that's sweet." He could hear the thundering of his own heart, now, like they were on a wild ride across the plains. Like he was the bird, soaring over the horse's back.

"Yes." The harsh lights seemed to dim, the city's sounds disappearing in a rush.

Remembering then that he had hands, Aidan undid Joshua's jeans, struggling to get them open. He wanted to feel, too, and Joshua's cock throbbed, pushing out, reaching for his hand. He took it in his fingers, feeling the weight of it, the heat. God, the man was built like a brick house...all over.

Joshua tugged him onto those thighs, managed to get him to where their cocks were pushed together, held in Joshua's fingers.

"Oh...." That felt like...Jesus. He wanted to do another tat for Joshua now. He could see it as he got into rhythm, riding those thighs. He wanted to do a bucking bronco with a lean, broad shouldered rider on back. One who looked like the man in his arms. One that he didn't have to search for the meaning, just use pure admiration.

"Yeah. Yeah, goddamn." Joshua bucked up, rolling underneath him, fingers rubbing him good and hard.

"Tell me you'll come back, yeah? Tell me you'll let me do another one." There was magic in Joshua's touch. Pure spark. Aidan grabbed on and stroked them, too, needing to feel Joshua shake.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be back. I need to see you do the next one." Joshua's voice was all raw need and growl.

"Yes. Shit." He swarmed up, got even higher on those lean thighs, rocking like he was in a rocking chair, his cock sliding on Joshua's so good.

"Come on." Joshua's lips slammed down against his, that tongue pushing in deep and tasting him.

Fuck. He lost it, coming so hard he all but bit Joshua's tongue off. He shot for what seemed like forever, shaking and moaning and seeing clear as day the next tattoo that would go on his own skin.

That cowboy held onto him, hand stroking down his back as he came down.

"You... you need to, too." He tried to make his brain work, tried to get his hand moving.

"Uh-huh." Joshua put their foreheads together, eyes staring into him like maybe he was something fascinating.

Aidan was used to being nearly invisible; his art was what people stared at. He finally got his arm swinging, tugging at Joshua's cock, really pulling.

It didn't take Joshua long at all, those eyes going wide, sharing that need with him as heat sprayed over his hand.

"Oh. Oh, man. Yeah." That was...it made all the ink he'd done in the last year fade from his memory like it was nothing.

Joshua's lips spread in a wide smile, the look enough to sink into him.

"Damn." He just.

"You wanna. I mean. I'm done here, soon as I tape you up. We could..."

"Yeah. I want." There wasn't the slightest hesitation in those words.

"Do you need to get back to your place? Or are you in town for the night?" His place was small, but it would do.

"I'm here 'til tomorrow, then I'll go do my feeding."

"Well, why don't you come home with me then?" He felt bold as anything, asking, but he wanted to spend more time with this fascinating man.

"Sounds like a plan." He got another one of those grins, Joshua's eyes gone crinkly. "You wanna stop and get us some supper and a beer on the way?"

"You bet. Let me just get you all lubed up." He winked, figuring it was okay to tease. He wanted to take this one home and see what other tattoos came to him when they went to bed together.

Heck, he wanted to see what else might happen, too. Something about this cowboy made him feel like a soaring bird, just waiting for his lover to come. Maybe they'd change each other. Maybe they'd soar.

SIDE EFFECTS BY M. DECKER

Thunk. The bed shifted as Jordan plunked himself down on it. "Are you awake?" he asked.

Will pulled the pillow over his head. "No," he muttered. A few strands of blond hair stuck out around the edges.

"C'mon!" Jordan yanked the pillow away and flopped down to look his boyfriend in the face. "I got a job!"

"s great," Will replied, not opening his eyes. "Breakfast's on you."

"No, Will," Jordan said, shaking Will's shoulders slightly to wake him up. "A real job."

Will cracked his eyes open and peered up at him. "What, like with magic and stuff?"

Jordan grinned and nodded.

Will pushed himself up on one elbow. "Seriously? Someone's going to pay for that?"

Jordan's grin widened and he nodded again. "A summoning! Not much, just fifty bucks, but the ingredients are really cheap and it won't take very long and then I'll have a reference and everything and start getting bigger jobs!" He tugged the covers off of Will. "Get up, let's go celebrate!"

Will shivered, yanked the covers back up and glanced at the clock. "Dude, it's like three a.m."

Jordan shrugged. "So, Denny's. I'll bring my flask. We can spike the coffee and get waffles with all the crap piled on them."

"Or," Will said, one arm snaking out from under the covers to grab Jordan's leg, "we could celebrate right here. Without even leaving the bed."

Jordan considered this.

"And we can get waffles. In the morning," Will added.

"With whipped cream." Jordan had his shirt off and was working on his pants.

"On me or the waffles?" Will asked, pulling Jordan down from a kiss.

Jordan left his pants half-open and wrapped his arms around Will. "I'm good for either."

When Will got home from work the next day, the apartment stank of sulfur and something that smelled like burnt hair. Will flicked on the lights, dropped his briefcase by the door and went straight for the windows to let in some fresh air.

Jordan was crashed out on the couch. Will noticed that the tattoos on his arms had faded to faint lines. Must've used a lot of magic today, Will thought. He sat down gently next to Jordan and shook his boyfriend's shoulders lightly.

Jordan opened his eyes and blinked at Will. "Crap, is it six already?"

"Yep. I hope that smell isn't our dinner."

"No," Jordan sat up and ran a hand through sleep-rumpled brown hair. "There's a lasagna in the freezer. Won't take long to cook."

"I'll take care of it," Will said, getting up. "Maybe we should adjust the dinner schedule if you're going to be so worn out when you do a summoning." He glanced around suddenly. "Er. It's not loose is it?"

Jordan grinned. "Messenger picked it up already. It's just a Frioh, anyway. They're like, ferret-sized and not very dangerous."

"Good," Will said. He gave Jordan a kiss and went into the kitchen to fix dinner.

Jordan found the remote and turned on the TV. He drew an afghan around himself and settled in to watch Law and Order reruns.

Will stepped out of the kitchen. "Ferret-sized?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"They don't come any bigger?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Not, say, Great Dane-sized?"

"Nope."

"Green scales? Inch-long claws?"

Jordan laughed. "No, brown scales with tiny claws."

"Right." Will nodded. He looked back into the kitchen. "So, what would you call a Great-Dane sized creature with green scales and inch-long claws? With, say, wings and a long tail?"

Jordan didn't look up from the TV. "There's a few varieties of dragons that come that small."

"Dangerous?"

"All dragons are. Red-eyed ones tend to be the most vicious." Jordan finally looked up at Will, who was staring into the kitchen.

"It's sleeping. I can't tell the eye color," Will said.

Jordan dropped the remote and walked over to the kitchen doorway. Curled up in one corner was a green dragon, about the size of a very large dog. Little puffs of smoke rose from its nose as it snored contentedly.

"Shit!" Jordan stared at it.

Will gestured vaguely at the creature. "I take it this was unplanned?"

"No, I forgot that I summoned a dragon!" Jordan gave Will a dirty look.

Will held up his hands in surrender. "Just checking."

Jordan carefully closed the kitchen door. "Okay," he said. "First thing - do NOT wake him." Will shot Jordan a "duh!" look, but Jordan was too deep in thought to notice. "As long as he's sleeping, we have a chance of getting him out of here safely." He paced back and forth, tapping his fingers on the back of the couch as he walked.

"What about that company you did the summoning for? Will they take a dragon?" Will asked. He sat down on the arm of the couch.

"BioGen?" Jordan nodded. "They might. But he's got to be restrained somehow. Which for a dragon would include muzzling."

Will looked toward the kitchen doubtfully. "Could you hit him with a tranq gun?"

Jordan shook his head. "Not with those scales."

"Taser?" Will suggested.

"Probably wouldn't work, would definitely wake him up and would have to be done within arm's reach." Jordan shook his head. "No."

Will sighed. "Why don't we just call Jonathan and ask him to bring his gun over?"

Jordan stopped pacing and looked at Will in horror. "Kill him?! He hasn't done anything!"

"You said he was dangerous!"

"So's Jonathan!" Jordan realized his voice was rising and dropped it to a frantic whisper. "We wouldn't shoot him if he fell asleep in our kitchen!"

Will threw up his hands. "So what do we do? Board up the kitchen and hope he doesn't break out?"

"I'm thinking!" Jordan rubbed his forehead with his fingertips and started pacing again. Will watched him impatiently, arms folded across his chest.

"Meat!" Jordan said finally, with a snap of his fingers.

Will raised his eyebrows at Jordan and waited for an explanation.

Jordan caught the look. "Feed him meat with tranquilizers in it," he explained. "That'll knock him out long enough to get him in a cage. Go to the butcher, get the freshest, meatiest steaks you can find. I'll hit the pet store and get a cage, muzzle, and horse tranquilizers." He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the clock. "Twenty minutes 'til closing," he muttered. He knelt in front of the coffee table and tossed magazines and papers aside frantically.

Will put a hand on Jordan's shoulder. "I hung up your keys by the door," he said.

Jordan stood up and looked over at the key rack. "Ah," he said. "Good."

Will gave Jordan a light kiss. "Breathe. We can handle this."

Jordan nodded. "Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "I'll meet you back here in about half an hour." From the kitchen came the sound of claws scratching on linoleum, as if a very large cat were waking from a nap. Jordan looked at Will. "If I'm not back before you, wait outside the door."

Will stared at the kitchen door. "Uh-huh." He looked back at Jordan. "How dangerous?"

"We can talk specs after we drug him, 'kay?" Jordan gave Will a small smile and they both headed for the door.

Will was waiting outside the apartment door with a bag of steak when Jordan returned with a cage and a bag from the pet store.

"Kevin now thinks we have the kinkiest sex life ever," Jordan grinned. He set the large stainless steel cage down near the door and looked at Will. "What's going on in there?"

Will shook his head. "I heard scraping and things falling. Didn't try to get a look."

"Good," Jordan said softly. "I don't want you getting hurt."

"I don't want you to get hurt, either," Will said. It came out a little sharper than he intended.

Jordan just smiled. "Sling your meat over here, then," he said. Will rolled his eyes and handed him the bag from the butcher's shop. Jordan took out a syringe and injected each piece of meat with the liquid from a small, unmarked bottle.

"So, they just sell that stuff over-the-counter?" Will asked, eyebrows raised.

"If you know which counter to ask at," Jordan grinned. He finished up the injections and put away the syringe. "Stand back," he warned. Will took a step back as Jordan opened the apartment door a crack. Jordan peered in, then let the door swing open all the way. "It's safe," he said. "He's still in the kitchen."

"Yay," muttered Will. They dragged the cage and supplies into the apartment. Jordan picked up the meat again and approached the kitchen door.

The scuffling in the kitchen stopped. Jordan paused with his hand on the doorknob. He looked over at Will. Will shrugged helplessly. Jordan let out a breath and started to turn the knob. Will suddenly waved a hand at Jordan. Jordan paused and frowned at Will in confusion.

Will ran into the bedroom, neatly dodging a pile of dirty laundry, and pounded on the kitchen wall from the other side. The scuffling in the kitchen headed toward the noise.

Jordan yanked open the kitchen door, tossed the meat in and slammed the door shut. "Done!" he called to Will.

Will ran back into the living room and banged his shin on the coffee table. "Ow," he hissed. The scuffling changed direction. Now they could hear a loud sniffing and snorting.

Jordan took Will's hand and pulled him back near the front door. "I think he's found the meat," he whispered. Will squeezed Jordan's hand gently.

"So," Will whispered conversationally. "Fifty bucks for the summoning?" He looked at the cage and supplies.

Jordan sighed. "Okay, I didn't turn a profit on this one. But it's more about the experience—"

Whoosh! A blast of heat came from the kitchen. Flames licked out from under the kitchen door.

"Shit!" Will dashed for the closet and came out with a fire extinguisher. "Think he's pissed?" he asked, spraying the flames that escaped from the kitchen.

Jordan slapped his hand to his forehead. "Dragons eat their meat cooked," he sighed. And now they could hear the sloppy sounds of an animal chowing down on a meal.

Will glared at Jordan. "Might've mentioned that earlier."

"I forgot! I haven't studied dragons in ages!"

"Will the drugs still work?" Will asked.

Jordan threw up his hands. "No idea."

"Great," Will sighed. He hit another stray flame with the extinguisher.

They waited, listening, barely moving, until the various snorting, sniffing and scuffling noises settled down and they could hear a low, rhythmic breathing.

"I think he's out," Jordan said.

Will nodded.

Neither of them moved.

"Maybe we should wait a few minutes to be sure?" Will suggested.

"Yeah," Jordan nodded. "That sounds good."

They waited a little longer and the breathing deepened into a gentle snoring.

"Okay," Jordan said finally. He dug the muzzle out of the pet shop bag and opened the kitchen door. Will followed, still holding the fire extinguisher.

Charred linoleum crackled under their feet. Tiny fires burned brightly around the edges of the kitchen. Will hit them with the extinguisher foam.

In the corner, the dragon was curled up and snoring peacefully. Jordan crept up to it and put his hand on the creature's back. It didn't react. He let out a relieved breath and slid the muzzle over the dragon's head. It wasn't a perfect fit -- having been made for a dog, not a dragon -- but Jordan adjusted the straps quickly. "Get the cage," he said to Will.

Will set down the extinguisher and dragged the cage in from the living room. He looked at the steel bars doubtfully. "Is it going to be strong enough?" he asked.

"It's the best I could find," Jordan shrugged.

"That's not really an answer," Will said.

"They didn't have dragon cages!" Jordan snapped. "If you have any better suggestions, just let me know!"

"How about not summoning a dragon into our kitchen?" Will retorted.

Jordan glared at Will. "If we were all perfect, you wouldn't be so damned special."

Will frowned at Jordan. "What? I'm not perfect."

"No, you just—" Jordan sighed. "Let's just get this guy into the cage before he wakes up. You take the front legs, I'll take the back."

Will wasn't thrilled with being so close to the front of a dragon, but the tranquilizers seemed to be working. "The claws aren't poisonous, are they?" he asked.

Jordan frowned. "I don't think so. Better not get scratched, just in case."

The dragon had made a nest of sorts out of newspaper and dishtowels. Will wrapped a dishtowel around each foot before attempting to lift the creature.

"Ready?" Jordan asked. "On three. One, two, three!" They lifted the dragon. It snorted sharply and Will froze. He held his breath, ready to run, but the snoring continued.

"Yay for drugs," Will said. They wrangled the dragon into the cage and Jordan latched the door shut. They both let out sighs of relief.

"I'll call BioGen," Jordan said. He disappeared into the living room.

Will watched the dragon sleeping for a moment, then picked up the mess the creature had made. He scooped up a stack of dishtowels from the nest and stopped. It was heavier than he'd expected. He pushed a few towels aside and blinked in surprise.

Jordan returned. "Okay, the good news is they'll be here in less than an hour."

"What's the bad news?" Will asked automatically.

"They're charging us \$500 for the pickup," Jordan winced.

"Five hundred!" Will exclaimed. "That's insane!"

"I know," Jordan said. "But would you rather keep him?"

Will looked around at the scorched kitchen and sighed.

"I'll pay you back," Jordan promised.

Will waved a hand dismissively.

"I really will this time," Jordan insisted.

"Don't worry about it," Will said. "Come look at this."

Jordan walked over to the dragon's nest. "Did he leave a treasure pile?" he asked hopefully.

Will snorted. "I wish." He lifted the egg from the nest and put it carefully in Jordan's hands.

"Wow," Jordan whispered. The egg was big enough that it took two hands to hold it. The shell had a golden shimmer to it and was hot to the touch.

"I know I'm not the expert here, but I'm thinking that's a female," Will said, pointing at the dragon.

Jordan nodded, eyes wide. "So awesome!" He stood up and turned on the oven. "It'll have to stay warm. She couldn't have traveled with it, so it must be fresh-laid. I'll have to look up the gestation period." He put the egg in the oven.

"Jordan," Will said. "We can't keep it."

Jordan looked at Will. "Why not?"

"Because it'll hatch!"

"It'll hatch a baby!" Jordan grinned. "We can train it!"

Will groaned and rested his face in his hands. Jordan threw his arms around Will. "Come on," he begged. "A dragon! How cool would that be?" He ducked his head to look Will in the face.

"You're insane," Will sighed.

Jordan lifted Will's chin with his hand and kissed him.

"Okay," Will conceded, "We can try."

PATH OF CORRUPTION BY STEVE BERMAN

Let's start with the truth: I followed him. Not that I usually stalked people, but he was different.

So I waited outside the shop, peering into the windows as if browsing from the street, but I was watching him. That he actually bought something surprised me. He did not look the sort of person to frequent a gallery, especially that one. Were weird masks his taste? The ones on display, crafted from tooled leather and animal bones and graced with burlap wings, struck me as truly macabre. I almost walked away, leaving the empty stares of raccoon or perhaps possum skulls perched on calfskin.

Yet I was held fast. When he left the store -- without pausing to offer me even a glance -- I stood there, breathing in his smell. One more inhalation and a minute passed before I followed again. I never expected to earn his attention, but let my eyes follow the length of his pretty frame with, I supposed, little risk.

He led me to Jackson Square, filled by the weekend with tourists and regulars. The artists displayed their paintings and caricatures along the wrought iron fence binding the park.

A snack at L'Madeline's seemed his goal. Outside, I sat down on a metal bench and waited. Resting and inert, I felt little the predator. More embarrassed for acting in such a ridiculous fashion. After years of keeping a secret, I could not easily bring myself to reveal the truth of my desires for another man.

I wondered what about this boy had lured me into stalking him. My first glimpse was on a side street to Royal. He looked vastly different from the other young men walking the French Quarter. Slender and pale, with almost platinum-colored hair that hung loosely down his neck. His dark sunglasses and worn clothes lent the impression he was a night dweller that had crept out for some reason to take a glimpse of the sun.

He left the cafe to walk down the alleys that led back to Bourbon Street -- the infamous thoroughfare of the Quarter, but truthfully a disappointment during the day. Those walkways had the rare person traveling besides us, but still I followed, my mind often urging me to turn back but never quite vehement enough that I listened. I wondered why he did not turn around and confront me. My footfalls were neither quiet nor calm. Perhaps he simply chose to ignore my existence. No matter, I was saved when he left the known parts of Bourbon. He passed the Line.

Newcomers to the Quarter hear of the Line if they spend any serious time downtown. Eventually the tourist trappings fall aside, the restaurants fade back, and you are only left with gloomy looking buildings. Most are bars of ill repute squatting down ready to gorge themselves on sodden customers. From the few fellow grad students I occasionally socialized with, I learned that beyond the almost visible line were places a normal guy, a straight decent fellow, just should not go. Gay bars, rough spots, leather dens, areas where your ass either got shoveled or kicked in. And though the warnings were taboo entreaties, I had not the courage to cross.

So I watched him go with a sigh of regret. He never looked back, and neither did I. And the walk back to the streetcar stop seemed bland in comparison.

Somewhere I heard that New Orleans has two different patron gods, each presiding not over different places in the city, but times. During the day, it is the sly Mercantile, who stands grinning behind the counter. He may be met as a sophisticate selling artwork or antiques, or the street dealer with lewd T-shirts and garish Mardi Gras posters. But he will try to sell you something, anything; name your price.

At night, New Orleans becomes the domain of the Truck Driver, an avatar cruel and crude, laughing while he spills his beer on your sleeve, promising to show you sights never seen before, but all guaranteed to arouse. His language, blunt and to the point. The Mercantile wants your business, thrives on it. The Truck Driver couldn't care less, because he knows you have come to watch and don't feel like going home early. Or hungry.

Since I like to think of myself as somewhat sophisticated if not downright neurotic, I avoided offering myself to the Truck Driver. At night most of the French Quarter is alive and crawling down Canal and Bourbon, the other streets asleep except for the rare insomniac. And normally I am of little mood for drunken crowds. I'd rather lose myself in a book back at the dorm. But one night late this past semester I sought refuge in their madness; for three weeks I had been barraged with papers and tests, and the notion of just once losing myself seemed like medicine. Come morning, should I regret something, well, that was a New Orleans tradition, too.

I had come down on the streetcar with friends, letting them act as faulty guides and chaperones. With a beer clutched in hand, and my college sweatshirt on as a warning label to the locals, I was ready to drink deeply that night. All was fine, even the two hours spent in the strip joint. I enjoyed the rank smell of sweat and smoke more than the dancers, who seemed eager to leave the stage; their social security checks must have been waiting for them in the back. But I was a consummate actor, in part thanks to the three-drink minimum, and my friends never saw my disinterest in flouncing breasts.

Outside the club, I took a moment to clear my head. The brick walls here are great for this. One can lean against them and feel the world coming back into focus. Perhaps I

should suggest that a bit of powdered brick added to chicory coffee might serve as a hangover remedy.

My renewed perception let me spot him down the street. The clothing was so similar, with perhaps a different shirt, that I wondered if I wasn't having some weird Dixie beer-induced flashback. But no, through the passing mob my eyes were teased by the sight of him standing in front of a trader's shop, one arm casually draped around the cast-iron horse heads, relics from when busy folk had to tie up their steeds.

I rapped my head against the wall ever so slightly, letting my fellows chuckle at the display. I felt trapped. Leaving them would only invite questions, none of which I could readily answer. But the desire to go to him was demanding, making me reckless. I muttered something about getting a refill and wandered into the crowd. I prayed they would not follow as I waded past the doomsayers, smelling rank, like bad bologna stuck between their sandwich board signs. When I could no longer see my fellows and my last link to school and sanity was gone, I headed directly toward him.

This time his eyes were on me, casually, as I approached. I nearly lost my nerve, but to have come so close and then break away would be too disheartening. So we met besides the black horse head with its rust showing underneath the paint. Never having been so close to him, I was surprised at his youth. But his confident pose had no measure of inexperience in it. Since I did not yet have the strength to stare him straight in that delicate face, I found myself staring at his long fingers as they idly stroked the post's huge nostrils.

"Whew, it's good to get out of that crowd. Felt like I was going to be swept along the street." My voice had a nervous edge to it, making me cringe slightly when I finished.

He shrugged. "Nights here are like that." He had a soft voice, barely above a whisper. "Surprised to see you here; thought you were more of a day walker."

The remark was received and noted. So he had known I was following him that day. "Yeah, but something brought me out tonight. You seem to blend in here."

"That's not a compliment." He flashed me a grin.

"Are you waiting for anyone?" Hope nipped at my fingers, ready to flee if he should answer yes, someone else, someone better looking, taller or bigger.

"Sort of, but seeing as you're here, guess I might not have to."

That left me confused, but I nodded. It felt like the right thing to do. "Umm, you want to go somewhere and get a drink and talk?"

"Sure, I know a place."

I followed him as we made our way along the sidewalk, avoiding the packed street to make faster time. I dreaded that one of my school chums would catch sight of me and kept my eyes trained on his backside, which was not all together a bad sight. Before I knew it, the crowd had thinned out to mere stragglers. We had reached that damned Line.

He crossed it with ease, then turned around. I hesitated only a moment, realizing that it was too late to turn back. It was almost shameful how uneventful crossing over into unfamiliar territory actually felt.

Farther down the street, we reached a small doorway. Beyond, the room was dark, with dim splotches of light from weak bulbs hanging in the rafters. Small tables and chairs were placed haphazardly about, though several people sat close together on the floor amid throw pillows. The bar was low, with too many bartenders milling about, fighting over the odd customer who wanted something to drink. A dim chord of music hung in the air, supplied by an unseen guitar. It was mournfully apparent that conversation, offers and promises, perhaps even deals of flesh were the draw. What was the minimum here, I had to wonder.

We sat at one of the few empty tables. It seemed odd how such a quiet place could be so crowded; amid all the whispering, mouths barely moved. And I was disappointed that all sorts of couples sat down with their drinks; I had expected, had even hoped for, something more blatantly gay as a site for my initiation.

Drinks were set before us; there was no choosing, apparently. I took a sip from the wet glass and found it bitter but strong. He seemed relaxed as ever, just content to stare at me, it seemed, yet I decided such a demeanor must be a carefully constructed wall.

In a subdued voice, I started the conversation. "My name's Preston." Offering my hand seemed childish and utterly inappropriate for what I was hoping would happen that night.

He took more than a moment in responding. "Brandon."

My hand shook the glass a little, but I cast my eyes about the room to avoid dwelling on it. "An interesting place. Never saw anything like it before. Almost Bohemian."

He made a slight smirk. "A lot of the hustlers take johns here to settle terms before going farther. There are a number of places nearby to go. Haitian cabby drifts about like a checkered shark in case it's a hotel job."

I took a hearty gulp of the drink after that. As my throat burned, the truth crashed down, taking everything apart like a dropped puzzle. I may have had an innocent life up to then, but never had I thought myself naive. Where to look? The table, the floor, my arms, all covered with fragments of my fantasies. Odd that he was clean.

"Don't tell me you didn't know." He playfully rolled his glass between those pale hands. "You approached me. You were tracking me the other day."

I was still in shock, my mouth no doubt open. I came to when I heard, "Enough of this," and he rose to leave. My arm shot forth and grabbed hold of his hand. His skin felt cold and clammy, and my first instinct was to let go and rub warmth back into my fingers.

"No. Please stay. It's all right with me. Really."

He sat back down, but still I could feel that more brick and mortar had been added to whatever wall separated us. I yearned to knock it down before sharing anything with him, but realized that sitting between us was the Truck Driver, squinting and hooting, offering to pull away Brandon's shirt to let me see a little skin before I paid the bill.

On such new ground, with no maps or guides, I had but one recourse. To feel my way around him and hope to find some crevice that would let me slip inside.

"What are. . . what are your rates?"

"Depends. What are your needs?" He loomed closer, reaching across the small table so that his fingers brushed against the hand that held my drink. The touch made me shiver, not only from the erotic jolt that traveled my skin, but also the dank nature, as if his temperature worked on a different scale than mine.

I timidly wrapped his fingers with mine, choosing to disbelieve the damp chill I felt. The words tasted as bitter as the drink, but had to come out. "I want . . . I want to sleep with you. Spend the night. Maybe the morning." I quickly finished off my drink.

The smirk came back in full force, making his face look almost bestial. "Not just sleep..."

He enjoyed making me squirm with the request. Damn, I wanted the waitress to bring me another glass so that I might speak more, but now the bar looked empty, the guitar sounded too loud. My mouth was open but only small, guttural sounds came out. I think I trembled; perhaps a few drops of sweat fell onto the table.

I forgot that my hand lay still over his until he squeezed my fingers. "No problem, I see what you need. Pay for the drinks and let's get going."

My open wallet was a siren call. At least two waitresses showed at the table, each eyeing the other balefully over the bill. No words were said, so I threw down a twenty to leave them fighting over the paper. Brandon leaned against the doorway waiting for me. Now that an arrangement had been made -- though I did not recall a price even mentioned -- his stance had changed. Before, his slim build had seemed ready to quiver, if not twist and dance. Each step was made with wild abandon. Now his hips were cocked like a gun, his tread slower. He languished, arms sometimes spread wide to stroke the buildings along his side. I had a nagging hard-on for him, and stuck my hands in my pockets to conceal my interest. He noticed immediately and began to laugh, an oddly loud sound compared to his soft speech.

We walked along a maze of streets and corridors until we came to an inner courtyard, a sight most folk who walk the French Quarter never see. Often they contain old fountains or lush gardens. This one was bare except for several crates stacked like precarious towers and a metal gate set before stone steps down one wall. Brandon had one foot on a slim staircase that led to the upper floors of an adjoining building.

I glanced one last time at the odd gate -- basements were a rarity in New Orleans. The city was below-sea level, and I was intrigued; where did those steps lead? But Brandon called out my name, and my raging interest returned to what could happen atop the other flight of stairs.

The upper floor was riddled with rooms. Behind closed doors I could hear sounds and moans, but was unsure if all were sounds of pleasure. I realized now how dangerous my situation was; I had come to an area of the city with no clear way of going home, led by a complete stranger. The urge to run, break away and head back to the safety of my dorm room, crept over me for a moment. But before it had time to act, I had followed Brandon into one of the rooms.

It was small, mostly cramped space, framing a futon and an old chest. A Salem Witchcraft poster hung on one wall, along with a bizarre display of slate shards. The pile of stones seemed more than haphazard and was disturbing to look at. A few clothes lay scattered about the old carpet.

He shut the door behind us and leaned against the wood. I waited for a few minutes in the moonlight that streamed in through a window, feeling at a loss for words or actions. He just stared at me with those dark eyes. Then he walked to me, stepping so close, I could feel his cool breath on my face.

"Take off my clothes." A demand, not a request.

My hands trembled as they went to his shirt. The tips of my fingers brushed against smooth, cool skin as I pulled it off. His chest was slim but toned, nearly snow white except for dark rings around each nipple. I wanted to caress him there, but I knew that would not be following whatever rules had to exist in such situations. So his worn jeans were next. As I unzipped them, he stepped closer to me, until our bodies nearly touched. I pushed down the denim to expose a pair of black boxers, the front of which showed the strain of Brandon's erection. I knelt down, dragging the jeans along, passing with admiration firm, muscular legs with not a wisp of hair to be seen.

I helped him out of his sneakers, peeled off his socks, and then the jeans were free. He stood there only in his underwear, which was so dark compared to his skin that it looked like his body stopped at the waist only to begin again in mid-thigh. I was entranced by the contrast, and one of my fingers had to reach out and touch his boxers just to ensure that it was indeed fabric. My hand ended up close to the inner side of his leg, and I began to lazily stroke skin as smooth as milk.

I looked up to see a half-smile on Brandon's face. I could accept that. I came closer until we brushed against one another. My own erection was still constrained, reminding me that I was still fully dressed.

Then one of his hands went to my neck, cupping underneath my chin. To my flushed skin, it was a cool compress. I sucked in my breath, feeling the blood race around his touch. Then, that hand drifted down, over my shirt, to my waist. It hesitated a moment before sliding up between the fabric and my skin.

That I could feel such pleasure in his stroking my chest was astounding. I feared that I would completely collapse into a quivering mass if his hand went lower. I could not help but sigh and softly moan. My eyes closed.

He never said a word as his hand left me. The loss of such contact was frightening; all of a sudden I was left disoriented. I opened one eye to see him stretched out on the futon, a hand stroking the front of his boxers. The other did a slow wave to bring me closer.

That I had to undress myself was a disappointment. I saw again how immense and intact that wall of Brandon's remained. For the last few minutes, I had been lost in fantasy. The fact that I was paying for a night's passion, however exquisite it might turn out to be, returned and threatened to dull my desire with self-disgust. My hands fumbled at removing my clothes. If he noticed my inner turmoil, he said nothing to ease my thoughts.

Stripped bare except for my briefs, I crawled onto the futon besides him. He still wore that almost-grin. Along with adrenaline, my blood carried doubt, the whole mixture making me feel weak and lost as I lay there. Then Brandon leaned toward me on one elbow and with his free hand began to brush his fingers through my hair. His touch was so gentle that I felt like I had just sipped a tonic to chase away my fears.

We leaned in to kiss. His mouth was chilled, an ice-water bath, but rather than disturbing, I found the sensation delightful. Wickedly I had to wonder what would it feel like if he went down on me with that cold tongue. I held my breath for as long as I could, letting him explore. My arms went around him, sliding along as they made their way to his back. I gripped him, desperate to bring him closer to me.

At some point, he was atop me, rubbing his whole body against me, bringing shivers along the length of my spine. Then he rolled over, disengaging himself. Rather than speak, he guided my hand down to his crotch. The nerves along my arm readied themselves for what my touch would find.

I slid his boxers down, exposing his erection. Around the base curled a sparse arrangement of silver hair that curved down to his scrotum. I leaned in closer to marvel at the dichotomy: the softest skin and yet hard as an icicle. I let myself rub along the length, now and then gliding down to cup his sack in my palm.

When his hand pressed against the back of my head, inching me closer to his cock, I knew what he wanted me to do. I expected his cock to have a taste, but there was none. Rather a certain firmness that delightfully filled the depth of my mouth. That and the coolness of Brandon's flesh. I wanted to warm him with my breath and throat.

I had no idea if I pleased him; Brandon just lay there calm, looking down at me as I slipped my lips over him again and again.

Finally, he lifted my face from his crotch. Soon I realized that Brandon had managed to slide behind me and that I now faced the mattress. Moments later I gasped as something cold thrust inside of me, then quickly withdrew. As the movement returned again and again, I was drawn into heaving breaths while a tide of pleasure and pain ebbed and ripped through me. I could not help but collapse forward and hug the edges of the futon. I heard his laughter.

How long I lasted is beyond me. With a massive moan, I came into the folds of the sheets below me. Soon after, he pulled out from me, then turned me over to watch as he jerked off. His semen sprayed all over his chest and groin, and I was held enthralled by the sight. As his labored breathing eased, he dipped a finger into the streaks of come and he held it up to my face as an offering. I hesitated, and found him pressing it closer to my shut lips. I opened and took his finger in, tasting him deeply, feeling his salty seed lie on my tongue.

Then we slept. Come morning, instead of a shared kiss, he made me go down on him again. I did so without complaint. I gave him whatever money I had left in my wallet, leaving me only enough change for the streetcar ride back home. He led me back through the streets until we came to a part of Bourbon I recognized. I said good-bye. He merely nodded.

If only that had been enough. It seemed that I spent all my time remembering that night. Perhaps I should have been disgusted; some would say I was merely used. But I did not feel so. Rather my attraction to Brandon had grown beyond the physical. I wanted to meet the challenge of piercing his wall, to find and love the true boy that lurked inside. Are most defrocked virgins so naive?

The very next night I returned to Bourbon Street to find him. Now that I knew what sort of person I was dealing with, the hunt was easier. He greeted me with only a smirk, but this time, when we went inside the brothel, he held onto my hand, guiding me back to the room.

And so, for the next two weeks, it went. Rarely did I fail to find him, once even chasing away another potential customer, though Brandon seemed little bothered by the loss. My studies suffered as the task of college paled in comparison to the challenge of finding love with my prostitute.

My newfound dedication paid off, I thought. Brandon must have developed a fondness for me to often refuse money in the morning. When he took it, it was half-hearted, born of need. Even the sex became less demanding, allowing me to slow down each caress and find time to savor each taste and touch.

The next step came far too easily. I found myself staying with him each night, together roaming the streets where he would show me parts of the city few had ever seen. The wall was crumbling; I could hear bits of masonry fall as he guided me about, holding my hand during these private tours of decayed courtyards and manses.

During the day we mostly slept, venturing out only when bored. I abandoned most of my belongings back in the dorm room, taking only the essentials. The only way to embrace him was to turn my back on my old life and walk a new path.

There were moments I worried that I chased after the impossible. Was I only a diversion in Brandon's life, one that would last only so many nights before apathy set in? I drowned my concerns in bitter drink and his heady presence.

Now a night dweller, I was introduced to the other boys who lived in the building. Like some secret clan, they all spoke in whispers, each with walls holding back their true selves. All were hustlers, though some I think catered to more exotic clientele. At first I found them distant toward me, like I was only a shadow amongst them. Soon, as they saw how much time Brandon and I shared, they began to speak to me, confide in me the events in their lives. I wanted to let my guard down and regard them as friends, but no, I still had a bit of wall of my own.

Then one cloud-covered night, with the threat of rain driving most from the open street, Brandon led me, not to the room to spend one more night in each other's heat, but to the building's courtyard. He was quiet; the only snatches of conversation he uttered sounded both vague and unsettling. Something was going to happen that night, besides the thick showers that so-often befell New Orleans. I had begun to believe that this would be my last night with him, that tomorrow he would tell me to return to my old ways, to sunlight and textbooks. And loneliness.

The courtyard looked different, lit by fire. All the boys stood about, many carrying hand-made torches. I counted several faces hidden behind a variety of sordid masks. Here one crafted from broken porcelain, there a leather bondage visage complete with zippered eyebrows and lips. One of the boys brought Brandon the elaborate scrolled mask he had bought so long ago. He brushed aside my attempt to help adjust the straps in the back. Now I could physically see his wall rearing up to prevent me from reaching in.

A deep groaning of tortured metal sounded as the iron gate was unlocked and thrust wide open. A procession began to climb down the steps. Brandon need not have pushed me ahead of him; I wanted to go down and see the one aspect of his life that had remained hidden from me.

The descent was rough on my senses. Flickering torchlight revealed only dripping stone walls decorated with patches of repellent fungus. The boys remained silent; only the crackling of the fires and the sound of our feet falling upon the tiles reached my ears. The stench of musty earth was thick in the cool air.

How long we walked down those steps, I could not guess, but finally, when we reached bottom, my teeth chattered against the cold, and I dreaded brushing against the stonework around me. I followed the others, careful to keep track of Brandon's presence behind me. I believe we passed a few unlit chambers, all looking archaic and unsafe to venture into. Someone from the lead of the procession had begun to hum a strange tune that rose and fell in time to our feet. Other voices were added, and to my fear, it seemed some of the whispers emanated from those dark rooms.

The corridor ended in a large circular chamber, and the line of masked and unmasked wound its way around a huge pit set in the floor's center. In the dim light, I could just make out the remains of mosaic tiles surrounding the hole. But if they were decorated with words or icons, I was unfamiliar with the symbols. Though I could hear wind whistling up from the mouth, it looked more like a pool of black water.

A voice close to me ripped the silence. "Ia Nyogtha! Erikthnar l'hor kadishtu . . . Ia Nyogtha! Ygnaiih Nyogtha k'yarnak!"

I was horrified to see Brandon's mouth set below the mask, those lips that I had spent so much time touching with every part of me now twisted to spit out obscene-sounding words. His voice was no longer a whisper, but the hoarse screams of some dying animal pleading for release. Others took up the chant, hurling it from one to another, until the last shouted it down to the pit. Shards of slate were tossed into the pit, making no noise, meeting silently whatever lurked there.

And that something that dwelled in the darkness of the chasm responded. I could swear that above their hoarse shrieks I heard a terrible sound, like the lapping of thickened water. Their shouting intensified, they began to leap up and down, shaking their limbs.

One boy held out his hand. . . and was touched by something from the pit. A stream of blackness, deeper and darker than any my eyes had ever been hindered by, issued forth and snaked around the boy's pale wrist. It moved like liquid and sounded like poison.

Then each of the boys began to howl, stripping off whatever clothes he wore. I watched as they finally freed themselves to twist and jump, a dance both graceful and horrific. And tentacles of the black thing shot forth to touch their skin, stroke their naked bodies with a lover's touch as they laughed and cavorted. Their firm erections were jolted by the creature's lingering touch, as if it sought out the only heat along their bodies, wanting to bring it close. Several came, showering the blackness with their pale come, all the while howling with glee.

I had not noticed until now that some of the boys had brought bags along the descent. From them they dumped animals into the pit, letting the darkness swallow up a grand meal. Some squirmed and bawled as they fell.

My mind screamed for release, and I ran from the room. Even hunched over in the hallway, my thoughts shrieked. I wanted peace, and forgetfulness. I trembled and cried, wondering if it would be better to rip my eyes free and cast them aside for having betrayed the rest of my body.

Before my clawed hands could move close, I heard someone enter the corridor from that accursed room. I looked up to see Brandon standing over me, his mask slightly askew, his naked body glistening with an iridescent slime. Even then lust caught me, my eyes glancing downward to note how rigid he was.

He lifted me up gently, to meet his face. Then I watched as one of his fingers reached down to his chest and brought back a daub of that muck. He held it before my eyes; I could see the oily sheen it had. Then he offered it to my lips.

I could read nothing of his thoughts through the mask. But the decision was made, had been back in that bar weeks ago. Before he had a chance to withdraw the offer, I wrapped my mouth around the finger and sucked hard. The slime tasted acrid and felt like cold slush falling down my throat. But I did not gag or show any signs of suffering. Brandon let me taste his finger for several minutes, and then he withdrew back to the festival, leaving me alone again in darkness.

I slipped down the wall, knowing that something black had entered me, now festering in my gullet. When they brought me back to the surface, Brandon half-carried me along. I sank into a deep sleep troubled with images of dripping black water.

I awoke to the little sunlight that crept through the boarded windows. At my side, he still slept, his face serene, so different from the mask he wore. I rose without disturbing him and, dressed only in underwear, took the stairs down to the courtyard.

And here I am. The hours have passed, and I have been staring at the closed gate. What happened last night was no delusion, I am sure; more like a wedding. But now what am I married to?

The night comes upon me still in this fugue. The air holds a slight breeze warm against my bare skin, and I wonder just how cold my touch is now. Nobody forced me to walk this path of corruption, nor did they place my hands on the metal bars and aim my eyes toward those dark steps. I am solely to blame. But to what end?

A light touch on my shoulder does not startle me. The fingers are reassuring. I turn to find Brandon before me, naked in the night. He takes one of my hands in his, guiding it to his bare chest, against the smooth skin. And my touch meets no resistance, nothing to

prevent my finding his racing heartbeat. We share the black taint now. Together we make our way back to our room.

For the first time, I am master upon the bed, selfishly taking before I give any pleasure. And then we lie together and I know that for all the waking moments when I dreaded the path I walked, the companion I found along the way has made the harsh price worth it.

WERE BY JOSELLE VANDERHOOF

I hate Fridays like a preacher hates the devil, maybe even more; at least a preacher has his Bible and his holy water. Me, I've just got a TV, a six-pack of Heineken and some worn-out Star Trek tapes now that the cable's busted.

Considering the guys I've been with lately I think I'd rather have the devil. Unlike my last boyfriend, he's got a little class; he wouldn't clog the sink or raid the 'fridge and he'd never try to do experimental surgery on the TV while intoxicated (the sole reason the cable's now six feet under with no resurrection forthcoming, I might add). Also, I bet he looks hot in chaps. Yeah, I'd do the devil if he showed up to fix my cable in a tool belt and those jeans that show off your ass crack, just like they do in all those pornos we all hate but secretly admire. Then again, knowing how he screws people over, I don't really need that in my life.

Come to think of it, I'd rather do Scotty. No, not the Scotty from "Amok Time" or "The Trouble with Tribbles", when he was like, twenty-seven and roughly the same size as George Takei. No, I'm talking Scotty from "The Voyage Home", when he's grey and fat like me. When he says he "cannae change the laws of physics!" my stomach twists in that way it does when you're in love, or at least in lust. The fact I just seriously said "he could fix my flux capacitors any time!" means I know it's true. Also, that I know I'm more of a mess than I imagined.

Yeah, sometimes I ramble on like that. Maybe that's the reason I'm alone on a Saturday night fantasizing about Starfleet personnel with my phone shoved underneath the sofa. There are only about five people in Salt Lake Valley who haven't heard it ring tonight, that's how persistent my best friend is. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. He always gets this way after he goes to confession, to the point that I've decided trying to get me out more must be his priest's sick idea of a penance. Fifteen calls in the last hour and all of them from Brad.

After four rings the machine picks up again. Of course, he can't hang up. "Hey, Alex! Joe and me are going down to the All Nite with Elmer. Tonight's burger night, and we're gonna rent a movie after. Come on, man. We'll get The Day the Planet Stood Still, or something. Alex...I know you're listening. And the fact you haven't disconnected the phone yet means you secretly want out. Pick up! Come on. Al, I've got a spare key and I know where you live."

“You keep on this way, Brad, I swear to God I’ll change the locks and get a restraining order.” Hell, I guess you can’t fight fate. Or Catholics, either.

“Al, how many times have we been through this? Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Why not? You do it all the time.”

“Stop changing the subject. You know how many times I’ve called?” His voice gets that little edge in it like it did when we used to date, and I suggested we go do Laser Tag.

“Were you sitting on the phone again?”

“You know how my couch is; I think it just said ‘Feed me, Seymour.’”

“Ha ha. Get your coat and meet us at the All Nite.”

“Brad,” I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I tell you every time. There’s nothing to do in Salt Lake on a Friday but clubs, bars and the All Nite. We’re too old for the raves, your dad and Joe hate booze and the All Nite’s called the All Nite ‘cause it’s the same all night, every night. Just a bunch of sad, old farts who can’t find dates or anything better to do.”

“Al, it’s been six months since Jack left and you haven’t wanted to do anything but drink beer and ogle James Doohan. Come on. Just for an hour, okay? I’ll get you a burger and a Coke. No Catholic guilt about your cholesterol, either.”

I look around my house and feel my headache threaten to get worse. “Fine. I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Great! See you then.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I hang up before he can soliloquize.

A lot’s changed for me since I retired. Once I had thirty years on the force, a house I liked and abs you could bounce boulders off. Now I’ve got a gold watch and a place on the West side that smells like mold and cat piss. Still got the abs though, even if the gut’s bigger. The wrestler’s arms and the Hercules thighs, too, no kidding. Thing is, I’m the only one that feels them up since Jack. And when you’re almost sixty and whacking off in a shower that barely works, you know you’re just as pathetic as everyone else thinks.

All that would be enough, of course. Sooner or later, it’s what a lot of guys face unless they’re like Brad and Joe: lucky enough to find someone who sticks around after the sex who isn’t a jackass. If that were all I had to deal with, I’d figure I’d done pretty well. But it isn’t and I’m not. See, there’s a reason I don’t go out nights anymore that’s got nothing

to do with a fucked-up tweaker or my self-esteem. Brad thinks he's got it figured out, but he's not even close. This is something I don't think I could even tell him.

It started sometime back in college, when I was playing halfback for the U of U. First there were these nights I just felt queasy. Once or twice every few months, maybe, and only after dark. I'd go to bed and wake up feeling tired, like I had a migraine without the headache. It went for years that way, this weird sick feeling a couple nights or so a month. I went to doctors and they didn't know either, but they said I was as healthy as a horse and not to worry. But when I was thirty-five or so it changed again.

I even remember where I was: four a.m. in Sandy, stake out of this possible meth house. My partner's eating a Wendy's salad with this lemon poppy dressing she always kept in the glove compartment. I got one whiff of those greens and it was...like the kid in Charlie X, that same awkward compulsion. But it was deeper, something heavy, something almost primal. My mouth started watering and I did something my parents never approved of. I leaned over her and started picking. It was a damn good thing our bust turned out to be a bust, that's how pissed off she was.

Even if that was all of it, a stomach ache and some weird cravings, I know I could live with it. But the worst of it happened the night after I retired. All I remember is I came home and fell sleep after a couple beers. I woke up three hours later with my mouth all out of joint and what felt like a ten gallon Stetson on my head. I walked to the john to take a shower in case it was just muscle tension. When I got up I thought I either had a low-grade fever or I was dreaming. I mean, I've got big hairy legs: they've been that way since high school. But this felt different now, like I'd just gone to a furry convention and forgot to take off the suit. All things considered, I was sweating bullets by the time I reached the bathroom. To this day I wish I hadn't flipped the switch.

Back in the day when movies were worth watching, there was always a terror in transformation. Dr. Jekyll writhes in shadows as he turns into Mr. Hyde; Larry Talbot shifts from man to monster, his eyes glassed half with horror, half with sorrow. But there was no tragic dignity in my transformation; I was looking at the Easter Bunny, a naked bulb swinging past my ears like Edger Allan Poe to further ruin the effect. I looked like the bastard child of Tiny Tim and Bargain Bob's All-Occasion Costume: buck teeth, big paws, pink fur – pink! – and a fucking cotton tail up my ass crack.

As you can probably understand, that pretty much killed my sex life. Ditto for my social life, too. If the damn thing would just happen like it does in movies maybe I'd stand a chance. Problem is, it doesn't matter if there's a full moon or not, and lately I've just kind of given up. There's all kinds of books about werewolves; hell, I even found one at the Salt Lake Public on were-bears one time. But when it comes to bunny rabbits, nothing. Just A Christmas Story for us, I guess. The thing I miss the most about Jack – and the only thing, if anyone's keeping score – is that he was too stoned or drunk to notice half the time. But he's been the only one in forever, for obvious reasons. When it comes to dating hairy shapeshifters, I think most guys would rather run with the wolves and bears. Who wants a fluffy bunny but Twinkie boys and chasers? And no, they don't count.

I've been in the water so long now my skin's starting to pucker. That's the problem with thinking right there: it makes you prune. I towel off, get dressed, grab my keys and hit the road in record time. Not that it really matters. You could pull into the All Nite at seven or stumble in at three a.m. with a lampshade on your head and nothing would have changed.

Here's another thing you have to know about the All Nite: it might be the kind of place drunks come to pass out and piss, in that order, if it was a little cleaner and more stylish. The best way to think of it is one of those fifties places with the roller skates, the checkerboard tiles, the neon sign that won't quite give up and die. Except it's gayer. For some reason unbeknownst to God or man, this is where the nightlife is if you're queer and over forty. Also, Brad and Joe come here so much they more or less own real estate – the table in the back but not so distant that you can't see everyone who comes and goes.

"You're on time," Brad observes as I sit down.

"I know. I'll work on that," I promise. "Hey, Joe. Elmer." They nod but don't look up from their cards. "Let me guess. You're up to best out of two hundred now?"

"Damn straight," grunts Elmer. "And it's two hundred eighteen. Someone's gotta put this bastard in his place. Royal flush." He slaps his cards down on the table and gives Joe that same shit-eating grin he had when he worked Vegas.

Just like in bad movies, Joe shrugs and shows his hand. "Five of a kind." Only after he scoops up the pocket change does he punctuate his own shit-eating grin with "Daddy dearest." Elmer smacks his hand down on the table with such force I think he might put another chip in the Corelle ware.

"Damn it, Brad. You gonna let him mock me like that?"

"Can't help it, Pop. He's a modern kind of man. Remember, the Bible says that love is patient and kind." Brad chuckles as he cuts his pork chop almost primly.

"Hell with that. Jesus didn't play no poker," Elmer grumbles. "And don't it also say to love your parents?"

"There's a time and season for everything under heaven, Dad."

"Best out of two hundred twenty, then?" Joe prompts, shuffling the cards.

"Look at them," Elmer gripes, turning to me. "Have you ever seen such lip? Talking to me like that after all I've done for them."

“Yeah, Elmer, you’re a regular frail old man,” I put my menu away as the waitress shuffles over. “Hey. I’ll have the mushroom burger, a side of fries and a large Coke, don’t skimp on the ice.” But the moron shoved a dinner salad at me before I could finish.

Now, I’ve been chased, shot at, run off the road, and forced to sit through sensitivity training tapes on no less than five occasions. I’ve seen pretty much everything and let me tell you: nothing after the salad incident scares me more than iceberg lettuce, red cabbage and carrot shavings. So I did what any self-respecting were-bunny would do when faced with outing. I bellowed like a berserker and knocked the damn thing across the room.

While Joe and Elmer looked up from their cards I yelled, “Jeeze, Nellie! What the hell?”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!” Only it’s not my favorite waitress. In fact, it’s not a waitress at all. I’m looking right into the shock-blue eyes of corn-brained Christopher, world’s worst waiter and sum of everything wrong with gays today. In fact, that was the problem. He was staring at me like he’d just found Atlantis, stammering like an idiot instead of mopping up the ranch dressing slowly dribbling to the floor.

“Oh...um...I didn’t mean...” at last he decided it might be a good idea to shut up and stare at the splint on his left arm. “Sorry, Mr. Hillier.”

“Forget it, kid. Just get me a mushroom burger, a coke and fries.” I shoot Brad a dirty look and he makes a face like, “What?”. Unh-huh. I should have known they’d pull a stunt like this.

“Yes, sir. It’ll be just a minute. Sorry.” The little twink slinks off before I’ve finished yelling.

“Jesus, Al!”

“Lord’s name,” I remind him.

“Jesus Christ, Al! Is that better? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“He attacked me with a salad! That’s assault in all fifty states!”

“He gave you a dinner salad. We all have one. That’s what they do here.” Brad shakes his head as Joe and Elmer shrug and get back to poker.

“I’ve been feeling jumpy today, alright? And he’s not exactly my favorite person.”

“Be nice to Christopher, okay? He works this shitty job to pay for school – with a splint on, if you didn’t notice – and he doesn’t need this crap.”

“What crap?” He just keeps glaring. “Come on. I don’t hate the kid. I just wish he’d act like a guy sometimes.” But I shut up as he returns with my food.

“Here you go, I am so sorry about earlier,” he slips me a cheeseburger, onion rings and no drink – exactly what I didn’t order. I give Brad the stink eye and dig in.

The tension must be pretty thick by now, because Joe looks up from his game. “Hi, Chris. I’ll just have a root beer float, and Elmer wants the halibut.”

“The hell I do. I wanna know how the kid got the splint, and why no one’s said anything about it.” Elmer ads with his usual tact. Of course, this just makes Christopher shift and stammer more.

“Um...I really shouldn’t – I mean, it’s so stupid.”

“Is everything okay?” Brad pipes up, giving him that Christian charity act.

“Yeah,” he shuffles in that way that makes me want to smack him. “Well, you know. I’m fine, but I don’t know about the dog.”

“I had a dog did me like that once,” Elmer grumbles. “He followed me into the Excelsior this one time. Shit under the craps table. I still have a life long ban.” He scoops up the cards before Joe can touch them. “Okay, hot shot. My turn to deal.”

“You fell over a dog?” Brad says it like he gives a damn.

“I guess so. It had hair, and it was walking on all fours. The landlord hasn’t fixed the porch light yet, so I only had the streetlamps. I thought it was just a stray at first, the way it was just whining and lingering. Or maybe the neighbors downstairs got a Doberman and I hadn’t noticed. But when I opened my bag it just started -- growling isn’t the right word. I grew up with dogs; just growling doesn’t scare me. It was lower somehow, threatening.” He laughed, but I didn’t see the humor. “But I think I hurt it more than it hurt me.” I never thought anything could get Elmer and Joe to stop playing, barring the Apocalypse. But sure enough they’re hooked. “I only sprained my wrist when he knocked me down; he ran away with his arm slashed up. I guess it was a good thing I had my keys out.” He does that same, whining laugh again that says he didn’t really want to talk about this. “It was just a big dog, probably. Told you it was stupid.”

“Hey, Brad,” Joe says carefully, “didn’t Yolanda say something like this last week?”

“Yeah, but we thought she was just getting a little too friendly with Jack Daniels again,” Elmer chimes in with a helpful belch. “She said she heard a growl and saw dark fur, whether that was her shag carpeting or not.”

“Chris, are you gonna be okay?” I look up as Brad points at me. “Alex here used to be a cop. If you want an escort home –”

“For fuck’s sake! So the kid had a little run-in with a post-Prozac Old Yeller. Maybe it’s just me, but I think the National Guard can stay home this time. You can handle a little puppy dog, right?”

Christopher gives me this look like I just shit in his car. “Yeah...like I said, it’s pretty stupid. Excuse me. I should...” And he swishes off without a by-your-leave. Brad looks like he wants to stop him, but he rounds on me at the last minute.

“You know, sometimes I don’t know you anymore, I swear.”

“What? What’d I do?” Brad slaps some bills on the scratched-up glass and hefts himself out of the booth.

“If you’re gonna be an asshole, do it on your own time. Joe, Dad. Let’s go.” Joe puts a hand on his boyfriend’s shoulder, but he shrugs it off.

“Forget it. I was just about to leave myself. Food’s gotten worse, probably something to do with it not being what I ordered.” I don’t even leave a tip.

“You’re gonna have to get over yourself someday,” Brad shouts after me. “Someday you’re gonna realize you’ve pushed everyone away, and for what?”

“Spare me the exit speech.” I don’t slam the door; that would be too melodramatic. But on the drive home, I admit he’s probably right. Also, that the dog story got to me. I toss and turn all night; even Scotty’s ass can’t distract me very long. Before my own transformation, I’d have laughed at myself for being a little too obsessed with The Wolf Man. Now that I’ve started sprouting ears and whiskers, I can’t help but see a werewolf in every shadow, or hope someday I will. When the dawn creeps under the door I know what I have to do.

Somewhere in this city there’s a werewolf, and I’d bet dimes to doughnuts he’s the only one who knows what I’m going through.

It’s pretty easy to find Christopher Evan’s house. I know because he leases it from an ex of mine. It’s a crummy old two-story over by the university, the kind broke college students share when the dorm kicks them out for backlogged rent. Back in the day, I think it was periwinkle and there was a little rose garden on the side. Now it just leans in on itself, the tired grey of chipping paint and sunken decks that cries out for a bulldozing. There’s a rainbow wind chime on the screen door and a flag in the window you could see a mile away. Sure enough, there’s also footprints leading from the jagged concrete walkway all the way out back. Now, I never worked a day in Animal Control, but even I know the difference between Doberman’s tracks and ... these. These are longer than my size tens and skinnier, about the width of a cell phone. The most remarkable thing about them is the four inch claws; definitely not a stray dog, or even a wolf. I’m so busy

battling down that excited-nervous twitching in my stomach, that I don't hear him approach 'til it's too late.

"Hi."

He startles me enough I drop my notepad. Clad in an old blue bathrobe and no slippers, Christopher is staring down from the deck, the morning paper tucked underneath his good arm. He does not look amused.

"Morning," I say lamely. "I was just looking –"

The pissy look deepens. "No, it didn't eat me yet. Sorry to disappoint you." He scrubs his free hand through his tousled hair and yawns. "Thanks for waking me up, too. It's not every day some asshole tramples through my herb garden at seven a.m. on a Saturday. You shouldn't have. Really."

"Look, Christopher, I'm sorry about last night."

"Look, Alex," he leans over the railing, instantly awake. "You insult me at work and throw food like a baby. Fine, whatever. It's a job. One where I get bruises from standing all night, have no time for friends and, oh yeah. The pay is shit, too. There I bring your food and put up with your bitchiness because I have to. But that ends the minute I clock out, got it? And if you've come here to continue this little vendetta? I will call the cops on your ass right now, so help me God."

This is getting out of hand way too fast. So I spit out the first lie I can think of: "I was worried, okay? You and Yolanda aren't the only ones who've seen this dog, or whatever it is."

"Yes, sad isn't it, that sissy fags like me can't defend ourselves?" He starts to go back inside. "Go sleep it off, Alex. Whatever "it" is."

"Dammit, Chris! I acted like a jerk last night, I admit it. I've been going through some stuff since I retired. I haven't really been myself."

"Mhm. That's what your friends said." He returns to the railing, looking a little less skeptical, but still smug in a way that makes me want to kick him.

I can feel the migraine starting up already. "Let me guess; Brad thinks confession is good for the soul even when he's confessing for others?"

"It was Elmer, actually. He says you need to get laid. His words, not mine." He holds up his skinny arm – probably suffering from the same nausea I'm feeling about now.

"One track mind." Yeah, definitely a migraine. "Anyway, I thought I'd take a leaf out of Brad's book and –"

“Do some penance.” He smiles a bit, in a way that doesn’t make him look so stupid.
“Okay, Alex. Apology accepted. Seeing as you woke me up, I might as well make the best of it. You want to come up for some coffee or something?”

“It taste better than the All Nite’s?”

“This is a Starbucks house,” he reassures me as he unlocks his door. “You’re frustrating as hell, Alex, but I guess that’s part of your charm. I’ll even throw in a free doughnut.”

“It’s a date.”

A six-foot cut out of Darth Vader greets me at the door. “Sorry about that,” Christopher giggles as he turns the standy aside. “Darth’s insisted on standing there. He gets protective of his apprentices sometimes.” I suppose he’s blushing around the cheeks and collar bone and breathing hard, like he always does whenever he does something stupid. I wouldn’t know, and for once I don’t really care. I’m too busy staring at his walls and shelves.

“You’ve got Chewie.”

“Yeah.”

“And Han.”

“Unh—”

“And Leia. The special edition slave girl Leia with the chains and blaster.”

“I know, I know!”

But he has more than that. Just those four would be enough, but he’s got a whole shelf – some from the seventies -- and all in their original boxes. A Starship enterprise hangs from the ceiling, red lights flashing on its hull and NCC-1701-A scrawled across its top. He’s got every DVD collection, too – from The Avengers right down to The Twilight Zone. Dear God, when did I die and why were you dumb enough to let me into heaven?

“Impressive. Most impressive.”

“Look, I’m trying to be nice!” he explodes. “They’re just toys okay? Collectibles! Do you have to make such a big fucking deal about it?”

“I was being serious,” I lean closer to examine them. “Do you have Doctor Who?”

“Which Doctor?” he asks suspiciously. Sure enough, he’s blushing now.

“Third Doctor. Jon Pertwee.”

“Yeah, I taped it all the last time it was on PBS,” he says defensively. “Why?”

When faced with a hole in one’s personal geekdom, one can do a number of things. There’s the Denial Outright, the Subject Change Speedy and the Humble Admission. Since my pride’s already been whipped twice today, I choose the later. “I’ve never seen it.”

Were it not the laws of physics so rigid, I’m sure his jaw would have crashed through the floor. “Heresy!”

“Yeah, yeah. My VCR broke for two months and Brad and Joe were out of town. Elmer promised to tape it, but he ended up getting forty hours of the Playboy Channel instead.” I raise my hands, anticipating the question. “I didn’t ask and I sure as hell don’t want to know.”

He actually gives me a smile that isn’t cheesy, and one that doesn’t make him look so twinkly. “I keep my tapes in the guest room to save shelf space.”

“You think I could borrow them?”

“You’re not exactly a friend,” he flounces past me into the kitchen, beating time on his hips as he goes.

“Oh come on! What am I going to do, eat them?”

“So watch them here,” he calls, reaching up to pull some mugs down from a cabinet.

I don’t see that I have a choice. Still, you’ve gotta be a man about these things. “You bet your skinny ass I won’t.”

“What?” he turns around and throws me another shit-eating grin. “You’ve got something better to do today?”

As the setting sun paints the windows orange, he pushes the popcorn away and stretches. “So, which Doctor does it for you?”

I nearly snort my fourth beer out of my nose. “None of ‘em,” I say honestly. “Though Tom Baker’s weird enough I might say yes for the novelty.”

He mock-shudders. “Yuck, not me. He’s got this creepy jelly baby fetish going on. But I’d fuck his voice.”

This time, I am successful. “What?!”

“You know,” he presses. “Some people don’t cut it physically, but they have these voices?”

“Too much information, Chris,” I grumble as I swill down a mouthful of Heineken.

“Come on,” when he nudges me again, I cuff him on the shoulder. “Ow! Fine, I already said Tom Baker, but I’ll go again. Lieutenant Worf.”

“I told you I’m not playing.”

“No play, no more beer. Them’s the rules at La Casa de Christopher,” he tells me solemnly.

“Fine. Counselor Troi.”

“Bzzt! One luv! Al, play for real!” he whines.

“What? We’re going by voices now, you said! I’d tap that larynx.”

He looks at me suspiciously but continues with “Starbuck. Boy Starbuck.”

“Well, you did say this was a Starbucks house. Lando Calrissian.”

“Really? James Earl Jones, then.”

“Well, guess that explains Darth,” I aim a peanut at the standout looming near the doorway.

He pushes my hand down. “Don’t. You. Dare! He’s collectible!”

“Speaking of fetishes,” I toss the peanut in his hair instead. “Okay, HAL.”

“No way!” this gets him laughing.

“I’m sorry, Chris. But I’m afraid I would do that.”

“You’re terrible.” He stretches his hand up to the ceiling and yawns. “Scuse me for praying to the sleep gods; I think I’d better turn in.”

I reach for another beer. “It’s eight p.m.!”

“And you woke me up early after a fifteen hour day,” he gets up slowly, wriggling to toss out the pins and needles. “So, are you staying?”

“What?” I fumble the can like a football.

“Forget it. Too tired to get it now,” he dismisses the spreading stain with a wave and steps over it. “There’s bedding in the linen cabinet down the hallway. The bathroom’s the second door to the left.” He bounces on his toes a little, like he’s expecting something.

“Well.”

“Well.”

“Good night, Alex. I had a good time today, really. Even if your taste in computers is suspect.”

“For the last time, I said I’d do his voice! You were the one that made the rules!”

“Night-night!” he sings as he shuffles off to bed. It’s beyond me, really, to hurl a pillow after him. That doesn’t stop me.

I don’t know when or how I fell asleep, except that it was pitch-black when I woke and my neck felt like I’d just been Vulcan-pinched. For a few bleary moments I wondered where I was: in my bed or in the transporter room fellating Scotty while HAL and the Enterprise’s computer jerked each other off. But I remembered well enough when I heard the scratching. Not like a dog pawing the screen door; more like claws on carpet, more like hot breath on my neck.

My heart kicks up in chest and common sense tells me not to turn. “Just pretend to be dead,” says instinct, “you really don’t want to meet a werewolf, trust me.”

“Oh, but I do,” I remind it before I turn my head.

The room is dark except for the combination of moon and amber street light you get in cities at exactly 3 a.m. The dented Venetian blinds divided it in bars across the werewolf’s fur. In old movies they’re always brown or grey, human except for the prosthetic fangs and the bad make up job. But this was not a movie, and he was anything but bad. Long and lean as a dancer, I had no doubt he could split my skull on his knuckles or break me over his thigh. He moved so swiftly beneath his tawny fur, I couldn’t even look down the hall to check on Christopher; as the werewolf pounced I just hoped he had sense enough to stay inside and barricade the door.

He was heavy on my chest and on my belly, heavy on my legs and shoulders too. The striped light threw just half his face in high relief. I couldn’t see too clearly, but what I

did told me he wasn't like any wolf I'd ever seen in pictures. Sure, he had long, sharp teeth and curling claws, but there was no pug snout, no mangy beard, no swift bite to the jugular. He merely lay there, his breath hot in my face, his dark eyes locked on mine. If I didn't know better, I'd have guessed he was grinning, that he wanted to talk. It might be intimidating, sure, but not for a cop. Hell, I've seen scarier things at four a.m. at Frat houses.

"Look," I say when the intimidation has officially evaporated. "If you're gonna rip out my throat just do it, okay? Not to be rude or anything, but I'm not as young as I once was, and neither is my back. In fact, if you really want to kill me, just sit there a little longer."

"If you're trying to be funny, it's not working."

"Thanks. I'll be here all night." He has a voice like bone grinding against steel, like dirt and blood and something not quite human. As he shifts his hands against my shoulders, I notice that he's naked – and something very obvious is grinding on my groin.

"Oh, please."

The werewolf's teeth are all I can see next. "Oh, please?" he repeats, half-angry, half-incredulous.

"I do not care how long it's been since you got laid. I don't unzip for everything with a cock."

"Oh really?" he laughs, nudging me a little with his nose. It's moist, warm and softer than red velvet. "Then my, oh my, what a big prick you must have."

"Yeah, well, all the better to...to...." He's right, of course. "Dammit. I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Like a bear to honey." I tell myself I'm not going to gasp when his claws caress my belly or when he thrusts his hips forward just a little bit; I still do, both times.

"Well, then," he purrs. "If you won't unzip, I'm not about to rip your jeans off; despite the teeth and fur I'd like to think I'm still a gentleman."

"So we're at an impasse."

"I'm afraid so." The werewolf frowns and shifts his weight a bit. "It's me, isn't it? Let me guess: you don't like tail from guys with tails."

"No, that's not it."

“Is it my breath? I’ll get some Listerine.” He starts to knead my groin again. “Pretty please?”

“It’s not...damn it. It’s not you, okay? It’s me.”

“That’s pretty lame,” he laughs. “So you’re telling me don’t have a sex drive?” His hand cups my belly and kneads just above the buckle. “Come on. I’m a werewolf! What kind of bear doesn’t want to fuck one?” This time when his palm dips down I can’t help but respond. “Your mouth’s saying no, but your body’s pretty insistent. You might wanna get that checked out.”

“There’s something wrong with me, okay?”

He chuckles, low and lean. “What? You don’t like boys?”

“I’m serious!”

“Me too,” he laughs. “What is it? You’ve got two heads?” He licks his teeth and grins. “Never mind that. That’s kind of hot, actually. But my point still stands. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a frigging werewolf. I eat raw meat. I howl beneath the moon. I get fleas and scare little old drunk ladies for a living. You think anything you tell me is going to hold a candle?”

“This does,” I tell him softly.

“Try me.” He challenges. “Like you, I’ll be here all night.”

“I would, but you’re kind of crushing my lungs. Roll off.”

“Sorry.” He rolls to the floor and rests his head on my chest. “That better? Good. Now spill.”

Not seeing really that I have a choice, I do. I tell him about the pink fur, the twitchy whiskers, the buck teeth and the ass-crack cottontails. He listens without expression or care to the point I almost wonder if he’s mocking me. When I’m finished he lifts his head up and scratches at his ear.

“That’s it? Alright, here’s my take. You’re a werebunny. So-fucking-what? I know, I know,” he raises his claws before I can interrupt. “It’s cutesy, it’s unmanly, all the big boys want to be otters or bears. You might as well try to change your hair color.”

“But –”

“You know, when I first transformed I wasn’t happy either.”

I can almost see myself spit take. “But you’re a –”

“Yes,” he runs his hands down his furry body. “Everybody wants to be a werewolf, except me.” I have absolutely nothing to say to that, my circuits are too fried. “I’d rather have been a tabby, personally. There’s something appealing about lying in the sun all day. But no amount of catnip changed that, and why should it?”

“It’s just...do I have to be...such a queer animal?”

“Do you want my cock up your ass?”

I cough a bit. “Well, since you’ve put it so delicately, yes.”

“I thought so. No worries, then. You’re a gay animal whether you like it or not.” As his hand moves again, I feel the night air rush up against my prick. When he covers it with his palm, I stand at full salute.

“Well, so much for our stalemate,” I lean back and try not to cry out as he gives me a little squeeze. “So are you going to undress, you Wascally Wabbit, or do I have to do it for you?”

“Oh, I’ll let you do the honors.” His lips taste like copper and raw steak and something off. Is it popcorn? I don’t have too much time to ponder, though. Next thing I know he’s unbuttoning my shirt.

“Hey, try to relax, okay? I don’t want to wake your boyfriend.”

“He’s not,” I nearly choke.

“Oh, really?” I kiss him again before he can ask too many questions.

I don’t know for sure when I fell asleep, but I can safely say it was somewhere between the second time he fucked me and the second time I fucked him. So after all that activity, it’s understandable that I don’t know very much when I wake up. I know the sun is peeking through the blinds and that it’s hot and directly in my eyes. I know the only thing sorer than my ass is my thighs, thanks to all the raking. I know that I’m naked as a jay bird and that I probably need a good long shower and some breakfast. I also know Christopher is sprawled across me, with his head on my shoulder and his hand around my

Wait.

In movies, when someone discovers something scary they usually pan out so you can watch their scream reverberate around the world. I’ve never bought the Matrix or the

Truman Show logic, but damned if I don't hear birds fly off the roof by the time I've finished yelling.

"Mhh, what?" Two bleary blue eyes peek at me from straw-slicked bangs.

"Oh... 'morning, Alex. Breakfast?"

Ten seconds later, he's sprawled on the floor and rubbing his ass. "Okay, then," he grunts. "Don't take the glazed doughnuts, then."

I feel way too much like a B-movie heroine for my own good. Nevertheless, I still point my finger at him and yell "You!"

"Yes, what about me?" As he stares me down with an icy look I've never seen, my mouth and brain separate.

"Bah bah buh duah deh....dee...buh?" At least, what I'm saying sounds like that. But then I'm searching the floor for my pants. Somehow, my underwear got jammed in a lampshade; not wanting to know how I extract it and start dressing.

"It was the only way you'd consider it!" Shaking of his usual cowardice, Christopher grabs my arm.

"By what?" I jerk out of his grip. "Pretending you got attacked? That there was some crazy animal on the loose? You didn't even hurt your arm."

"That's not true!" He protests. "I did last week at Yolanda's house."

"That's – Jesus!" I pull up my jeans so hard I almost split a seam.

"Well, she had homemade jerky! I'm only human!"

"You're half animal, Chris, in case you hadn't noticed!" I grab my shirt and round on him, feeling kind of like one myself.

"Well, I didn't hear you complain!" He fumes. "And frankly, Mary, it takes one to know one."

Half buttoned up, I throw the front door wide.

"Al, can't we talk about it?" and he's grabbing at me again, nails sharp as little claws. I just shove my way past him and out the door.

"A word of advice, kid. Real men don't lie like little bitches and beat around the bush. They come right out and say it."

“Fine. You want the truth, here’s the truth. I did it because I felt sorry for you, the way your stupid friends keep trying to fix us up.”

“Go fuck yourself.” I don’t think there’s any reason to believe a word he says.

“You don’t get it, do you? They’ve known about you forever, you idiot!”

Even though it feels like something just tore up my insides, I tell him that God hates a liar.

He folds his arms over his bare chest. “You think so? Fine. Call them up and ask them to deny it.”

“If I do you better believe I won’t report back to you.”

“Well thank God for that. Get out!”

When he slams the door, I open it and slam it again for him. “Also, your taste in voices sucks!” It’s the most mature thing I can think to say.

I tell myself I’m not going to do it; I won’t give any of them the satisfaction. “Fuck ‘em all,” I tell Scotty. “Just give me you and a transporter any day!” But after awhile, even that sweet, Scottish brogue isn’t doing it. The TV’s loud as it can go, but the whole house still feels silent. But the resolve I had when I popped in “Where No Man Has Gone Before” has faded by the time I reach “The Corbomite Maneuver”.

“I forgot how much this episode sucks,” I mutter as I open up a beer. “I mean, that stupid rubber mask, the talking baby...” my shoulders slump when I realize I’m talking to myself, and it sounds even more pathetic than usual. There’s just nothing for it after that but to hit fast forward and dig the phone out of the couch.

Elmer picks up. “Lo?” I can tell it’s Elmer because the Playboy Channel’s going full tilt in the back.

“Hey Elmer. It’s me.”

“Just a sec.” The moaning drops a few hundred decibels. “Hiya, Alex. If you want Brad he’s out to church with Joe. Anything I can do you for?”

I can’t think of how to just come out and say it and I’ve had enough angst in one day to last the rest of my life. “Yeah, yeah there’s something,” I mutter, wiping the sweat off my brow. “Have you and the guys noticed anything different about me lately?”

“Other than the throwing dinner salads at your waiter?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of related to it,” I suck a breath through my front teeth (which, I notice, feel a little longer). For a moment we just listen to each other breathing.

“Al,” he says at last. “I done a lot of bluffing in my day. Now I’m retired, I don’t do a damn thing anymore that reminds me of work. So I’m just gonna come out and say it: this have anything to do with your rabbit problem?” There’s never been a time in my life I wanted to someone to beam me up more than I do now. Hell, I’d even go with Dave and HAL. “Yeah, I thought so,” he says gently. “Dammit, I told them it wasn’t fair –”

“How long?”

“I don’t reckon there was a time. There were the library books, the salads, and you didn’t want to go out at night. You also brought bunny hair over whenever you came, and you didn’t have no rabbits.” His voice softens even more. “Hell, I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

There are lots of things I could do. Yell at the old fart, bang down the receiver, never talk to them again. Instead I just start crying like a jerk.

“Hey now,” Elmer soothes. “Hey, guy. Shhh. It’s okay. Shhh.”

Only it’s not. Everything’s a mess, I suddenly realize. It’s been that way for a long time now, and I don’t know how to fix it. But Elmer takes the words out of my mouth.

“Yeah, life’s a bitch like that sometimes. Sonny, I’m an old bastard and I’ve seen a lot. But that doesn’t mean I understand it all. Werewolves, gay stuff. Neither do the boys. We all try our best, but there’s a limit. We didn’t wanna scare you; hell, we didn’t know what to say. So we found someone at the All Nite who knew and tried...” I can almost hear him shaking his head. “The road to Hell and all...well, it was a good-intentioned failure, anyway.”

“Only not really.” I scrub my eyes on my sleeve and try to calm my voice down. “I kind of told him I hated him, then we watched Doctor Who. Then he turned into a werewolf but I didn’t know it was him. We fucked, then I woke up, found out the werewolf was him and told him I hated him again before slamming out.”

The wince is audible. “Heavy stuff, Al.”

“I also called him a liar somewhere in there.”

“Well, I’ve gone through two marriages that nearly bankrupted me, so I’m not an expert. But I guess the question to ask is, did you mean it?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know.” I run my fingers through my hair. “He likes Doctor Who.”

“Unh-huh. Diagnosis: you really don’t need to get laid. You need to call him up, apologize, and invite him over for...I don’t know about this Doctor What but I liked that what’s it, FarScape when it was on the cable.”

“What if he tells me to fuck off?” God damn it. I guess you never get over high school after all.

“Al, tell me: isn’t it the ‘what if’ that messed everything up in the first place?”

Two hours later, I finally get up the courage. Something that sounds very much like Star Trek blares in the background when he answers.

“Casa de Christopher!”

“Hey.”

For a second I think he’s going to hang up. “Hey yourself,” he says finally. “You calling to yell again, or will calling me a faggot do?”

“Actually, I was calling to -- I was out of line.”

He sniffs. “Well, no shit, Sherlock. You want a medal, maybe a commendation from the Queen?”

“The only queen I want one from is you.”

“Well, that’s not cheesy or insulting at all!”

“I’m nervous, okay?” I snap. Then in the background, I recognize something. “Is that ‘The Corbomite Maneuver?’”

“Yeah, only the worst episode ever,” he snorts.

“That stupid alien puppet.”

“The bad lip synching.”

“The special effects looked shitty even then, I bet.”

He’s laughing now, almost despite himself. “Please! The anomaly looks like pie ala-mode after the dinner rush – wait. Not gonna laugh about that, no. I’m pissed off at you.”

“You have a right to be,” I agree.

Behind him, the TV turns off. “You have to be the dumbest – the most – the most infuriatingly fun geek I know.”

“Ditto. Look, Chris. Not that I deserve it, but I’ve got the whole original series over here and I’m just about to start Mudd’s Women.”

“Is that a threat or an invitation?”

“What I’m saying is...you wanna come over?”

He pauses so long I start to worry he ripped the phone out of the wall. “I’m supposed to work tonight but I’ll tell Nell I have to switch. I’ll be over at six or sevenish.”

“Fine then.”

“Fine.”

“I am not asking for a pity visit.”

“Kay.”

“Or a pity fuck.”

“Just say good bye while you’re ahead, Alex. I’m coming over but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you.”

When we hang up I promise myself I won’t sit around and stare at the clock. For that to happen, however, I’ll have to do one of two things: either sleep or get really, really drunk. Not wanting to screw up, I decide to do both.

I’m aware of two things when I finally open my eyes. First, that I feel like I’m trapped in a fur suit; second, there’s a tawny wolf staring down at me.

“Don’t you believe in knocking?” It’s a bit difficult to talk around my teeth, especially when I’m more than a little hung over.

“Honey, with these claws?” He flexes them for my approval before he sits down on the sofa. “You need to lock your door sometimes. It’s a dangerous neighborhood, and you should know better.” He nudges a Smith’s grocery bag over to me. “I brought snacks; beef jerky for me, Caesar salads for you. Don’t worry, I didn’t go out like this.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” When I try to look away, he slips a claw underneath my chin and turns it back.

“This is what you were so upset about?” He smiles so big I swear I can count all his sharp yellow teeth.

“Yeah, go ahead and laugh. I know I look like I just escaped from a Pokemon game.”

“You know, you’ve really got to stop being so defensive,” he says as he fishes through the bag. “You think you’re being funny I guess, but it just pushes people out.” He straightens up and tears open a package with his teeth. “You look a bit uncomfortable, yeah, but I like it. Pink’s my favorite color, and those teeth look pretty fierce.”

“Ha ha. Do you say that to all your furry friends?”

“See, there you go again!” He rips out a piece of jerky and chows down. “For the record, you were the only one who said you looked ridiculous.”

“Then you’re telling me you think it’s kind of hot?”

He hums the Dragnet theme, but the only word is “duh”. “But anyway, I think we’ve both had a little too much trauma for one night. Let’s just watch your show...to be honest, I haven’t seen the whole series.”

“Yet you bitched me out for the Third Doctor!”

“That’s different; you were alive then so you don’t have an excuse! And do you really wanna fight a werewolf over this?” I don’t want to give him any points by saying yes, but he knows as well as I do that silence is consent. “Well, this isn’t awkward or anything.”

“Nope, not at all.”

He reaches for another pack of jerky. “Well, in between turning into were-creatures today we’ve watched quality TV, fucked, fought and called each other ridiculous names. Does this mean you still hate me, or are we “going steady” as the kids say these days?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out myself,” I decide now’s a good time to open up a salad.

“If you hadn’t noticed, things are weird for me now. They’ve been weird for awhile...but I do know that I don’t hate you.”

“And I know I kind of like you.”

“Glad that’s cleared up.” Before he can move away I cover his claws with my fluffy bunny paw. “So, Mudd’s Women?”

“If you can stand the camp factor.”

This time, I'm the one to kiss him first.

He says it almost casually, as the three lovely, sequined ladies materialize on the transporter pads. "You know, Scotty's ok here, but he wasn't really hot until the movies." The lettuce falls out of my mouth and lands on my knees with an unceremonious splatter of ranch dressing. But right now I could care less about appearances.

LOST BY WENDY BARNUM

Lawrence Lewisohn was lost. It was a hundred and two degrees under Manhattan, and he was sweltering, in a suit, in the subway, crammed between a lady with two tiny, near-identical wiener dogs shoved into her purse and a large man who was trying to calm his screaming toddler with a plush octopus.

Lawrence looked from the octopus to the wiener dogs and back again. It was his least favorite day of the year. July 29th. Just early enough into the summer that anyone who was anyone was on vacation, and late enough that the seasonal high from the warm weather had been squashed flat by the heat.

It was also his birthday. The thirty-second in a series of shitty July 29ths, but this one was shaping up to be the worst. Of course, there were only three more hours to go until it was officially over, but Lawrence always held that his birthday luck lasted until dawn the next day, since he'd been born at 5:49 a.m., after a twenty-hour labor.

His mother still gave him grief for that. His sisters had both popped out so fast you'd have thought they were in training for the Olympic luge.

Brian would tease him periodically about his birthday paranoia, telling him it was just a holdover from being held under water at his own birthday parties for too many years at the local pool.

If I had drowned, Lawrence thought, I never would have grown up to be such a schmuck.

And with that, the doors opened. Exit the lady with two dogs and the man with the toddler, enter the talkative teenage girls sharing headphones on a knock-off iPod. The music was audible -- something with loud, sweeping synthetic horns and voice processing, but the words were unclear other than, "Don't look back."

Lawrence had been taking that as his motto all evening.

If he had to put his finger on it, he'd have said that seven was the age when he started really running away from home. He'd disappeared a few times before that, but it was just trying it on for size. Going to the attic or hiding in the shed wasn't running away, it was hiding. There was a distinction; Lawrence just wasn't sure exactly what it was.

At seven he'd started to give serious thought to what he'd need out in the world, and where he'd go. Some book had instilled in him early on, never run away without a plan. He couldn't remember which one. Maybe it was *The Incredible Journey* or *Island of the Blue Dolphins* that had imparted to him that when home leaves, you have to make your best way back toward it.

Home left when Lawrence was seven. Home had been his big sister Lisa, who'd gone to private boarding school for eighth grade because she was having too much trouble in the local public school.

Most of the time, when Lawrence ran away, reaching Lisa was his objective; he eventually told her this one time when he came up to see her at college. He'd been feeling really vulnerable after the breakup with Dennis. Maybe that was a kind of running away too, going up to Boston to escape New York. New York was full of Dennis and Lawrence running around half-naked at Coney Island, kissing at the top of the Empire State Building, charging down Sixth Avenue pell-mell to the Village in Viking costumes trying to get to the Halloween parade, making out in alleyways and behind bars, skin on skin, denim on denim.

Lisa had made it all right. She gave him cocoa and comfort, which she said was like tea and sympathy, but tastier and more sincere. Lawrence had missed the reference so thoroughly that she sat him down and they read through the play together, with a couple of crying breaks.

"Larry," she said, when they were done, "your heart is going to break all your life, just like mine, but you'll love harder, and be happier when things are going right." And then she made him go to bed instead of trying to call Dennis, and tucked him in.

If Lisa weren't in Paris with her husband and their four-year-old, he'd probably have gone to see her, but Paris was like being on the moon. For about twenty minutes he'd idly entertained the idea of hopping on a flight, but the fact of having to be at work on Monday put the kibosh on that idea pretty quickly.

What he didn't want to do was go back to the apartment.

The doors opened and six guys in matching leather-pride shirts walked on. Two of them checked out Lawrence, but he didn't have the heart to give anyone the amount of attention that flirting back would have required. He just smiled what his other sister, Julie, called his pretty-boy smile, and went back to thinking about Brian.

One of the guys winked and waved and for an instant, Lawrence thought of Dario: the two-year crush, the consummation, the disappointment and the torment slammed through him in as long as it took to blink. Dario had been everything Lawrence wanted in a boyfriend. He was artistic, he was funny, and he smelled great, even after working out; which Lawrence knew, because they'd been on-again, off-again workout buddies for two years. Then, one night, Lawrence finally worked up his nerve and asked Dario to go

drinking with him. They wound up in a bar off 31st street, an Irish pub with a nice, padded booth and very little in the way of lighting.

Trying to be suave, Lawrence put his hand on Dario's thigh and looked him in the eyes. A tiny squeak came out for what was supposed to be a throaty purr. Dario cracked up, and so did Lawrence. Eventually they found their way back to Lawrence's apartment. Dario was everything Lawrence had wanted. He was erudite, passionate and insatiable.

Lawrence woke up sore and happy in an empty apartment. There was a five-page letter on the kitchen table. Dario was erudite all right. He'd written an entire treatise on why they couldn't see each other again. He was desperately sorry, but he was married, with a normal job, and a normal life, and much as he enjoyed being with Lawrence, he was a little afraid of what they'd done making its way back to his wife. The sheer amount of gorgeous detail with which Dario described their lovemaking convinced Lawrence that he was sincere. He never went near Dario again, but he reread the letter often, and switched gyms.

Which brought him right back to Brian; he'd met Brian at the new gym, the tiny one near Houston Street. It wasn't really much more than a storefront crammed with step machines, LifeCycles, and weight lifters all straining to impress each other. The gym was tiny and kitschy like you wouldn't believe. They decorated for everything; Halloween was particularly memorable, with the dancing skeleton display doing synchronized step aerobics in the window.

Lawrence knew he wanted to fuck Brian the first time he laid eyes on him, which was just as Tim, the owner of the gym, was introducing Brian as Lawrence's new personal trainer.

It took seven months of working out three times a week for Lawrence to get up his nerve to even ask Brian about his life. Lawrence was still stinging from the end of his relationship with Jamie. Now there was a memory. Jamie had long, smooth red hair, almost to his ass. Jaime used to wind it around Lawrence's cock when it was wet and run his hands all over him until he was throbbing and begging.

Jaime had a cock the width of a Mars bar, thick, satisfying and tasting faintly of almonds. Lawrence could have kept him in his mouth all day, which was part of the problem. Lawrence liked it slow and building; Jaime wanted it hard, pounding, punishing. Lawrence developed TMJ and piles going out with Jaime, and Jaime dumped him flat on his aching ass after a year.

Which was where he was emotionally when he met Brian for the first time, aching and looking for comfort and sanity; but his brief fling with Dario had put him on the rebound at the wrong time. Brian was everything that Jaime hadn't been; he was fun, he was in touch with his body's needs. He didn't push himself to drink or smoke or eat stupid things. He just did what he felt he needed to do to stay happy. It was a remarkably relaxed approach, which Brian always credited to being raised in New Hampshire.

The doors opened and the train's engine shut off. "Last stop, all passengers mumble, squawk, mumble." Lawrence blinked. He had no idea where he was. He'd been getting on and off trains in no particular pattern for the last two hours, since he'd stormed out. Most of his mad-on was gone. Now he was just scared and depressed, and horny. He'd been thinking too much about the good sex he'd had with his exes.

For a flickering moment he thought about going to a bar and trying to pick someone up. He wouldn't have to go back to the apartment, and he wouldn't have to put up with the hassle of checking into a hotel.

And then Brian would probably never take him back. Given his track record this evening, that was already in doubt, but he didn't want to make it worse.

Lawrence stumbled into the station, feeling that weird way you do when everything stops moving and you're still trying to thrum in time. The iron maiden looked like the only way out, so he went to street level and looked around.

Queens. He was in Queens, with only one thought: How the hell did I wind up in Queens?

Lawrence stood with one hand on the barrier wall that kept people from walking into the open stairs and checked his phone. There were seven messages. The first two were from Brian, from earlier that evening, which made Lawrence angry enough that he had to take the phone away from his ear before listening to message three. It was his mother, calling to wish him a happy birthday. The next two were Julie and Lisa. Lisa had called him from Paris, probably very late into her night, probably while he was fighting with Brian. He briefly contemplated calling her up to tell her about what was going on, but he wasn't sure his phone plan covered international calls. The next two messages were Brian again. He wasn't sure he wanted to listen to those yet.

Now what? Who did he know in Queens? His aunt was definitely asleep by now, and Guy was probably out with Gordon. They still hadn't moved in together, even though they'd been together for ages. Guy had explained it to him once. Said they each needed their own space, to develop their own lives.

Lawrence had thought it was weird and non-committal, but then, he'd moved in with Brian and look where they were now.

Nevertheless, Lawrence gamely dialed Guy's number. After four rings the machine picked up. "Hi, it's Guy. Penny for your thoughts?" Then there was a long beep. Lawrence hung up. Gordon wasn't in either.

Queens wasn't going to work. Determinedly, he got back in the subway and decided to get lost again.

They'd been planning his birthday for ages. They were going to go to the opera; City Opera was doing an impressionist version of M. Butterfly with ballet. They knew someone in the corps and it seemed like a great idea.

Except for the part where Lawrence thought they'd agreed to meet at the opera and find a restaurant nearby and Brian thought he was supposed to call Lawrence to tell them where their reservations were for dinner and then wait there.

The heat was probably a major factor in their mutual aggravation. If it hadn't been so miserable outside, they probably would have gone looking for each other. The grand irony was that they were only about six blocks from each other the whole time. If one of them had made a move, everything would have been fine.

But they were both just waiting. Neither one of them thought to call until the restaurant started filling up with other patrons. Then the arguing began. There was a lot of "where were you?" and "now we'll miss the opera" or "we're not going to get dinner". Which escalated into "this happens every time!" and "you never listen!" It only got worse from there.

Lawrence had been running away since he was a little boy, and since he wasn't even looking Brian in the eye, it was easier just to start walking, and keep walking until everything behind him disappeared and he was standing, looking into the open mouth of a subway station.

In retrospect, it was a stupid decision. If he'd gone to meet Brian, they would have had a hurried dinner, sure, but they could have salvaged the evening. Thinking about it made going back to apologize even more impossible.

The train stopped at Roosevelt Island, and for a moment Lawrence was tempted to get out and just go exploring. He'd never been to Roosevelt Island. He'd never had a reason to go. Part of the allure of running away was exploring, finding something that would answer the questions you were running away from so you could go back.

He was standing, half out of his seat when the train rumbled away from the station, and for just a moment, he felt a pang of regret that he had stayed on. Where was he going, anyway?

He looked around. The car was dim and empty except for an old man, with a TV dinner tray set up in front of him. It looked like he was playing Scrabble.

Lawrence got good at Scrabble playing against Brian. It was Brian's one big concession to intellectualism. Brian had one of those huge, custom boards that rotated. That was Brian for you, when he got into something, he went for it full bore.

The Scrabble set on the TV table was somewhat larger than the travel edition and good deal smaller than Brian's deluxe model. The surface of the board was crowded, and

nearly full. Across the top the words almost formed a sentence, it said WHEREVER YOU GO. All the words on the board seemed to reflect his situation. He saw NEVER and FOREVER in close proximity, he saw ENCOUNTERS crossing HOME and EVENT. STRANGERS ran through MIDNIGHT, SEEKING and FRIENDS, and MIDNIGHT itself crossed TOGETHER. Reflexively, Lawrence looked at his watch. It was ten-thirty.

The old man held out a purple Crown Royal bag, jangling it, to show Lawrence that it was full of tiles. He held it out and Lawrence put his hand in, pulling out S O G Y E E and N.

He managed to make STODGY by making YEAR into YEARS and crossing STRANGERS and HIDING and kept the rest of the tiles in his hand. The old man drew next, and made GONG. He held out the bag to Lawrence. Lawrence put his hand in and took out T D O and then there was a tremendous noise, like when the doors get stuck and the ringing noise goes on forever. He turned around to see if someone was stuck in the door and took his hand out of the Crown Royal bag. When he turned around again, he was alone. Somehow the man had folded up his table, stored the tiles, and gotten outside the train.

Or at least, that's what must have happened, because now the man was waving to him from the other platform. Lawrence pressed his hand with the tiles against the window and pointed, to let the man know he still had them. The man waved, looking unconcerned. He smiled and nodded vigorously at Lawrence. And then the train pulled out of the station, and sat in the tunnel for nearly thirty minutes while a garbage train went past.

While he was sitting in the train in the half dark of the fizzling fluorescent lighting, he looked at the tiles in his hand T E D O N and E. He laid them out on the bench next to him, scrambling them to amuse himself while he waited.

E D O N T E

T E N D O E

E E T O N D

Through the haze of low blood sugar it almost looked like a word, so he switched the vowels around and got E T O E N D.

The haze cleared as his brain parsed this as "E to end"; as in "take the E train to the end of the line". Given the sheer lack of logic he'd been using all night, that seemed as sensible a course as any.

As if triggered by his decision the train lurched and started up again. When he got to the next station he tucked the tiles into his pocket and got out, as the train went out of service for repairs.

He walked as far as the tunnel for the E train. Which way was he going? Back out to Queens, or down to the World Trade Center site?

Then he sat down on the steps. They were blessedly cool, if filthy. Dusty too, for stairs that were used daily.

And then he got it, like the second part of a pun kicking in. He'd called the World Trade Center site "the end" for a while, because it felt like the end of everything normal. Commuting through it seemed like something you'd do at the end of time. Commute through a disaster area; it was something you'd only do in New York.

Getting up, he headed for the downtown train, wondering what waited for him.

The train rumbled and shook all the way to the bottom of Manhattan. Unremarkably, with the air conditioning off, as it seemed to be in every train, Lawrence fell soundly asleep.

There was Lisa, in her old post-graduate school apartment; sitting in the shabby old knitted chair she'd made in her time at FIT. Lawrence sat across from her, feeling as low as he could, despite the macaw-brightness of the walls and ceiling. She was smiling her sisterly smile, serene, but with the hint of pain in her eyes that told him he'd just poured out his heart, again. He could almost hear the last "and I miss him so much" echoing between them.

"Think of it this way, hon," she said, "Letting go of this guy opens you up to let someone better in."

"Do you think I'll ever meet someone better? Someone who gets me?"

"I know you will. He's looking for you, right now."

The loud exhale and the bump of the E train reaching the end of the line woke him, before he could ask Lisa how she knew.

Still half asleep, he staggered out of the train. Out, through the iron maiden. Up ahead, on the platform, was a beautiful box of lights, white, with a sheen, now red, now silver, with words running over and under and through the light. A soft hum came from the box, and Lawrence stumped toward it. The box was telling a story.

Exhausted, he leaned against one warm, friendly wall and listened to the voices. A woman was speaking softly. You could hear that she was crying. It didn't matter what she was saying, he knew the story. She had lost her lover in the World Trade Center. She had told her story to share her pain with someone, with anyone, with him.

Lawrence sat down against the wall of the StoryCorps booth and cried his eyes out.

It might have been five minutes or half an hour later that someone pressed a handkerchief and a bottle of Gatorade into his hands. Wiping his nose, Lawrence peered up at Brian, who was standing, resplendent in a half-unbuttoned tuxedo shirt and a hanging silver-patterned vest. He wore long white trousers and bespatted white shoes. When he crouched inches away, Lawrence noted that the entire back of the suit was covered in fine black smudges.

“How did you find me?”

“Remember that night we went up to Lincoln Center to go swing dancing?”

“Yeah, last summer.”

“And we had that whole conversation about that homeless guy we saw, with the sign that said ‘Tell me off, \$2’?”

“Yeah, I hate that. I always want to give him the two dollars and tell him, ‘Man, you’re better than that,’ but that would be telling him off.”

Brian smiled. “You said that if you were homeless, you would charge a dollar to tell stories, but you’d need to learn a lot more stories first.”

“Oh.” Lawrence lifted his head in grudging admiration and met his lover’s eyes for the first time. “You know me awfully well.”

Brian pulled a crumpled plastic bag of crackers from his vest pocket and offered them to Lawrence. “That’s why I brought supplies. I knew you’d go barreling around New York like a loose pinball and never hydrate.” He looked at Lawrence critically. “Or eat.”

“Guilty,” said Lawrence, pulling open the bag of crackers.

“Well,” Brian stood appraising his lover for a minute, then reached out and took Lawrence’s free hand, pulling him to his feet. “The night is still young, and we have a one a.m. reservation at a very nice restaurant.”

“You’re serious?” Lawrence looked down at his own sweaty clothes and at Brian’s rumpled finery. Lawrence looked at his watch; it was just midnight.

Brian leaned forward and kissed him, pushing him up against the wall of the StoryCorps booth. The kiss was deep and slow, full of sweetness and a bit of salt sweat. “They’ll have to love you as you are. I know I do.”

“Even when I run away, or get crackers all over your vest?”

Brian was brushing himself off, with a small smile. “If you run, I get to run after you and capture you and claim you again.” Brian smiled. “What’s more romantic than that?”

“Will you always run after me?” Lawrence said.

“Will you always feel the need to run?”

“Maybe not, after tonight,” Lawrence thought about the long hours of wondering and feeling alone. “Maybe next year, we’ll just stay home for my birthday?”

“Maybe,” said Brian. “Or maybe we’ll run away together.”

“I’d like that,” said Lawrence.

Brian folded their hands together and led Lawrence to street level, where he hailed them a cab. “Just promise me one thing, Lawrence.”

“What’s that?”

“That we don’t have to take any more trains tonight.”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

THE REFLECTION OF LOVE

BY JULIA TALBOT

Water and oil swirled together on cracked asphalt to make little rainbows under the street lights. It was the perfect night for Alain to do his business, because every little pool became a mirror, and every mirror gave him a window on the world.

He'd been tracking the same guy for three nights, and his client was getting hot about how long it was taking. Always the same story. Clients just didn't get that his methods depended on having something that belonged to the lost person, dog, what have you, and then having a way to see them. A mirror. The right light.

The little puddles were perfection.

A panel truck roared past on its way to the fish market, obscuring the sound of his boots ringing on the pavement. There. That one was big enough for him to see.

Alain stopped, listening for traffic. It would suck to get hit by the only vehicles out this late at night. Only truckers came through this little loop at three am, and with good reason. The place stank of despair and garbage, the tenements all but abandoned they were so old and rundown. The city workers who cleaned in this section of town had to wear heavy boots to protect them from discarded syringes and masks to guard them from meth cooks.

It was the perfect place to hide if you didn't want to be found, but Alain could find almost anyone, given time.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the watch his client had provided him. Heavy, solid, it was the kind of wrist watch a man might have worn in the fifties, with a dial face and a flexible, linked band. A treasure to the guy who had gotten it, passed down from father to son to grandson.

He kinda thought it must have sucked to lose it.

Holding it tightly in his hand, Alain stared into the glassy surface of the street puddle, letting his eyes go a little unfocused. He let his consciousness blur about the edges, sending his mind out to search for the man who belonged to the object he held.

The last few nights he had gotten nothing but echoes, leading him on a rambling chase from neighborhood to neighborhood. Tonight it was like he had a live wire. The whole world lit up with the guy's essence, his presence. Jesus, he had to be close.

The image started as a shaft of light that almost burnt his eyes. Alain knew he couldn't blink, though, or he'd lose it. So he stared, willing the stupid thing to resolve itself into a man. To give him a clue.

The scene he finally got surprised the hell out of him. The guy in question was there, a gaunt, gray figure in tattered jeans and a t-shirt, his overcoat open and hanging limp from his shoulders.

There was another man there, too. He was the bright light, the one Alain could have found on the darkest night with just some lady's compact mirror. That one fucking glowed, like a lantern in the night. No wonder it had been so easy to tune in.

Of course, the fact that the new guy was giving his target a blowjob amplified the effect. Sex always made a magic field. You just had to know how to tap into it.

Finally tearing his eyes away from the bruised mouth and flushed cheeks of the new guy, Alain stared at the target, noting every detail, and every bit of the surrounding. Fixing the image in his memory, Alain blinked, giving them some privacy.

Damned good thing, too, because that puddle was boiling. Literally bubbling and steaming.

Dude.

That was a first.

Okay, so he had a good idea where the target had holed up now. Alain pulled out his cell phone to call it in. Then he would go follow the guy until the client caught up with him.

"Hello?" The client's clipped British voice always made him grin.

"Hey. I got your boy."

"Turn on your homing device. I'll meet you there."

The phone went dead. Alain sighed, flipping the little switch on the side of the cell; a tiny beeping starting up. God, he hated that fucking thing. It was like a tether, keeping him at the client's heel.

He wandered, trying to keep his mind off the hot guy. He was on a job, damn it.

The big black Mercedes pulled up minutes after the little business in the alley played out, the bright one moving on. Alain didn't have a scry open, but he felt it like a physical thing.

The guy was happy with his pay, that was for sure.

"You have the target, Alain?"

Shit. Alain jumped a half a foot. He'd forgotten the client was there. That kind of shit could get him killed.

"Yeah. He's three blocks over in the alley behind Carstair's Jewelers."

"Get in."

Ah, man. He hated it when the client wanted him to follow all the way through to the capture. That got messy sometimes, and messy always threw off his resonance for a week.

"I'll go, just to make sure you see him, but I want you to pay me and let me out before you take him."

"Have you another engagement?" That clipped voice sounded vaguely annoyed.

"I do." Something told Alain to follow Mr. Blowjob. Something strong.

"Very well. As soon as the target is in sight, you may go."

Alain got in the car, wrinkling his nose at the scent of bad cigars. "Thanks."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of you working for someone else when you are on the job for me," his client said, stubbing out the stogie. The client had blond hair, perfect white teeth and an impeccable suit. That shit set Alain right on edge every time.

The target was more his crowd.

They pulled around and drove past the alley where the guy still leaned against the wall like a gray scarecrow.

"There he is. My pay?"

A bundle of bills came Alain's way. "I'll contact you next week with the next target."

"Yeah. Sure." This client had a list a mile long, he'd bet. Alain tried never to know **why** someone wanted him to scry. He only ever took enough detail to find. "See you."

The car didn't even stop rolling. Alain hopped out, hitting the ground running to compensate for the momentum. He hightailed it in the other direction, deliberately closing his ears to the harsh cry that rang out in the night, running from himself as much as from the scene of the crime.

Kyle had felt something in that alley.

Oh, not for the poor guy he'd blown. That guy had known he was about to die, and wanted to go out with a bang. He'd given Kyle all the money in his pocket, about three hundred dollars.

With that Kyle could take the rest of the night off.

No, he'd felt someone watching. Someone that vibrated on a frequency he usually only felt when he was jacking off. His very own buzz.

Jesus, it had put the hair up on the back of his neck, made him run like the fucking wind.

Now he was back in his one room flat, staring at the wall. His poster of Scotland was looking a little ratty. He'd bought it in college, back when he'd thought he was going to go live in a belfry in Edinburgh and write the great American novel.

Shit. He'd made it as far as Atlanta. That was where he'd gotten stuck. His Lit degree meant less than nothing to anyone but McDonald's. What he did might not be kosher to everyone, but it beat flipping burgers, and his special kind of empathy really helped folks think he was the second coming. On the first come.

He'd just about forgotten about the watcher, or pushed it from his mind at least, when he felt the sensation again. It was like a heater when you set it too close to the bed. It made his skin tingle, made his cock rise in his pants.

Shit.

Hopping up off his little futon, Kyle reached for a smudge stick, determined to cleanse the room. No way was someone coming into his home. He'd accept voyeurism out on the street, but not here.

As quick as it came in, it left, the tingling sensation fading. Kyle sighed, relief making him a little dizzy. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe whoever it was just wasn't looking for him. Like he was a blip on the wrong radar.

He wandered to the kitchen, grabbing a cranberry juice and a Ho Ho, needing the sugar fix. He'd gone out of his way to make that guy feel good tonight, had used up a good bit of energy. Hey, just because he got paid didn't mean he couldn't have sympathy...

Just about the time he got settled in his bones a bit, sitting on the futon and turning on a movie, someone knocked on his door.

No one ever knocked on his fucking door.

He was the king of nowhere. No one knew where he lived. None of his johns, none of his drinking buddies. No one.

For a long moment he sat there and held his breath, hoping whoever it was would just go away.

Then the knock came again, a little louder this time.

Shit.

Kyle didn't want to answer the door, but he knew he had to, because in this neighborhood loud knocking would bring heads out of doors. And he didn't want people to see him. At all.

When he did open the door, the guy who stood there could have been any one of the guys Kyle hung out with down at the Groundhog Tavern. He was lean and hungry looking, with a shock of dyed black hair and the bluest eyes, wearing rock and roll clothes. A t-shirt, a black, close-fitted jacket, jeans and stompy boots made the whole picture.

He couldn't help but laugh. "Don't tell me you want me to be in your band."

"What?" Eyebrows up, the guy shook his head. "No. I just...uh. This will sound nuts. I. My name is Alain."

"Well, gee, that's great. Go away." Kyle tried to close the door, but Alain grabbed it, holding it fast.

"Look, I know you don't want me to come in. I know you like to be invisible. And I know that guy you blew tonight is dead."

"Jesus." All of the blood drained from his head, balling up in his belly. "Who the fuck are you, man?"

"Can I come in? I'm not here to hurt you."

Everything in him screamed no. Everything but that one little kernel of curiosity among the fear.

"Yeah, but I swear to God, man, you try anything and I'll beat you down."

"Shit, I'm a wimp." Alain smiled a little, pushing past him and looking around. "You have some serious college chic here."

"Yeah, well, I don't entertain much."

"No, you work out of the home."

They just stared at each other for a bit, the little clock next to his bed ticking loudly in the silence.

"So what, you want a blowjob or something," Kyle finally asked.

"No. No, I just wanted to see you in person. You have this amazing glow, man."

"Glow." Okay, the guy was a little nuts. Maybe a lot. "Okay, then."

"Look, you may think I'm a freak, but I see things. Just like you take things up a notch with your mind. You're empathetic, yeah?"

"Yeah. So, you're clairvoyant or something?"

"No. I'm a scryer."

Kyle chewed on that one a minute, then nodded sharply. A lot of people had talents. He'd met a good many, since they seemed drawn to him. He'd had a telekinetic tell him that he was like a booster rocket, magnifying the talents of others.

That guy had been a fantastic fuck.

"So prove it," Kyle said. "Scry me something."

Alain's pretty blue eyes widened, but the guy had game, because he shrugged and said, "Okay. Get me a mirror."

This had to be the weirdest first meeting in the world. Kyle dragged his shaving mirror down off the wall.

"Sorry, it's all I got."

"It'll do. What should I show you?"

"You mean you can focus it?" That was some powerful shit. A real monster talent.

"Yeah. I tell you what, I'll show you the client I was working for tonight when I saw you."

"Sure, whatever." Privately, Kyle thought that might be a really bad idea. If the client had killed his john it might be better to know nothing about it.

Alain sat on the floor, laying the mirror flat and beckoning him to sit.

Kyle folded himself down cross legged and waited, glancing back and forth between the mirror and the man, wondering if he'd lost his mind for going through with this. He'd let Alain into his home, let him talk crazy shit about killers and mental talents, let him...whoa.

At first the stuff that appeared in the mirror didn't look like anything. Clouds. Swirls of light and color. Nothing impressive for sure, except Kyle **was** impressed. Alain was on the up and up about the Seeing, anyway.

The guy was focused, too, his eyes on the mirror, his whole body set in an attitude of waiting.

Slowly, the image started to resolve itself. The background showed some kind of swanky restaurant, all leather booths and low lighting. A slim green bottle sat on the table, along with several plates of food. A delicate looking blond man sat across from an enormous fat guy, the contrast between the two almost laughable. Like something out of a cartoon.

The blond man was the one talking, leaning forward with his hands flat on the table, looking very intense. The other guy just sat and listened, his jowls flopping every time he nodded.

It amazed him, how long the image stayed strong, how he could almost read the blond man's lips. He'd always heard that scrying was an inexact thing. This was very exact, man.

Finally the image faded, and he glanced up to tell Alain that his talent was fucking cool, but the words froze on his lips.

Alain swayed, white-faced and puny, sweat beading his upper lip and forehead.

"Dude. Are you okay? You use too much juice?"

"No. No, I'm fine. I mean, I'm not, but not because. Jesus fuck."

"What?" The whole experience had been on the weird side, but nothing to get upset about, he figured.

"I've never been able to **hear** a scry before. I guess that must be you, yeah? Acting like an amplifier."

Those eyes...Alain's eyes looked like the man was on serious drugs, the pupils like pinpoints. If Kyle hadn't seen them looking normal only moments before, he would worry that Alain was gonna OD or go crazy or something.

"I didn't hear anything."

"No? It was plain as day. The client's name is Tristan, and the big guy was Alfie. Alfie is supposed to hire someone to kill the scryer. He's outlived his usefulness."

Kyle sat back and stared. "Sucks to be you, man."

"Uh huh." Pushing the mirror aside, Alain stood up. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have...You were just. I had to see you. I needed to. I'm sorry."

"You're not making any sense." Kyle rose and went to his little apartment sized fridge, pulling out orange juice. Why was it his empathy always kicked in when he should be working on his self-preservation? "Here, drink this."

Alain obediently drained the juice, and his eyes went a little more toward normal. Cool.

"I shouldn't have come," Alain said. "If he sends people looking for me, they might come here."

"Yeah, well, you won't be here and I won't know where to send them, yeah? Problem solved."

Those blue eyes sharpened, the look in them at once knowing and disappointed. "Yeah. I mean, I just came because you had that light. Like a damned lighthouse or something. I should have known better."

"It's been vastly entertaining, man, but I think you need to go." His light and Alain's sparks be damned. He needed to be safe.

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"You say that one more time and I'll kick your ass. It's cool. Just go."

Alain nodded, moving slowly toward the door. Kyle followed, close enough that when Alain turned around and grabbed his shoulders he couldn't quite manage to back away. The kiss shocked him, his eyes staying wide open to stare into Alain's as that hot mouth pressed to his, sending these amazing jolts of pleasure all through his body.

When Alain pulled away it was like he'd held a live wire for a moment and then let it go. Shocks still ran through him, leaving him a little freaked out.

"Sorry," Alain said, holding up his hands. "I had to know. And it was just like I knew it would be. Amazing. Be safe, Kyle."

And then Alain was gone, the door closing quietly behind the guy, leaving Kyle standing in his tiny apartment, his hand on his mouth, wondering if he would ever see Alain again. He sorta hoped he would.

Stupid, Alain thought. That was just stupid. Why had he gone to Kyle's place, looking for...what? Romance? Hot sex? An end to his restless, weird life?

Sure, Kyle was hot, and he lit the darkness of the scry better than any firefly in the summer night, but he didn't even know Alain.

The guy probably wanted to have him committed or something.

He really couldn't blame Kyle one bit if he did.

Alain didn't go home. Luckily he kept most of his cash in a safe deposit box, so he took his cash from the last job there, keeping out just enough to get a cheap hotel for a couple of nights.

He checked his mirrors obsessively, the little one he kept in his backpack, the big one in the bathroom, the freakishly fly-spotted one over the hotel dresser. Every time he saw people looking for him. More and more people. The kind of guys who took jobs even he wouldn't touch.

So far there hadn't been any other psychics, but it was only a matter of time with someone as resourceful as the client.

The third night a sound outside his door brought him up out of bed like a shot, grabbing all of his shit and hightailing it out the bathroom window. He never saw the guy who sent a bullet after his ass, but he heard it whistle by him like a miniature freight train, and that was when Alain knew he had to take to the streets.

He got his money out of the bank, sewed a fake lining into his bag, and hid the money in there. He had enough for several weeks if he went cheap and didn't get it stolen. And then he headed for Underground Atlanta.

Years ago the Underground had been a tourist attraction, full of cheesy stores, scary food stands and little art shows with fabulously talented African American artists. That had been before the big recession, when most of downtown fell into disrepair. Now the Underground held the dregs of the city; drunks, addicts and people like him. People on the run.

When he'd first arrived in Atlanta, the Underground was where he'd ended up, and that was where he returned, blending in with the winos and the meth users, just like the old days.

Sleeping in the courtyard where the Walgreens had once met the food court, Alain stayed low, barely opening little windows of scry, mostly making sure his hunters never came close.

But sometimes...well, sometimes he looked in on Kyle.

Okay, maybe more than sometimes. He loved the look of the man, all shaggy blond hair and green eyes, his skin so pale that he glowed. Even better, he loved the buzz he got from tapping into Kyle's light. It was fucking addictive.

He'd seen Kyle in the shower, on the bed jacking off, with johns, and eating and drinking with friends.

Alain knew a lot about Kyle now. He knew the way Kyle's mouth kicked up in a shit eating grin. He knew how Kyle's smile never reached his eyes when he was with a job. Hell, he even knew how the guy liked his French fries, with lots of malt vinegar and salt.

Even more important, he knew that Kyle could feel him. If he watched long enough, Kyle would start looking around, rubbing his arms like he had goosebumps.

By the fourth week on the run, Kyle knew that the client really didn't want him dead because he knew too much, but because he had a psychic talent. He could recite the name of every enforcer on the client's staff. And he knew it was time to leave town, because there were no less than twenty-five people out searching for him.

With just enough money in his pocket for a bus ticket to someplace far away, Alain gave away most of his belongings to his fellow bums and headed out into the sunshine for the first time in too damned long.

The sun had him blinking, even with the haze hanging over the city, and the humidity hit him like a slap in the face. Maybe he would go west, where the dry was. Where the humidity never reached one hundred percent without raining.

Only one errand remained before he hopped his ticket out, and Alain had to work up his courage to do that. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his mirror.

It was time to go say goodbye to Kyle.

The last john had tried to spank him. Jesus, people were getting freaky these days. Kyle figured maybe it was time to go to flipping those burgers, because if he had to smack someone and run every time he got a job, he'd never make any money.

He'd begged off going out for a beer with Leon and Bear, needing to go home and sit, do something quiet so his jangling nerves would settle down.

His foot had just hit the front steps of his building when he felt it. That warm, tingling feeling had become old hat over the last month. Kyle had felt it everywhere, and even though he knew he'd never see his voyeur, he always looked over his shoulder.

This time he saw someone.

Jumping, Kyle threw his hands in the air, taking on a serious passive stance as the scraggly homeless man in an Army jacket shuffled close.

Close enough for Kyle to see the bright blue eyes and crazy black hair under the cap the man wore.

"Dude. Alain?"

"Yeah. I...can I come in a minute?"

That was a seriously bad idea, but he really didn't want to be seen on the street with a marked man, so he nodded and led the way up to his efficiency.

"What's up, man?" he asked when they got inside. "I thought you were gonna leave me alone. What's with all the spying?"

"Scrying."

"Whatever."

Alain took off the OD green cap, scrubbing his hands through his hair. "Sorry. I am. I just can't seem to stop. You're hard to give up."

Frowning, Kyle went and poured a shot of his best cheap scotch, handing it over to Alain. Guy looked like he needed it. "Hey, I was never yours to give up."

"I know. I just mean you're like a habit. Like smoking, or crack."

"Uh. Thanks. I think." Kyle studied Alain, noting that the hungry look was even more pronounced now, the man nothing but skin and bones. "So what do you want? Food? I don't have any drugs."

"I don't want drugs. I wouldn't say no to a sandwich, but that's not why I'm here."

"So why?"

Alain shoved his hands in his pockets, one hand turning something around and around. Finally, Alain drew out a little compact mirror, opening and closing it, just like he was using it for a stress reliever.

"I want...I'll pay you."

Narrowing his eyes, Kyle stared right into Alain's nervous gaze. "Pay me for what?"

"To let me touch you."

"Ah." Man, they were all the same. "How much?"

"I have a hundred dollars."

"Uh huh." A quick mental calculation told him that would finish his rent saving for the month and buy him smokes and some of those little hamburgers from Krystals. "Not like you are now, though. Go take a shower. Brush your teeth with your finger; the toothpaste is in the medicine cabinet."

Eyes wide, Alain nodded, mouth opening on a soft groan. "Oh. Okay. Yeah. Be right back."

God, he must be crazy. He was gonna fuck his stalker. But he couldn't turn down a hundred, not with the bad night he'd had. And that same kernel of curiosity that had gotten him the first time they'd met had a hold of him now. What would that spark Alain threw off during something as simple as a kiss be like if they went all the way through the whole deal?

The shower ran for nearly half an hour, and he was starting to think Alain was playing him just to get some freebie water and food when the guy came back, wearing a towel around his waist.

"I hope you don't mind, but I left my stuff on the bathroom floor. I figured the smell might kill the mood."

Kyle tried to shake himself into answering, but he was too busy staring. Alain's body was almost painfully thin, but it was beautifully put together, and the man had ink. All sorts of ink, all in places that didn't show with clothes on. A tiger sat on one hip. A raven bird flew across one pec. On the shoulder blades Alain had a sun and a moon, and at the small of that skinny back there were waves, blue-green and gorgeous, with negative space dolphins rising from the center.

Fuck, that was pretty. Kyle wanted to play connect the dots.

"You're way hotter naked."

Alain's cheeks flushed. "Thanks."

"So, what do you want?"

That sharp yet let down look he'd gotten the first time they met was back. "Is this where we negotiate?"

"No, this is where I tell you that you get one shot, so pick whatever it is you want most."

"Okay. Then I want you to fuck me."

His eyes widened, and Kyle rocked back on his heels. Usually the johns wanted to fuck him, or have him suck them off.

He hardly ever got to top. And he fucking loved doing it.

"Okay. Sure. I can do that."

A relieved smile spread across Alain's face. "Cool. Can I...um. Can I kiss you first?"

Kissing never came with the package deal, but Kyle knew it would help him get it up, because Alain's kisses were electric. Hell, that mostly naked body had him half hard already.

"We can kiss, yeah."

"Cool." Alain was on him in a nanosecond, one hand coming up to hold his head still, the other landing on his hip.

The kiss took off like a bottle rocket, Alain pressing his mouth open to slip him tongue, no subtlety or hey, how are you in the touch at all. Just desperate need.

It was a little bit frightening. And a lot hot.

Kyle kissed back, his own hands clenching on Alain's upper arms to keep him balanced, his knees shaking a little. He opened up, let Alain in, and he got deep, searching touches of Alain's tongue, like the man wanted to know him inside and out.

Moaning, Kyle broke the kiss, breathing hard, his cock aching. "Okay, that's good with the kissing, all right? I'm ready."

"Get undressed for me?"

"Oh. Sure. No problem." It wasn't like Alain hadn't seen him naked before. This time was only different because the guy was actually there with him.

Kyle stripped down, knowing he looked good. It was his stock in trade after all. He'd had a lot of guys look at him appreciatively.

But he'd never had one stare at him like he was the second coming or something.

"I got condoms and lube in the bedside table if you want to get us both ready,"

Nodding, Alain brushed past him to get them, beckoning to him. "Come on and lie down with me. I don't want to do this standing up."

He went slowly, realizing this was the first man he'd ever done in his little apartment. Weird.

Alain pulled him down, smiling. "Thanks."

"No problem. Come on, man. Lube up."

Alain gave him a hot look, those blue eyes almost black with need, before popping the top on the lube. The condom landed on his lap. "Here," Alain said. "You do that while I do this."

Two lube wet fingers slid right into Alain's body, the guy reaching behind himself to push in and start working his hole, opening it up.

God, now he could see why some men just wanted to watch. That was the most arousing thing he'd ever seen. Kyle opened the condom and smoothed it on carefully, glad it would be there to deaden his thumping cock some. It would suck to come before he got all the way in.

While Alain got ready for him, Kyle reached out to touch. Tracing one tattoo after another, he hummed the ink so damned fine that he even bent to kiss the lightning bolt on Alain's belly.

"This one looks new," he said, feeling the tiny rough patches that signified healing skin,

"It is. I got it after I met you."

Whoa. That was...damn. Crazy and sexy as hell and fucking terrifying.

"You ready to ride?"

"Yes." Alain pulled his fingers free, staring at him expectantly.

"Well, come and get me." He laid back on the futon and held out a hand, drawing Alain up to straddle him.

"No. I want to be on the bottom. On my back. I want to watch you."

Damn. He'd thought he could keep it impersonal. Safe. Looked like he had to do the doing though.

Shrugging, Kyle pushed Alain off so he rolled on the mattress. "Whatever you want, man."

Alain spread for him, knees coming up, cock just bobbing, and Kyle took a deep breath, settling between Alain's thighs. He lubed his cock up good and wet before pushing right up to Alain's entrance, staring down into those blue eyes.

"You ready?"

"Yeah. Come on."

If kissing Alain gave him sparks, sinking into Alain's body was like a firestorm. It was like standing outside in a lightning storm with steel rods all around you. His hair felt like it stood up on end, and his muscles shivered under his skin.

And when Alain grabbed his hips and said, "Move, damn you," he did just that.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, Kyle moved in and out of Alain's body, his hips rolling back and forth. Alain moaned and touched him, stroking his belly and chest, then curling both hands around his hips.

"Harder."

The little shocks that ran between them only heightened the pleasure, making Kyle grunt and arch back, slamming his cock into that sweet hole over and over. He reached for Alain's cock and found one of Alain's hands already there, stroking away. Shit, he hadn't even noticed that Alain had let go of him.

He added his own stroking touch to the mix, and Alain cried out, loud enough to wake the neighbors. Kyle bent to kiss him and that was when Alain lost it, coming over Kyle's hand, splattering his belly, that whole lean form shaking for him.

Kyle didn't have to fake it with Alain like he did with other men. Alain's orgasm seemed to rip through him, sizzling right up his spine like electricity up a wire, leaving him spent and shaking after the biggest orgasm he could remember having in years.

Maybe ever.

The room rang with sex magic, even the motes of dust dancing for them.

Alain kissed his cheek and pushed at his shoulder. "Let me up?"

Shit. Fucker. Kyle wasn't usually one to bask in the afterglow, but it was just rude to be so fast to go. He moved though, and got another one of those amazing kisses in return.

"Thanks. I just need. Ah. Can I use the mirror?"

"Uh huh."

Certifiable. Why did he always have to try to do good deeds for the crazy ones?

The mirror lit up in less than half the time it had taken the first time he'd seen Alain scry, and a picture formed of the same blond guy from last time, sitting in a big office chair typing away at a computer on a teak wood desk.

Alain frowned fiercely, looking like he might blow a vein or something, and the weirdest thing happened. The blond in the mirror jumped back like he'd been stung, shaking his hands.

Then slowly but surely, words began to scroll across the client guy's computer monitor. He could read them easily, the image as crystal clear as the best high def TV. They read, "Stop searching for the Scryer. This could be you."

Which was when the computer monitor in the mirror exploded, blue flames shooting out of it and electric components spewing all over.

As quickly as the image had appeared it dissipated, and where silver glass had once been in Kyle's mirror there was now a sheet of black.

Kyle pondered that a minute. "Do you think it will work?"

Alain blinked at him, eyes bloodshot and heavy lidded, looking tuckered out. "I think it will make him think twice. Either way I'm leaving town."

"So, what? You used me to generate a little sex magic so you could do that?"

"No. I was going to come and have you, just this once. The magic was just..." Alain spread his arms, a tiny smile on his face. "Magic. You. Us. Come with me."

"What? Are you nuts? I don't even know you."

"But you could. I don't snore, I like bacon on pizza, and I love to watch Kung Fu movies. See? You know all of the important stuff."

"I can't." That would be insane.

"Okay." Man, Alain could do the sad puppy look. But to his credit, the guy got up and went to the bathroom, coming back with those nasty clothes and a hundred dollar bill. "This is for you, then."

Kyle reached out to take the bill and their fingers touched, a fierce shock running up his arm from the place where their skin met. His nipples drew up and his hair stood on end and Kyle sighed, pressing the bill back into Alain's hand.

"I won't take your money."

Eyes lighting up, Alain leaned in to kiss him, mouth capturing his for a long, breathless kiss.

"So will you come with me, then?"

Kyle grinned, deciding that crazy wasn't so bad after all. "I'll think about it."

Water and oil swirled together on cracked asphalt to make little rainbows under the street lights. It was the perfect night for Alain to do his business, because every little pool became a mirror, and every mirror gave him a window on the world.

Alain wasn't looking at it, though. He was too busy holding Kyle's hand and checking off the list of things they wanted to see. Baltimore had a lot of neat shit.

And a lot of water, in case he ever needed a quick scry.

He hardly ever tapped into that magic anymore, though. It was a dangerous gift, one that he didn't want to chance anymore.

These days he made his magic with Kyle. He couldn't ask for a better buzz than that, no matter what mirror he looked into.

Kyle was all he needed to look at. The perfect reflection of love.

UNDERNEATH BY A.J. GRANT

"There's a dragon underneath Grand Central."

John Marron paused in the act of pouring out cups of coffee. It was a cool fall day. The kind of day where even the leaves in Queens turned into bright orange, reds, yellows, and gave the locals a smug sense of satisfaction that they could have all the so-called suburban beauty that New England boasted for itself, though with the bonus of being able to order a proper slice of pizza at 3 a.m. and have it delivered to your door.

It was also a good day for visiting, which is what John thought Peggy had in mind when she called. Peggy was an old friend of the family. Not so close that John would call her an honorary aunt, but close enough that she could come over and shoot the breeze about the latest with gossip and work. Typically this meant a lot of nodding and saying "Mm-hmm." on John's part while Peggy spent the better part of six hours talking about the latest annoyances with her boss, but John didn't mind.

Peggy was one of the old crowd. Her mother and father had come to America and carved out a slice of citizenship for themselves. Though to look at Peggy with her freckled skin, round cheeks, and red hair that was now showing signs of what could generously be called "blond" but more accurately could be called "white", it was possible to imagine her having come off the boat from Ireland herself.

Her appearance was a bit of a contrast to John's own Italian blood which gave him darker skin, eyes, and hair that he sure as heck hoped wasn't showing as much signs of his age as Peggy's did, but cultural differences like that weren't what caused the occasional problems between them.

Announcements like that, however, were another story.

"There's a what now?" John asked.

"Dragon. Underneath Grand Central." Peggy held up an open Tupperware container that she'd brought with her. "Chocolate ball?"

John ignored the offer for dessert. He put the coffee in reach of anyone who wanted refills, then sat down in his chair. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Peggy added two spoons worth of sugar to her mug. "Been there a few months, as far as anyone can figure."

"Which means it could've been there more than a few months," John pointed out.

"Hang on." George, John's son, looked up from where he'd been doing his homework in the living room. His thirteen-year-old face, which had his mother's blue eyes, frowned with confusion. "Dragons are real?"

"You can go upstairs to your room now," John told him.

"As real as you or me," Peggy answered. She helped herself to one of her own candies, munching down on the chocolate and peanut-butter filled confection. "It's underneath Grand Central and you-know-who wants it gone."

"As opposed to the New York City Board of Tourism, which wants to put its pictures on T-shirts," John said, somehow managing to not actually roll his eyes.

"That would be cool," George said. "I'd wear them."

"It's dangerous," Peggy said.

"Don't care," John replied.

"It's deadly."

"Think you conveyed that with the 'dangerous' bit."

"It's where it can reach a lot of people."

"Still think that was covered by - "

"And if you don't go after it, the Agency will."

John snapped his mouth shut. Trust Peggy to know that if he couldn't be roused out of a sense of loyalty to his old job, appealing to his sense of masculine pride would. "They know about it yet?"

"It's still down there, isn't it?" Peggy shrugged. "But we don't have those kinds of connections. Government jerks don't exactly feel a need to send out memos to their competition."

"Some of them are arrogant enough to," John said. He rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. He hated this. He was supposed to be retired. He was supposed to be living out the rest of his life with his house, and his kid, and his incredibly mundane day job of

construction work. He wasn't supposed to be called in to act as a Knight just because certain people felt like throwing up that version of a Bat-signal.

On the other hand, not like Knights were thick to the ground these days.

Not that it made John feel any less pouty about the subject.

"Why me?"

"Because a job like this needs Stuart."

Of course it did.

"Small problem with that," John said, moving his hand forward so that now he was rubbing his face.

Peggy's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What?"

"Dad was a jerk," George supplied.

"I was not a - " John turned around in his chair to face George. "What part of 'You can go upstairs to your room now' was somehow unclear?"

"You were," George said. To Peggy, he added, "They haven't talked in days. Might even be a whole week. Dad's been in a mood."

"Is there anybody else we'd like to tell?" John asked. "Maybe throw a sign up on the door, or post this up on your blog somehow?"

"You assume I haven't?"

"Seriously. Room."

"Whatever it is between you two," Peggy said, clearly now referring to John and Stuart, "Get over it. We don't have enough information about what's going on down there. We're flying blind. That means we could use a - "

"I know, I know," John said. He looked at the clock. If he left now he could make it into the city before rush hour. "I can't make any promises that he'll listen to me."

"Use your charm," Peggy said.

"Maybe apologize too," George added.

"You are so grounded," John told him, not really meaning it. He got his coat and wondered what sorts of fall afternoons the parents of teenaged boys who didn't have a family history of battling the forces of darkness were allowed to have.

There were many reasons to feel intimidated by Stuart's apartment building. Not the least of which was that Stuart owned the building. Fairview Towers, located at the oh-so-picturesque southern end of Central Park, complete with marble floors, uniformed bellmen, and an overall pervasive attitude that if anyone who wondered how much any of this cost most definitely could not afford even a fraction of it.

At twenty-four years old, Stuart, he of the blond hair, hazel eyes, lean build, and handsome face that frequently was seen pictured in the gossip columns, was the youngest mogul to hit the city without having some sort of dot-com fortune as his claim to fame. It was an enviable position, until you remembered that the only reason Stuart held it was because his parents had died and even he didn't know how.

That was a kind of irony that most people didn't get.

At forty years plus, and with a background that made him feel more comfortable in faded T-shirts and blue jeans than in sharp, tailored suits, John never really felt totally at home in Stuart's place. But business was business, so John swallowed his pride and made his way to the penthouse. Luckily the bellman on duty let him pass without having to call up to Stuart.

The elevator doors opened to reveal one very pissed-off looking Stuart waiting for him, complete with cell phone in hand.

So much for the discretion of the bellman.

"Gee," Stuart said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "you'd think I would've seen this coming."

John sighed. "I can explain."

"See what I did there?" Stuart asked, gesturing to himself. "The little joke? See? Seer? As in one who is connected to the future and knows how much of a jackass you can be with your stupid, idiotic—"

"Stu—"

"—stubborn male pride that refuses to believe for one second that maybe, just maybe, somebody other than you—"

"Stuart—"

" –has a valid idea about how to do things. Because God forbid I have this connection to the vast web that interlocks every single component of man, space, energy, and time and somehow - somehow - come out of that with an eensy bit more knowledge than you about how to handle– "

"There's a dragon."

Stuart paused. He put his hands on his hips. "There's a what?"

"Dragon."

"Tall creature? Scaly? Sort of like a lizard except it breathes fire and eats virgins?"

"Yep."

Stuart folded his arms. "Really?"

"We've faced vampires, werewolves, ghouls, and witches but dragon is what throws you off?" John asked.

"But dragons are so..." Stuart flailed a little. "Make believe."

"Says the seer, to his boyfriend the Knight."

"Okay, first off it's not like I accepted the whole seer thing like that made sense," Stuart reminded him. "And second, if I were you I wouldn't be so cavalier about whether or not you still have the right to call yourself my boyfriend right now."

"Was that a pun?"

"Oh shut– "

"Cavalier. Knight. I'm just saying."

" –up." Stuart pointed a finger at him. Thankfully for right now, it wasn't the middle one. "You're not going to cute your way out of this, John. I'm still annoyed with you."

John leaned against the wall. "What if I said I was sorry?"

"Would you mean it?"

"Sorry I pissed you off, yeah," John said. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "What else do you want me to say? You of all people should know we don't get a choice about this. We've got our fates. Yours is to have all those connections shoved into your head. Mine is to fight evil things with sharp objects."

"Yes," Stuart said, as though John was only proving his point. "Evil things with sharp objects. As in evil things that can kill you."

"Think I'm thrilled about that?" John asked. "I've got a life. I've got a son. If I'm lucky I've even got a boyfriend who I'd really like to spend a good chunk of my final decades with. But this is what I have to do. If I don't, somebody else will. And right now the next likely candidate for that is George. Can you maybe see why I might be against that?"

Stuart had that lost in his own thoughts look that was growing more and more common as he got used to his powers. "George. Dragon. Could be worse."

"I'd rather not tempt fate," John said. "Besides, next battle might not be a dragon. Then what?"

"I don't want you to die."

"Wasn't planning on it either."

"I wish you could find non-violent ways of dealing with things."

"Tell that to the evil things with sharp objects."

Stuart sighed. He pressed a hand to his forehead. "Dragons, huh?"

"Yep."

"Ever dealt with them before?"

"No, this is a new one for me." John grinned at him. "I think it's kinda neat, actually. Been a Knight all this time and never had a chance to fight a dragon before."

"Oh good," Stuart said, disappearing into the apartment long enough to get his coat. "I'm thrilled to know that when push comes to shove we're ultimately doing this because it all boils down to your little boy urge to go VRROOM! with a brand-new toy."

John blinked. "Vrroom?"

"You know, like a kid playing with trucks?"

"But it's a— "

"I don't know what sound dragons make, okay?"

"You know, you're really kind of cute when— "

Stuart held a hand up to stop him from getting close. "Haven't quite forgiven you yet. But I'll go along with this anyway to help keep you alive."

"It's a start," John said, agreeably.

As seers went, Stuart wasn't what most people would have expected. He didn't get visions. Ghostly visitors didn't whisper into his ear. Dreams didn't reveal the secrets of the universe so long as he figured out how to crack a cryptic code.

Instead he just felt things.

In the grand, cosmic scheme of the universe there were always options. Get up early or stay in bed? Wear the white shirt or the blue? Take the highway or the local streets to get to your destination?

Each choice had its own consequences. Everyone knew this, but most people were oblivious to what all of those consequences were. Almost anyone could figure out that you had a better chance of succeeding at a test if you studied for it. Only a seer could know if sitting at a certain desk at a certain time while tapping your pencil in a certain way meant you'd also attract the attention of the person who would one day be your wife.

Like the proverbial flap of a butterfly's wings that cause a tornado on the opposite side of the world, every single action caused a consequence or reaction. Seers -- trained seers -- could sense those consequences in the grand scheme of things. They didn't have all the answers -- far from it. In fact, being aware of the possibility of everything meant that they had confidence in nothing. The future could change based on something as seemingly insignificant as whether or not someone left crumbs on their plate.

But what seers could do is have incredibly spot-on hunches. Buy now to score the winning lottery ticket. Give in to the impulse to shake someone's hand and find out that they're just the investor you're looking for.

If you were a fighter -- as John was -- it also meant that they were a great person to have at your back, because they knew just the moment to strike to save your ass from being destroyed by the enemy.

The only problem was that Stuart was a pacifist.

"I don't see why I'm needed for this," Stuart said. Thanks to a friend of John's on the MTA, they had keys and access to the bowels of the city's transportation system. They were currently walking along a dark and unused train track deep underneath Grand Central Station. "Couldn't you find the dragon without me?"

"How?"

"I dunno," Stuart said. "Follow the dragon tracks?"

John pointed his flashlight down at the ground. "See any of those around?"

"Well... no," Stuart admitted. "But it has to leave a sign, right? How else do they know it's down here?"

"Guess somebody saw it," John said. He walked a half-step behind Stuart. Not ahead, because that would affect Stuart's ability to let his instincts guide them on the right path. But not far behind, either. If a dragon attacked, John didn't want to be too far away with his sword.

"Something about this doesn't feel right," Stuart said.

"Not like this area is really made for visitors," John pointed out.

"No," Stuart said. He made a gesture of frustration. "It just -- I don't know. I feel like we're missing something."

That was two 'feel's in a row. John didn't point it out -- Stuart was still too new and untrained to have control of his abilities, and pointing them out would make him overthink and get confused about them. But he did pay attention. "Like what?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you," Stuart said, not unreasonably. He shone his flashlight around. "What do dragons do anyway?"

"Sudoku puzzles for all I know," John said. For all that he'd scoffed, he was looking to the ground for anything that looked like signs of a dragon. "There's a lot of myths and legends about them. As far as I know nearly any god could lay claim to having them."

"Virgins, fire, reptile," Stuart recited. "That's about all I know. Unless we're counting those books with the flying dragons and the fire lizards."

"Really not," John said. "Though I'm hoping ours doesn't fly. We're going to have enough to deal with based on size."

"You're assuming size, though," Stuart pointed out as he aimed himself down the right-hand side of a fork in the tracks. "For all you know it's as big as a cat. Or a pigeon. Or--"

And that's when John saw it. He reached out to touch Stuart's arm and hold him still.

The beast was massive. It filled the tunnel from floor to ceiling and looked as though it could take up more space besides. Its skin was a mottled grey-brown, as though made to camouflage perfectly against the dirt and grime of Manhattan's lower levels.

From his vantage point John could see four legs with five claws each, a spiked tail, folded wings, and a mouth that hinted at having teeth large and sharp enough to cut a man's body in two.

This was a little more than he was used to.

"This isn't our fight," John said, keeping his voice low. The dragon was asleep. John hoped to keep it that way. He tugged on Stuart's shirt to encourage him to fall back. "We need help. Others. Get in touch with the gang at the Den, or the Agency boys, or—"

"Something's not right," Stuart said. His eyes were unfocused. He had that look of frustration he got when he couldn't make his mind feel a connection quickly enough. "Something -- this isn't -- we're not seeing—"

And then, with no other warning, Stuart shoved John down onto the ground before he could be attacked by a troll.

Later, much later, they were back at Stuart's apartment. It was a hard-won victory that involved John very quickly relearning how to kill trolls (cut off the head, duck the heavily falling body) and Stuart grabbing him at just the right moment to save them both from an oncoming train that amazingly neither they nor the trolls had heard coming.

They had also learned that a train could hit a group of trolls and keep on going.

This town did not stop getting weirder.

"How'd you know?" John asked. He tried to hold still as Stuart bandaged up his wrist.

"Food," Stuart replied. "All living things need to eat. If a dragon was there, it meant there was large enough food source to sustain it."

John thought about this. "I thought dragons ate virgins and sheep."

"Know of many of those in Manhattan, do you?" Stuart asked, quirking a single eyebrow.

"Fair enough." John sighed. "Still say we should kill that thing."

Stuart shook his head. "It's good. It's like a spider. Wouldn't you rather have a spider in your house instead of all the flies that it would eat?"

"We seem to be ignoring the part where this still means I'm living in a house with bugs."

"You know what I meant."

"Also that some spiders are poisonous, and can kill you."

"We want the dragon there," Stuart said. He finished bandaging John's hand as though that settled matters.

John flexed his fingers. "Do I get to know why?"

Stuart cocked his head to the side as though listening. He wasn't really, but sometimes the pantomime helped him get into the right mindset. "No. But I don't either. Just that we do."

"Agency folks won't agree with you."

"I don't live by their rules."

"Plus I'm going to have to fight with Peggy about this."

"You'll win," Stuart said, and it was uncanny how he could throw things like that out there sometimes. A small smile touched Stuart's face. "Does this mean that the great Knight is actually going to listen to his seer?"

"Okay, you know I hate that pompous, medieval-sounding, bullshit crap," John told him. "But if you are asking me if I am going to listen to the opinion of my boyfriend who just so happens to be a seer, then... yes. Okay. Fine."

"You're very fond of redundancies, aren't you?" Stuart said, his eyes twinkling with bemusement.

"Evens out all the one of a kind things I have."

Stuart smiled. "Like me?"

"Like you," John confirmed. He reached out to place a hand on Stuart's hip. "If I can be bold enough to call myself your boyfriend again."

"Possibly," Stuart said, but he leaned in close anyway. He rested his hands on John's shoulders. "I -- I'm not used to this, John. I don't have your background. You know that. Dragons, trolls, wondering if one day I'm going to end the world just because I put my fork in the wrong position and-- "

"Hey," John took one of Stuart's hands in his unhurt one and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "It's okay. That's what I'm here for. I do all the protecting, you watch out for me. Even trade."

"I don't do it for trade," Stuart said. His fingers curled inside John's hold. "I do it because I like you."

John tugged on his hand to pull him in for a kiss. "Lucky me, then. 'Cause I like you too."

And it was possible that the other parents out there, the ones without teenaged children and family histories about battling the forces of darkness, did not have to spend a fall afternoon deciding to defeat trolls instead of dragons, and putting their lives on the line so that their sons didn't have to.

But then again those parents probably didn't get a second chance at love with a guy like Stuart.

John kissed his too rich, too young, undoubtedly the completely wrong type for him boyfriend, and decided that some days he really did like his life just the way it was.

THE LOVE POTION BY ABBIE STREHLOW

The steam rising from the pot was viscous and thick, forming cloudlike clumps then dispersing again. The shapes didn't hold their form long enough for Aiden to be able to read them. They reminded him of the dreams he'd been having, when, after he'd found his true love, moonlight and clouds conspired to keep his partner's face hidden, so Aiden could never see him, never really know who this man was to be. And Aiden wanted to know, wanted desperately to be certain that this time he'd actually found the other half of his heart.

Aiden continued to chant, throwing in a sprig of rosemary, noting absently that he'd need to pick up some more if he was going to make lamb for the party on Sunday. If he forgot, he'd never tell his friends it was because he'd used it all up for a spell. Julian, one of his co-workers at the record shop, would probably tease him about mistaking it for ganja, while Sylvia would joke about his two cats using it as a replacement for catnip.

None of Aiden's friends knew that he was a magician -- a word he preferred to warlock or sorcerer. A real magician, that is, as he also sometimes performed sleight-of-hand table magic to entertain people. His friends laughed when Aiden talked of deeper magicks, but that was okay: he didn't want anyone looking more closely at him. He generally dressed flashy as well, distracting people from his true nature. His outfit that night was true to form: a loose black and white flowery shirt with ruffles down the front and around the sleeves, black stretch jeans that fit so snugly around his skinny legs that they could be tights, and clunky, studded black boots. Cheap silver rings decorated most of his fingers and around his neck he wore several beaded necklaces, as well as a miniature scimitar hanging from a leather cord.

Aiden's friends didn't know this serious side of him that easily chanted in a foreign tongue that few would understand. None of them would believe how calmly he sliced his palm with a boning knife, then dripped his own blood into the cauldron. No one knew how much he'd sacrifice to get what he wanted, to end his loneliness, to be certain of his love.

The steam curled around Aiden's hand, caressing it, hiding it from his view. A surprisingly claustrophobic pain stabbed from his palm to his wrist, making forays up toward his elbow, drawing a sharp breath from him. He shook with the effort to keep his hand where it was, to let the magic learn his form. He struggled to breathe and keep chanting as sweat broke out across his forehead and dripped down his back and sides. The words brought an image in his mind of doors being closed and lights in windows

being doused as a single path through endless city blocks was forged. It was a stifling image, and Aiden had a flash of doubt: was this really what he wanted? Just the one possibility?

However, before his doubts could grow the pain and the image faded, leaving just the memory of aches behind. The clouds from the pot dissipated and Aiden drew his arm back, the newly healed cut tingling. He stared for a moment at his palm, the flesh white and pink, pulling as he opened and closed his hand.

When the kitchen timer went off, Aiden reset it and moved on to the next part of his spell, almost singing his chant now, stirring first clockwise, then counterclockwise. When the buzzer sounded for the last time he added the last of the huge trout he'd bought at the local market -- the eyes that he'd carved out and then marinated in brandied vinegar. With a final stir, he covered the pot quickly, like a chef anxious to preserve the delicate flavors of a dish, then took it off the heat.

In the morning, after the potion had cooled and gelled, Aiden would have to reheat it and add the final ingredients -- crystallized poppies, dried snake bladder, slivers of whale tongue -- say the final words of the spell, and drink it, all of it. It currently smelled like an exotic fish stew, but Aiden had no illusions that it would taste good.

According to the description of the spell, once Aiden was finished, the hearts of men would be unveiled to him and he would find his love. The dreams had made it clear that his love was close, but Aiden didn't know who he was. Since the last love of his life had turned out to be a liar, cheating on Aiden every chance he got, Aiden wanted to be certain this time. It was so difficult to meet people in the city, and he didn't think it was anyone he knew. Instead, he figured that after he drank the potion he'd walk down to the local coffee shop, fall into instant lust with a perfect stranger there, get together with him and live happily ever after.

With an exhausted sigh, Aiden started cleaning up the kitchen. The cats came and wound around his ankles, but he shooed them away. He was as tired as if he'd spent the evening shimmying around the dance floor, throwing caution to the wind. Eventually Aiden declared the small space clean enough and took himself to bed, only to have another frustrating dream, searching through thick fog for a figure that always retreated. In the morning, Aiden woke with a start, sitting up in his bed as soon as he opened his eyes. He worked to contain his excitement, making himself lie back down, then stretching and yawning. His body was still sore and his palm burned hot and cold. However, only one thought kept cycling through his brain: today I will find my love.

Aiden didn't allow himself to go to the kitchen first thing. He made himself go to the bathroom, instead, taking a shower and sluicing off the remains of the sweat from the night before. He shaved meticulously, carefully conditioned his bleached hair, then applied gel until he'd achieved that perfect bedhead look. He even dressed more conservatively than usual: a green shirt with a print of jungle leaves climbing all over it,

plain blue jeans and his least clunky boots. He slipped on only two necklaces, one leather bracelet, and three silver rings, all sporting different gem stones.

Finally, Aiden was ready to go find his love. Taking one last approving look in the mirror, one last deep breath, he headed to the kitchen.

The sight there hit Aiden hard in the gut, and the heart. It appeared that the ingredients of the spell -- probably the fish -- had attracted his cats. They must have worked together, pushing the heavy cauldron to the edge of the counter and tipping it over, spilling the contents onto the floor so they could get at it.

Aiden sank weakly to the ground himself, shaking his head, tears stinging his eyes. He was lonely, damn it. He wanted to find his love, wanted so much to be someone's special someone. He had so much love and magic to bring. Why was he being denied?

The cats came up and started rubbing against Aiden. He knew better than to believe they were there to comfort him: though their bellies were full, they were still looking for more. Stupid cats. The reason why most magicians kept cats instead of dogs was because they had no interest in human magic -- they had their own, and so had no need for it. They hadn't absorbed any of the magical properties of Aiden's concoction. They'd merely eaten their fill and ruined Aiden's plans.

Aiden picked up Fritz, the fatter of his two cats, and sat for a while, just scratching Fritz's chin, tears streaming down his face, his heart aching, the cut on his palm burning. He supposed he could try the spell again, however, what was the point? Something else was sure to happen. He was obviously meant to be alone, the single path that he'd seen closed to him forever. Aiden knew he was being melodramatic, but he didn't care. His loneliness wrapped around him like a great cloak, smothering and overwhelming.

Eventually, Aiden made himself get up and clean the noxious jellied mess spilled not only all over the floor, but down the front of the cabinets as well. He didn't understand why the cats had thought it was tasty, however, they obviously still did, darting in to lick at the spill while he cleaned. He probably would have gagged if he'd had the chance to drink it.

When Aiden finished, he sat back down on the floor and thought for a while. It was Saturday morning. Aiden didn't usually have weekends off from the record shop, but he'd managed not only the weekend, but Monday as well. He debated starting to drink -- he had a bottle of nicely aged tequila still on his shelf, a birthday present from Julian and his other co-workers -- but that would make him feel like even more of a loser. Instead, he made himself get up and took himself out to brunch.

Of course, Vicki's, Aiden's favorite café, was packed, with people lining up the street outside the entrance. On the off chance that there might be someone he knew already seated, he walked past the line and down the street, looking at the customers already at tables along the sidewalk.

Aiden was surprised to see Julian there. He didn't know much about his co-worker, as the shop was small and they rarely had shifts together. Aiden thought Julian was from Jamaica, but he wasn't sure.

Julian looked up as Aiden approached, giving him a huge smile.

"Hey," called Aiden.

"Hey," Julian said, his voice deep and low, the word accented.

"You waiting for someone?" Aiden asked.

Julian's face broke into a broad grin. "Just for you. About time you showed up."

Aiden was slightly puzzled but he pushed through the barrier of potted shrubs separating the tables from the thoroughfare and made his way to Julian's table.

"Looking good today," Julian said, still smiling, eyes raking over him from head to toe and back again.

Aiden looked at Julian -- really examined him. He was gorgeous: perfect skin and flawless smile, dark brown eyes flecked with green and gold, dreads caught back with a white headband, a carved ivory necklace done in a Maori tribal design hanging around his neck, Buddhist prayer beads around his wrists. Why hadn't Aiden noticed this man before?

Aiden sat and silently studied the menu Julian handed him, his mind working furiously. He'd never had much gaydar. Was Julian amenable? Or not? Then he remembered Julian talking in the shop once about this hot one-night stand named Kim, and Aiden dismissing the male pronoun Julian had used, without really thinking about it.

After the waitress had taken their order and poured them blessed coffee, Julian asked, "So how did your spell go last night?"

"Excuse me?" Aiden asked, glad that he'd finished his first sip of coffee or he would have spewed it.

"The magic, man. You still reek of it," Julian explained.

Aiden stilled, and the world around him grew quiet for a moment. Could he? How? Then Aiden broke through the bubble, laughed and shook his head. He might not know, might never know for certain if this was the man for him.

Knowing might be overrated, as the possibilities expanded, doors opening and many paths lighting up again.

"Cats got it before I could finish it."

"Shame," Julian said sympathetically.

"Not sure it matters," Aiden said, smiling, the clouds parting before him.

PICTURE PERFECT BY SEAN MICHAEL

Lights.

Lucas Furlow took a couple more pictures and then nodded. "Thanks, Bobby -- that's a wrap."

The fit black model flashed him a smile and thanked him for his time. After a quick, but heartfelt, handshake, they each went their own way: Bobby to change back into his street clothes, Lucas to change out the film in his camera and stow it in his carrying case as he and the crew got ready for the next model.

He was doing a shoot for the new Markus line of jeans, the advertising campaign was sexy and fun, and utilizing a half dozen diverse male models for mass market appeal. They had only one model left, and Lucas double checked the schedule before setting the stage and lighting. He groaned when he saw that Alex Portnoy was replacing Gilles Shield as the final model.

Gorgeous, blond and buff, with amazing blue eyes that just grabbed you through the camera, his pictures would be a real feather in Markus Jeans' hat.

Unfortunately, Alex was a real thorn in Lucas' side. The man was at the very top of his game, and knew it. He was arrogant, full of himself, and seemed to delight in making Lucas' life as hard as he could. Just seeing the name had him tense and on edge -- and the shoot had been going so well!

Closing his eyes for a moment, Lucas took a deep breath, and then another, trying to find some calm. Being rattled in front of Alex would only give the man more ammunition.

He heard Alex's whistle coming down the hall, the man sauntering in wearing nothing but blue jeans and eyeliner. "Let's get this over with, folks. I've got a deadly headache."

Right. With that whistling, and the way he was sauntering around like he owned the place? Lucas felt a throbbing behind his own eyes. Perhaps what Alex had meant was he was a deadly headache.

The little private joke actually calmed him a bit and he turned toward the set up with more confidence than he'd expected. "Oh, that lighting won't do, Charley. Alex needs the brights. And the dark red background will bring out his skin tone better." He might only

be a geeky redhead who couldn't help but trip over his own feet, but here he knew what he was doing.

Then he made the mistake of looking over at Alex and that bright, beautiful man made him stumble all over himself. He tripped slightly, knocking into Charley who was rearranging the lights. It was only thanks to the chubby assistant's girth that they didn't both go down.

"Careful, man. You don't want to bring the house lights down." Oh, the snarky bastard.

"I w..won't." Damnit. "Just do your job."

Charley silently helped him get his footing back and gave him a wink.

"I always do my job, honey." Those long, muscled legs spread as Alex straddled this sawhorse. The really annoying thing was that Alex was right. He always did. Always looked damned good doing it, too. Why was it the good-looking ones were either taken or assholes?

"Well just make sure you do." Oh, that was a brilliant come-back. Lucas grabbed a camera out of his case and swung it in front of his face, relaxing marginally.

Alex stuck his tongue out, wagged it around in the most obscene way.

"I'm shooting that." He clicked a few shots of Alex making faces. "Let's see how pretty you look in those," he muttered.

"Hey, now. Don't be nasty or I'll go."

"I'm taking pictures, Alex -- it's my job." He snapped off a few more, barely even looking through the viewfinder, before his sense of professionalism kicked in. "Now give me something I can use. The client's going for sexy and fun, so nothing too sultry, and make sure your eyes are smiling."

"No gay porn shots? Damn." The good thing was that Alex -- for all his teasing -- was professional and damned good at his job.

They managed to spend the next half hour working seamlessly together, as Alex posed and he took shot after shot, occasionally directing Alex into a different angle or a new look. He thought maybe Alex did have a headache; the man had the tiniest frown, a bare crease in his forehead.

He checked to see how many shots he'd taken, thinking they were probably good to go, when he realized he was using the new camera he'd bought. Well, it wasn't new new, just new to him new. He'd found a little store in the downtown core that was a hodge-podge

of new and old and had the weirdest assortment of items -- everything from mirrors to cameras and slippers to umbrellas.

The camera had caught his eye immediately. It was an older model, but in excellent shape. Not to mention reasonably enough priced that he'd felt a little guilty for not offering more. He'd certainly have paid twice the asking price -- it was an excellent addition to his collection.

At least so he'd thought. He'd only used it twice before today and both times something... odd had happened with the film. The pictures had come out... well, they hadn't been what he'd been photographing at all. The subjects had been right, but they'd been naked instead of clothed, as if the camera had an x-ray lens, and there'd been ghostly figures superimposed next to the model's. He'd put it down to something hinky with the film and had bought a new batch, but hadn't had time to test it.

He'd been flustered enough when Alex had walked in, that he hadn't paid attention to which camera he'd grabbed. Lucas figured he should take another roll with a different camera. Just in case.

"Take five," he called out. "Someone get Alex a couple of Tylenol and some water."

"Shit, someone get me a handful of codeine and a shot of whiskey."

Well that's what he got for trying to be nice. "Whatever works to get that frown off your face. We're going to need to do another roll." Dammit how was it that Alex always brought the worst out in him?

"I'm not fucking frowning, asshole." Man, that Southern drawl made an appearance when Alex was pissed.

"Those little lines in your forehead say otherwise." Not that it was Alex's fault he was going to have to shoot another roll of film, he was pretty sure they had some perfect shots. "Look, we're almost done here. I just want a few shots with the Nikon and we'll call it a wrap."

He made sure he had film in the camera and found a lemonade on the catering table. Some little twink came over, rubbing Alex's shoulders and whispering in the man's ear. Probably offering sexual favors if they could all just get out of here. Of course with a body like Alex's, maybe the sexual favors were being offered without any caveats.

Lucas shook his head at himself and rolled his head on his neck, just concentrating on not spilling any of his drink. He wasn't the most graceful guy in the world and Mr. Perfect Body over there had a way of bringing out every klutzy bone in his body.

Another lackey rushed over with a glass of something that definitely wasn't water and some pills, fawning over Alex as they were handed over. Alex patted one on the ass, giving the one twink something to bounce about. "Come on, honey. Let's get this done."

Not your honey. He didn't say it out loud though, he was going to be Mr. Professional from here on out and get this finished so he could see the last of Alex as soon as possible.

"All right, let's get this done." He hoisted the camera and started shooting again. "Alex, straddle that sawhorse again, and lean forward just a little. Seduce the camera." Seduce the buyer. That's what it was all about.

Those long, perfect legs spread, showing off an amazing package and a six-pack that was just perfect. "This work?"

Lucas just kept snapping, not trusting his voice one bit. The last thing he needed to do was give Alex the ammunition of knowing that Lucas thought he was hot. He spent maybe ten minutes taking shots, getting Alex to redo a couple of the better poses from earlier. Not long at all and he was calling a wrap.

"All right, we're done. Thanks for a good shoot, everyone." He made sure to include Alex in his sweeping glance. "The client's going to be happy with this one."

"Sure they are. I make these jeans look good." Alex winked and stood, back popping.

"I'm thinking the people at Markus are gonna be looking at it as the jeans making you look good." And he wasn't looking, wasn't checking Alex out as that long body stretched. No sir, not him.

"Man, you sure don't like me a bit, do you?" Alex shook his head, rolled those huge blue eyes. "Just so long as I get a paycheck, I don't much give a fuck what you think."

"Oh, you'll get paid." In fact he wouldn't be surprised if Markus wound up making Alex their main model. The plan was to have one of the models run through all their ad campaigns like a thread to tie them all together, and scuttlebutt had it that model would be chosen out of the jeans ads.

Things like that always seemed to just fall into Alex's lap. Good looking, confident, sexy, lucky. Was there anything this guy didn't have?

Lucas shook himself and managed to give Alex a smile, which he hoped didn't look too fake -- with his luck Alex would get the job and would demand a different photographer and that would be a black mark on his resume. "Good job as usual."

"Can't wait to see the shots. You make me look good." Wait. Was that Alex being nice?

"I..." His mouth opened and then shut again as he realized he didn't know what to say, how to respond to that. Was this being nice a set up? Maybe Alex didn't want a reputation of being a bitch and difficult to work with. Finally he cleared his throat and managed an answer. "That's pretty easy." Crap, was that really the best he could come up with?

"Thanks, honey." He got a wink, then Alex opened those jeans up, stripped them off right there and handed them over to an assistant before heading off to get dressed in nothing but a smile.

Oh, God, Lucas wasn't going to need a picture to remember the sight of that pretty as fuck cock surrounded not by blond curls, but by smooth as glass skin -- it was etched into his brain. As was the perky ass sauntering away from him.

And he'd be damned if he didn't watch until Alex was right around a corner and out of view.

The sight, and his hard-on, stayed with him as he helped Charley break down the set, packing away the equipment and cleaning the place up. It stayed with him as he packed his camera case in the back of his little Toyota and headed home. It stayed with him when he went to the darkroom and got started on developing.

How Alex looked naked was very clear in his head when he developed the first set of prints out of the antique camera, so it was no surprise at all that he recognized the man in all his naked splendor in the photos. Looked like the camera had done it again. Clear as day, Alex posed on the sawhorse, jeans somehow absolutely transparent and revealing that lovely cock and the smooth skin around it, as well as nicely muscled thighs.

What was a surprise was that he knew the ghostly figure next to the man. Slightly blurry, like the other ghostly figures had been, this one was easier to make out because the man was familiar. Really familiar.

Saw it every day in the mirror familiar.

There he was, naked as the day he was born, too, slightly blurry, arm wrapped around Alex's shoulders and smiling like he was the happiest man in the world.

Camera

Lucas spent the next few days alternately obsessing over the photos from the old camera and ignoring them. He handed in the good prints to the Markus company, and went on a couple other jobs, making sure to take his Nikon only. No more erotic pictures. At least not unless he deliberately shot erotic pictures.

He would just never use the camera again, that seemed like a good plan.

Still, the existence of the pictures nagged at him. There had to be a reason why the camera was doing this. The x-ray vision of the camera was odd enough, but it was the ghostly figures that had him truly puzzled. He double-checked the pictures of the other two guys, checking to see if he could recognize the apparitions as people who'd been at the shoots. But as far as he could tell, the pictures of Alex were the only ones where the extra figure was someone who'd actually been in the room while the pictures were being taken.

On his first day off, he packed up the camera and a couple of the pictures from the first shoot he'd done with it, and headed uptown to The Purple Breeze. The proprietress was a friend of his, and Lucas knew that if anyone had any ideas about what was going on with the camera, it would be Darla.

He parked in front of the little brick building and headed in. The purple flags that never failed to make him smile were fluttering, and the little bell over the door jangled, merrily announcing his presence.

"Lucas, lovely!" Darla waved be-ringed fingers, bright purple hair piled high on her head. "You haven't been in in so long."

He smiled and gave her a hug, feeling that strange tingle he associated with her go through him. "I've been busy."

"Busy? How so? Tell me everything, lovely. It's been positively boring here."

"I can't believe anything is boring around you. Is there tea?" he asked hopefully. He'd made sure to come when he had nothing else to do. A trip to Darla's was always an adventure, and never ever boring.

"Always. I have the most luscious blend - it's from Tibet."

"Sounds good." He followed Darla to the back of the shop, sitting in one of the big, ugly scarlet chairs that circled a little table. It was here that Darla read tea leaves and cards, and consulted on any number of personal magicks. And it was here that he shared what was going on in his life with his friend, usually over a cup of tea.

"I've been working pretty steadily since I last saw you. Lots of shoots for clothing companies. Oh! And I had two of my pictures from the inner city up in a gallery. One of them sold for two hundred and twenty dollars." Shooting for magazines and ad campaigns was only the way he paid the bills. And at the moment it was taking up all his time, leaving him scrambling to find opportunities to do anything else.

"See? I told you, the stars are aligned to bring better things to you. Your world is changing."

"It is, Darla. And so far all the changes have been pretty good. It's been good." He'd been apprehensive when she'd told him big changes were coming -- he didn't doubt her ability, he just knew that change wasn't necessarily for the better.

He pulled the pictures out of his back before she could call him on that as well, tell him 'I told you so' and remind him not to be such a pessimist. "I've got something I wanted to show you, actually, get your expert opinion on."

"Me? Honestly?" She actually bounced, lace and hair flying. "Show me!"

"Well, I picked up this antique camera at a thrift store downtown. Not antique exactly, but an older model. And it..." He felt his cheeks heat. "It changes the pictures I take with it. Fair warning -- these are full frontal male nudes." He laid the pictures he'd brought with him on the table, knowing that nothing he could show Darla would shock her.

"Oh, dude." She looked at each one closely, frowning a little, fingers on the prints. "Do you have the camera with you?"

He nodded and handed the camera over. "They were completely dressed, but in those poses, when I took the pictures. And that second figure in each one? Those people were not only not in the shot, they weren't even there. I thought maybe I had a bad batch of film, but I bought some brand new, made sure it was a different brand even, and it still did it." He took a breath and asked the question that had been nagging him ever since his own ghostly image had appeared in the pictures he'd taken of Alex. "Do you know what it means?"

"I have a guess or two. It could be ghosts, could be psychic energy in your darkroom. It's definitely sexual and I don't see it coming from you..." She picked the camera up, aimed it at him. "Say cheese!"

He shook his head, but it was too late, she'd already taken the picture. "You just want to see me naked," he grumbled. He didn't like being on this side of the camera under the best of circumstances, but doing it with a lens that would somehow reveal him in all his long-limbed awkward glory...

"No one will see it but you, right? Go home, develop it. If it's still weird, you know it's the camera, not you."

"But what does it mean?" he asked. Whether it was him or the camera, that still didn't change the fact that it was happening, and it was his experience that weird stuff like that didn't just happen.

"Maybe it's telling the future? Or a secret crush? Maybe erotic energy is high..."

None of those were things he wanted to associate with Alex and himself, but they were in line with what he'd been thinking. "It feels like magic, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it feels... tingling." She blushed a little, grinned. "In that fun, spanky way."

He laughed, his own cheeks heating again. "All right, I'll take this home and develop it, but tell me, Darla, what am I supposed to do with this? It's not like I can use these for anything..." Darla'd always told him, though, you didn't waste the magic in your life for fear of losing it.

"Well, you could give them to the people they belong to, although that could lead to trouble..."

Lucas snorted. "Here's a naked picture of you – by the way do you recognize this slightly blurry figure? That's your secret crush, isn't it? That would go over really well, I'm sure." And why exactly had his brain fixated on the secret crush thing?

To his surprise, Darla went bright red. "Well... not so secret after last night..."

"Oh, really?" Quick as a cat, he brought the camera and snapped a picture of her. "You'll have to tell me who he is, so we can see if that's indeed what the pictures show."

"Lucas!" She grabbed for the camera, both of them laughing as they struggled for it.

Several more shots went off while they were struggling over it, but in the end, he was victorious. "Wow, Darla. You've got me more curious to see your picture now than my own!"

"You're an evil boy, Lukie." She leaned over, kissed his cheek. "I want to know who your secret crush is, too."

"I guess we'll find out." He wagged his eyebrows and tucked the camera back in his bag. "You don't suppose it would be something more sinister, do you?" Not all magics were good, he knew that, but Darla usually didn't hold with black magic and could spot it right off.

"No. There's nothing nasty about this. Hell, honey, sometimes you just have to go with it, not over think it."

He nodded. It was one of Darla's favorite pieces of advice. To him, anyway. "I'll do my best." It was why he'd come here, after all, because if he didn't have someone like Darla help him figure it out, he'd have spent ages just worrying at it.

"Then you'll be fine. Drink your tea, honey. Maybe you'll have visions."

Great. Just what he needed.

Visions.

Action

Developing the latest shots from the magic camera told Lucas several things. It told him it wasn't a fluke and it wasn't him, it was the camera. It told him that he looked as gangly as he'd thought he would, and that Darla was into girls.

It also told him that his secret crush, if that's indeed what the pictures denoted, was Alex. The only comfort he took from that was that Alex's secret crush was him.

Maybe it wasn't crushes at all, though. Maybe it was a picture of your mortal enemy. Of course that would negate Darla telling him that it was good magic involved here and really, if it wasn't erotic or sexual, why would the figures in the pictures be naked?

So he did the only thing that made sense, he put the camera in a small case to protect it along with all the pictures he'd taken with it, and put it in the back of his closet, vowing never to take it out again.

It was working pretty well for him, too. At least it was until the day he found himself in the studio to shoot the next series of ads for Markus, these focusing on their bathing suit line, and there was only one model's name on the roster. Alex Portnoy. Grumbling to himself, he went to his case to make sure he had film in his camera, and stopped short when he opened the case up. There, nestled next to his trusty Nikon, was the camera from the thrift shop.

He froze, just staring at it.

"Hey, man. You see that storm blowing up out there? It's insane." Alex breezed by, smelling of rain and sex and musk.

Oh, the man did smell good, he couldn't deny that. "A storm?" He could hear it now that Alex had mentioned it, the wind starting to make the windows rattle. He looked around, blinking as the sky darkened. None of their lights were set up yet, neither were the props. In fact it didn't look like anyone but him and Alex were there.

A flash went off, the stupid camera taking a shot without a touch.

"Man, that thing's bright."

"Yeah, it's broken. I'm not sure how it even got into my carrying case." Or what it was doing here. Or why he and Alex were the only ones to have made it: Charley was late, not

to mention the make-up artist and the rep from the client... "I'm surprised you showed up given the weather."

"I always show up for my jobs, rain or..." The lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and they both jumped.

The wind started blowing even stronger and the sudden noise of rain against the building had Lucas moving closer to Alex without really even thinking about it. "I have a hunch you made the trip for nothing. Shit, that storm blew up out of nowhere." He shivered as another flash and crash lit the sky.

Alex nodded, stepping right up against him as the lights went out. "Damn. Damn, man."

He could smell Alex, could feel his warmth and instead of it irritating him, getting his back up like the man usually did, he found himself moving just a little closer. It was almost dark as night outside, the black relieved by the occasional flash of lightning, the thunder right overhead and loud enough to make him jump even though he knew it was coming.

"Shit, you got a ride out of here?"

"Yeah, I've got a car." He winced as another peal of thunder drowned out the sound of the rain lashing against the windows. "But I'm parked halfway down the street. I think we're stuck until this lets up." As the humidity rose in the room, so did Alex's scent. Lucas tried not to notice.

Alex headed toward the window, entire body outlined as the lightning flashed again. Lucas gasped softly, reaching behind himself for a camera. He turned off the flash and started snapping shots; he had to bite his lip to keep from cheering as he caught a few of Alex outlined in lightning.

"I'm not in the swimsuit." Alex turned half-way, cock full and hard in the tight jeans.

"These aren't for Markus." And right now, with the storm wild around them, the lighting dark and then flashing bright, Alex a fucking gorgeous silhouette, he didn't care if saying so made him vulnerable to any snide comments from the model. He just hoped the shots were turning out as good as he thought they were. And that Alex would sign a release form, letting him show them. Because damn.

"You want more?" He wished he had more light, because those blue eyes seemed to be staring right at him.

He just nodded, and started to move, up down, to the right, to the left, getting shots from every angle. He was in the zone and he knew, just knew, that these were going to be amazing shots, every last one of them. "I want it all."

Alex opened his jeans, one hand spreading the fly open, letting that heavy cock push out.

Lucas groaned, barely even realizing he was making the sound. His own prick throbbed in response, his breath coming more quickly. He was so caught up in it, in the way Alex looked, and smelled, in the storm. It was a perfect moment, every click of the camera shutter like a jolt going through him.

"You like it, honey?" Alex didn't sound mocking in the dark, one hand cupping heavy balls.

"Yes. More." He moved closer, on his knees now and shooting up along Alex's beautiful, buff body.

"You think its sick, getting so hard with you watching me?"

"Huh?" He was wrapped up in it all, his own cock as hard as Alex's, the question only half registering.

"It's hot, honey. The way you see me."

"You're gorgeous. Everyone sees that." He moved even closer, right at Alex's feet now, shooting up the long legs, getting that beautiful hard cock in the shot, the six-pack, right up to Alex's face; in the darkness it was all angles and lines, shadows.

"Fuck that." Alex moaned, cock throbbing.

Another bolt of lightning lit Alex up, making Lucas gasp and almost drop the camera. Alex was looking right through the camera at him. Alex's hand was wrapped around his cock, moving nice and slow, stroking all along the length.

"Oh..." Lucas moaned, the camera lowering. He licked his lips, watching Alex's hand as it moved over the hard flesh. He was hot, sweating, and his mouth had gone dry.

"Just lean forward, honey. You can have it."

He groaned, swaying forward, pushing away any worries that Alex was never going to let him forget this, never let him live it down.

His tongue touched the tip of Alex's cock, the flavor of the man exploding across his tongue like the lightning across the sky.

"Oh. Oh, shit. I've wanted so goddamn long..."

He shook his head. He couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that Alex couldn't have anyone he wanted. Lucas let his tongue swirl around the head, lips wrapping around the heated silk flesh. A low moan filled the air, surprisingly gentle fingers in his hair. A shudder

moved through him, and he took a little more of the gorgeous cock in, sucking harder now.

Alex's cock felt so good in his mouth.

Soft little words poured down over him, filthy and needy and hot and what was this? What was happening? Like he was mesmerized, his head started to bob, his suction increasing, tongue swirling, tasting and touching as much as he could.

"Honey. Don't stop, huh? So close." Alex arched, hips rolling, taking his mouth while the storm raged around them.

Oh, he was probably going to regret this, but Alex tasted so good, and no matter what happened those needy sounds were his, they were made for him. So, he just closed his eyes and sucked as hard as he could, hands wrapping around Alex's hips, taking it all in.

Alex shot, bitter salt filling his mouth, his name just echoing in the empty room. He kept sucking gently, licking Alex's cock clean, feeling it soften on his tongue before he let it slide from his mouth.

Alex settled, kneeling down with him, lips taken in a hard, hungry kiss. He gasped, his mouth opening beneath Alex's kiss, more shocked by this than what had just happened.

"Knew it. Knew you would taste like Heaven."

"I taste like you," he murmured, blinking, looking into Alex's eyes.

"You taste like us."

"Oh... I..." He swallowed hard. The only things he was sure of were that his cock was harder than it had been in a long time, and Alex didn't seem to be making snide remarks. And then Alex's hand dropped to his prick, rubbing him good and hard. "Oh, God." The only thing better would have been if his damned pants weren't in the way. "Please," he begged.

"Yeah. Yeah, honey. I got you." Alex's fingers found his skin, gave him what he needed.

His hands found Alex's arms, fingers wrapping around them, holding on as Alex's hand sent him flying. He couldn't breathe at all, but then Alex's mouth pressed against his and it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered but them, together, shifting and rocking. Breathing together.

A bolt of lightning lit them as he came, his back arching, spunk spraying over Alex's hand as the thunder boomed.

"Oh, honey. That's so pretty."

"What is?" he asked, clinging, melting against Alex's warmth.

"You. Coming for me." God, Alex's drawl was hot. Damned hot.

"Are you making fun of me?" He had to know -- no games, no hiding behind words, he just wanted to know.

He just wanted the answer to be no.

"No. No, honey." The thunder boomed again, Alex's tongue tracing his lips.

His lips parted for Alex's tongue and he pressed himself closer. "Oh. Good." He liked the way Alex called him honey. Liked the way it sounded sexy now instead of snarky.

"You... Shit, man. If I'd known all it would take to catch your attention was a rainstorm, I'd have arranged one earlier."

He didn't know which part of that statement had him more intrigued, that Alex wanted to catch his attention, or that he'd arranged for the storm. Surely that was just an expression... "You could have tried just talking to me."

"I did. You always fell down or snarled or got all fluttery." Well, who wouldn't, with those blue eyes staring at him.

He was feeling pretty damned fluttery right now in fact. But luckily he was already down, and as mellow as he was feeling he wasn't likely to snarl at anyone. "I thought you were taking the piss out of me," he admitted. And wow, he had to be feeling really mellow to admit that.

"Well, maybe at first." Alex grinned, that attention focused on him and wasn't that stunning? Wasn't that the most amazing...

Wait. He didn't like Alex.

At all.

Did he?

And yet here he was, all melted. He'd just given Alex a blow job and was cuddling with the guy. And not really wanting things to go back to what used to pass as normal between them. Sure he'd always thought Alex was gorgeous, but the guy was a self-centered, arrogant...

"Why me?" he finally asked.

"You see things and make them beautiful. I appreciate that."

"Thank you." He tilted his head, looking into Alex's beautiful baby-blues. "But you're already beautiful. The male figure doesn't get much better than you."

Alex blushed, shrugged. "I don't care about that. I care about how you see other things. Like the city. Like the piece I have of that big hotel, all lit up and glittering."

Oh. Oh, that was. Alex had been buying his pieces?

He shook his head, thinking everything he knew about Alex he'd just assumed based on how the guy looked. He always looked beyond the surface, it was what made him good at his job. So why hadn't he with Alex?

"Did you really make the storm happen just to get me alone?" The words blurted out from him, but maybe he was beginning to believe it.

"Would it matter if I did?"

He grinned a little sheepishly. "It wouldn't hurt my ego any to know the best looking guy in the country thought I was worth going to all that trouble for."

"Well, let's just say the rain wasn't an accident." Alex rolled his eyes, touched their noses together. "Did you get some good shots with that old camera?"

"Oh, fuck." He glared down at the camera -- seemed he'd picked the magic one up in his haste to get the shots. "I thought I had. Brilliant shots, too, but not with this camera..." Of course he had a hunch maybe Alex would let him take more. Lots more.

"No? You'll have to show me. I have a hunch that they'll be something special."

"Yeah, I imagine they might be." He leaned in, bringing their mouths together, needing to know the electricity was still between them, that it hadn't just been the storm. That it hadn't just been the camera.

The kiss flared as the lightning did. Oh. No. Not the camera.

He was hard again already, and eager, needing to... no, needing Alex. Not the camera at all, or the storm -- it was them. Him and Alex. Moaning, he pushed closer, tongue sliding with Alex's.

Alex leaned back, dragging him up over all of those perfect muscles.

"I can hardly believe this is real," he murmured, his need digging into Alex's hip.

"It's real. I'm real." Alex was hot, solid underneath him, hands cupping his ass.

He nodded. He could feel it, heat and muscles and a hot, musky scent. He pushed a hand between them, pushing and tugging until their jeans were well down past their hips, gasping as their pricks bumped and slid.

The rain slammed against the windows, the lightning flashes like huge cameras going off, capturing them, their passion, their need. It was as if they were driving the storm, the lightning and thunder punctuating their movements.

One of Alex's thighs pressed between his legs, the pressure making him moan, making his eyes roll back. He was long, all arms and legs and usually as awkward with a lover as anywhere else, but with Alex, here, now, he felt sexy and sensual, he felt like he did when he got behind the camera.

He ground down, meeting Alex's eyes, holding them as the feelings got higher.

"I see you." Alex groaned, lips parting, tongue flicking out.

"No camera," he murmured, grinning, laughing. "You see me, even without the camera." Oh, he felt good.

"You know it. Fuck. You're fine." Those blue eyes were smiling at him.

"You, too." He gasped as Alex's hands squeezed his ass, fingers sliding against his crease. His balls drew up tight, God, he was close.

"Come on. Come on, honey. Together." Those fingertips tapped his hole, sending shocks through him.

"Alex!" He shuddered, that lightning shooting right through him, his cock spraying spunk between them. Alex was right behind him, heat joining with his own, sweet and wet.

They smelled good together, like sex and heat and storms. He smiled, pressed their lips together and the kiss was soft, warm. Good.

"Come home with me."

"Yes."

Okay, so maybe he liked Alex after all.

Maybe he liked Alex a lot.

Picture Perfect.

The murmur of voices washed over Lucas like a soft spring storm as he stood at the far end of the Windover Gallery.

The Windover was celebrating a new collection of photographs simply called *The Look*. Three dozen amazing photographs by a half dozen artists, including five of his own. He wasn't a household name by any means, but it was his third showing in as many months and he'd started cutting back on the commercial work, focusing on the portraits of people and the city that he loved.

The last six months had been amazing -- Darla had been so right, his life bringing one wonderful change after another. He took a sip of his champagne, grinning as Lucia Wylde held court in the middle of the large, airy room. He was far more comfortable letting his photographs do the speaking for him.

Besides, it wasn't quite real yet.

One hand wrapped around his waist, a soft kiss brushing his cheek. "Hey, honey. How's it going?" He still melted a little every time Alex called him honey in that sweet, soft drawl.

He leaned against Alex's strong body, turning his head for a real kiss. "Hey. It's going good." He nodded toward the wall, his pictures grouped together. "What do you think?"

"I think you're amazing." Alex's hip bumped his. "And I think my collection is the best."

He blushed happily, and nodded: his best work graced their walls at home. Alex refused to part with them. Given that Alex himself was the subject of many of them, it was a fair deal.

"Did you do it?" he asked, hand sliding into Alex's, their fingers twining together.

"I dropped it off today. Someone will buy it. Learn something. Fall in love."

"Good."

He looked around at all the pretty people, baubles sparkling, drinks flowing. Then he looked at his lover, those blue eyes seeing his work, seeing him, making it all real.

"Take me home, Alex?"

"You know it, honey. Let's go."

They slipped away as the crowd arrived at his pictures, voices rising and falling.

Lucas didn't even look back.

He didn't need to.

THE TOKEN

BY ELSPETH POTTER

"Give me a token," the small man said.

I say small; most people are smaller than me, though, even back then when I was young. In the last year, I had seen beggars of all ages and colors, so his apparent youth didn't surprise me, nor did his almost glowing whiteness. I wondered if he might be an addict of some kind I hadn't yet seen, or maybe he had tuberculosis. That disease was supposed to leave its sufferers pale and beautiful, wasn't it? Except he looked too strong to be ill, or hooked, and he smelled clean, cleaner than me, even. He was weirdly gaunt, but powerful in the smooth, sleek way of cats and otters. His silvery-pale hair clung smoothly to his scalp all over, like a pelt, and his eyes looked too big for the rest of his features. I couldn't tell their color. I was seeing him in bits and pieces. Every time I looked at his face, I couldn't stop myself from glancing away almost immediately, like my eyes were skidding off of something slick.

He was hotter than anyone I had ever seen. True, I was young, and hadn't seen much yet, but he was more compelling even than men on television, or in magazines. He was gorgeous, and more important, he was different. Let me explain why I wanted something different. First, I'd tried being the same.

I grew up in a medium-sized town. I'd come to Philadelphia a year ago with a suitcase full of high school t-shirts from all my clubs, thinking college was like a big club, and was going to be the answer to everything. I had abandoned the t-shirts in less than a week, in favor of an urban uniform of plain white tee and baggy jeans, shifting one kind of belonging to another. I had nothing in common with the rich boys in my classes except proximity. If I was going to be a young black man in the city, I'd decided, I'd look like my brothers. At least I had looks in common with most of them. So I could belong to them, in a way, even though I was living my life somewhere else. I'd always been an exile. That was as close as I could come to belonging, to look like I belonged, to pretend.

At the time, I didn't understand what I was doing. Now I've had years to think about it, years and years to realize why I did what I did. Now that I have time to look outside myself, I see that other people do this, too.

In the part of the city where I lived then, near the University, people could afford all kinds of expensive designer clothes if they wanted; but most of them dressed in homemade clothes and ethnic colors, lumpy sweaters from Peru and all that, showing their solidarity with the poor people who were supposed to be superior because they lived

close to the land. That was their story; that they could have lots of money and still be good people because they were down with the primitive way of life. That was how I thought of my neighbors then. Really, it was just another way of showing their tribe. We humans think about our tribes a lot. Gender, color, language, food, opinions about government, sexuality. They're all tribes, in a way. We forget how much we're alike underneath.

My story, like I said, was that I was different from everyone around me; that I had a home, but it wasn't here. I had been looking for that home for a long time. That had been the most important part of my story since I was maybe six, and knew it was boys I wanted and not girls. I wasn't sure, though, how to make my story happen the way I wanted it to happen. I tried a lot of ways.

Unlike the other smart kids who tried to fit in, I'd shown off my brain all through high school, showing there was more to me than my color or who I wanted to have sex with. I was in the Math Club and the Brain Bowl and the Physics Club. I should have been able to make a home with the other smart kids, but it never quite worked out that way. They wanted to succeed. I just wanted to be different. And then, when I'd won a fancy scholarship to a university in the city, I tried dressing differently, like I said before. It still wasn't enough for me. I still felt uncertain. Next I tried shaving my head. I liked that, but it didn't do the trick. To make a change, I had to do something. So I made myself a new story, and myself into a new person.

The new me wore certain clothes because I liked them, not just to fit in. I made myself into somebody who could have sex if he wanted it, and feel good about it afterwards (my first couple of times hadn't worked out all that well). I would be someone confident, who would find what he was truly searching for. To do that, I'd be open to new experiences. If you think things hard enough, you can make them true.

The new me wouldn't just toss a token at a beggar and walk on. He'd look and see what was there to be found.

I made up stories in my mind: that this gorgeous little man was really interested in me, and not in the bus token I might have in my pocket. He might be a rich guy, thinking I was a hustler, but he was wearing shabby clothes so the cops wouldn't spot him. He might live in that great Victorian house on the corner, the one with the purple gables, and been watching me pass by every day, and wanted to get my attention. Or he might not really want a bus token, but be looking for the perfect young man to live in his house and be his love slave. Asking for a token could be his way of finding out who was worthy of, perhaps, giving him a blowjob.

There was a reason I thought that last. I said I had a difficult time staring at his face, but his body was a different matter; it seemed to draw my gaze. His jeans were worn thin and I could clearly see the shape of his package behind his zipper, limned in white and stretched to his shape. For somebody whose head barely topped my elbow, he was seriously hung. I imagined his cock and balls to be as gorgeous as the rest of him, and as

unearthly. My mouth watered. I wanted that cock in my mouth. I wanted him in a way I'd never managed to want the guys at parties or in the downtown bars. The fact that he was a white guy made him seem forbidden, maybe, and thus exciting. Except it had never mattered to me before. Queer trumped color.

This man was queer all right, but not in the way I usually meant it.

"Give me a token," he said. Oh, his eyes. Whatever color they were.

I slipped my hand into my jeans pocket. "Can I ask where you're going?" I didn't expect an answer. I made up stories; I didn't believe they would come true every time.

He smiled, his teeth perfectly pearl-colored, perfectly aligned. "Why, nowhere, sir, and everywhere," he said. "Above and below."

"Bus and subway, huh? Do you need enough for a transfer, too?"

His smile flashed again, and I thought I caught a glint from his eye, but maybe it was a sun reflection. "Give me a token. I've asked you three times."

An anticipatory shiver fluttered down my spine. When I gave him the token, he would have to touch me. I took my hand out of my pocket and held out a bus token.

The little man shook his head almost immediately. "No, no, no. A token. A lock of thy hair."

He wasn't laughing. I dropped the token back into my pocket and rubbed my hand over my shaven skull as I searched his face in vain for some clue to what was going on.

He held out his hand, delicate as a girl's. "Come with me. Let me take it from you, so long as it's freely given."

I followed. What would you have done?

He led me down my tree-lined street, past gaily painted Victorian monstrosities with their low iron fences, an ugly but expensive apartment building, a house made into a restaurant with, now it was close to dinnertime, a long line of people waiting for tables. The street stretched off at an angle and we crossed it mid-block, the little man skipping over the old inlaid trolley tracks as if they would set his feet on fire. He was barefoot, I noticed for the first time. How did he manage not to cut his feet open on glass every day? How could he walk on sidewalks where people spit and smashed out cigarettes?

Then we were ducking down an alley, one I hadn't realized was there; it led past the stone church on the corner, and there were no fences to separate alley from churchyard. We were walking on grass now, skirting nineteenth century tombstones, and the little man

slowed. He stopped next to a tree, the biggest one on the block, and beckoned to me. "Come, come. Closer."

The tree's branches overhung a circle of tombstones, and the last sun of the summer afternoon speckled through its leaves and onto the man. Where the sunlight struck, parts of him gleamed and parts of him wavered. I blinked, my eyes watering. My mouth was watering, too. I wanted a taste of him.

I stepped closer and it was like time grew viscous and honey-sweet. All the noises of my neighborhood, occasional car traffic, and people chatting while they waited to get into the restaurant, and birds fluttering and singing in the churchyard, stretched and blurred. The air went grayish, as if my contacts had become fogged.

The little man reached out both his hands, and they moved at normal speed. Sounds were still weird, but I could see again. He unbuckled my belt and I snatched at my baggy jeans before they could slide off my hips. He didn't care; he reached right in and took out my cock and balls, and then out of nowhere he had a knife in his hand. It had a big blade. It wasn't steel, but some kind of dull yellowish metal. It still looked plenty sharp.

A birdlike squeak popped out of my throat. The knife sliced, but only a lock of pubic hair drifted free. He caught the lock, made his knife vanish, and bound my hairs together with thread.

"A token?" I asked, when I could get my breath.

"Aye," he said.

My throat was tight, but I forced out the words. "What'll you give me for it?"

He bent and sucked my cock into his mouth like it was a candycane.

It wasn't like anything I'd felt before. He would pull me into his mouth with a hot suction that felt like it was stretching me out toward the horizon; for a second his grip would loosen and I'd almost relax, then the pulling would start again, always always dragging me higher and farther, but never quite reaching, and I didn't want to reach the end, I wanted to be here forever. It was so, so good, dreamlike good, going on and on.

The sun faded, and then the sky again began to lighten. It didn't ever seem to be really night. I didn't feel tired at all, just hovering on the cusp of coming for so long that I ought to have been yelling for release. I was almost screaming, the whole time, but I was pulled tight all over and nothing could escape, not noise or spunk or even breath. It sounds horrible, but it was ecstasy.

At last, my legs started to wobble, and the sun rose. All at once, he let me come. I went off like a rapid series of firecrackers, a really, really long string of firecrackers that got louder and more explosive as they raced up my spine and shot down my arms and legs

and burst the top of my head. Weirdly, I didn't feel any spunk coming out, like it was tantric or something. I thought the orgasm was over and then my whole body spasmed, slower, like the waves of the sea throwing me further and further out, and then leaving me to peacefully float.

I fell to my knees, quivered, and sprawled into the grass, my jeans still tangled around my ankles. I looked up into his smiling face. "A token, Derek, and your nectar," he said. "Our queen will be glad of it." He brandished my lock of hair. "And I shall find you again when we have need of you."

"Wait," I said. I wasn't able to think clearly. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but it felt like a long time, like when you've spent all night cramming for an exam. Plus, there was the exertion of the sex. Once, when I was about fifteen and my mom was away, I'd spent a weekend seeing how many times I could make myself come, and by Sunday night, I was more worn out than after a week of basketball camp. I felt even more exhausted now than I had then.

He stopped, still holding my token in his hand. "Do you ask a boon?"

"Yes." That seemed to be what I wanted.

"I've repaid you for your token."

He had. At least I think he had. The haze was starting to clear from my thoughts, and I was starting to remember that weird and beautiful little men didn't normally show up and give you blowjobs that lasted all night. It made sense inside my head, but in the hard light of day it was bizarre. I wondered if I'd been drugged, somehow, though I hadn't eaten or drunk anything, and I'd felt strange before he'd even touched me. I'd felt...like I'd always wanted to feel. I'd felt different, just as strange and different as I'd always imagined, and hoped, myself to be.

"Take me with you," I said. "I want to meet this queen. I'll give you nectar whenever you want it. And I want to know your name."

He looked at me with a strange little smile that made me want to kneel in front of him. "Our queen has been looking for such as you," he said. "My name is Tulip."

I'd definitely heard weirder names.

That's how it happened. I had to promise loyalty, and give a drop of my spittle, and walk backwards around the tree, and a lot of other things. I know now that not all of them were necessary, but the little man thought it was funny. Finally, he took my hand and led me into the tree.

As soon as I scratched through the bark, I started to wonder what the hell I'd been thinking, but then my curiosity took over and I reveled in the feeling of living pressure all

around me, the wood of the tree with sap rushing through it and bathing my skin; then the heart of the tree, dense and strong, keeping me out until Tulip took my hand and I relaxed, and it was all easy; I eased slickly inside and through.

Tulip kept hold of my hand and led me across a sward of purple and yellow and a strange deep pink I had never seen in my life. People who looked a lot like Tulip lounged everywhere, talking softly, some of them singing. I saw a couple dancing, two men, dancing together, and no one blinking an eye. The air vibrated and smelled like ozone and sweet flowers and, well, something that reminded me of male musk. I was too busy looking and smelling and listening and feeling to pay much attention to where Tulip was leading me. I didn't notice at first we'd stopped.

Tulip let go of my hand, and then I came awake. He faced me, and his ragged city clothes fell away from him. For a few seconds he stood there naked, and his skin was so perfect I wanted to lick him all over and then rub my skin against his and -- clothes began to form onto him, out of the air, swirls of silky stuff in soft gray and deep purple and a blue like the sky just before sunset rips loose. The layers formed into a snug shirt that bared most of his chest and, at his waist, frothed out into skirts. When the fabric had settled, a tiny glowing bug alighted at the center of his forehead. Tulip could carry off this outfit, believe me. Then he smiled. "Will you feed me with your nectar for my visits to your world? Consider your answer carefully."

I caught on. I fell to my knees. "Only if I may also provide pleasure to you, my queen," I said.

That was the right answer. And that's where I've been all these years. It felt like weeks to me, but I can see its years here. It doesn't matter, I'm going back home soon. To get there, I already have a token.

CEDAR BY ANN STOCCE

John walks. He's a walking man. In the bleak hours before dawn, he walks off the trawler, onto the dock, trailing behind the women, the married couples. The other single men whoop and prance, rolls of bills burning holes in salt-stiff pockets. The Sound stretches out after him, pointing to the ocean, every step toward shore a desertion.

Two weeks. Two weeks of regular showers, real eggs, a bed that he doesn't have to share in shifts with three other men. Two weeks of exile on land that no longer belongs to him.

He paces on spongy legs through the ranks of bars and ragged residential hotels that lurk near the docks. Gradually, the muted clamor of the others fades into darkness, lost in the hiss of Seattle's ubiquitous winter drizzle. It's a long walk to the bus station; not as long as the walk across the Bering Strait, but long enough for his knees to compensate for the absent dip and sway of a trawler deck.

He's never ridden the Greyhound. Someone, years ago, had introduced him to the true value of bus stations: for a few dollars, less than the YMCA, he can rent a locker for his duffel, take a shower, and get a hot meal. If a man was of the mind, he could also find a hooker and drink himself broke. John isn't of that particular mind, although the appeal of warmth after weeks shivering at net and line is understandable. He lingers in the shower, instead, feeding quarters into the slot until the pads of his fingers are puckered and soft, the crust of fish-grit rinsed from his skin.

Washed, fed, dressed in his cleanest shore-clothes, John stashes the majority of his scant gear in a rented locker, taking only his pay packet and backpack. Another mile or two south is work for a strong back.

It's a migratory pattern, older than the city he walks through, older than the body that contains him. The ocean on one side, mountains on the other, he's been shipping out on the big fishing boats for millennia. The old trading canoes could hold two dozen men; trawlers carry two hundred, but they serve the same purpose: they still feed the people, though there are both more and less of them, now.

Late winter sunlight is just beginning to brighten the cloud cover when John finally reaches the industrial district. The cracked pavement seems to speed beneath his feet, soft as a carpet of fur as he nears his destination. Groups of day-laborers are already gathering, greeting each other in cheerful Spanish, shoulders hunched against the soft rain.

They fall silent and stare as he passes. His hair, eyes and skin are as dark as their own, but his face is shaped differently, cheekbones sharp as fins flaring wide, chapped from a harsher wind than that which coils in from the Sound.

The door he is headed for is no different than any of the others he's passed over the last mile or so: peeling white, with a small grated window; a sign that reads "Shipping/Receiving"; four black stenciled numbers over a small bell. The door is unlocked, and John steps through into a small, glaringly bright hallway. Corkboards line one side of the hall, reminders to "Chock Your Wheels: \$250 fine" tacked beside curling cartoons cut from the newspaper, and other, more obscure, missives. The other wall is reinforced glass over countertops, the glass pierced with two speakers and, beneath each grill, slots just large enough to pass a small packet through. Behind the glass, a utilitarian office is ringing to life.

Leaning against the counter, John taps gently on the glass, until one of the women in the room beyond looks up. He waves at her broad smile and shouted "John!" her thick accent turning his name to Juan.

"Morning, Estela." His voice rasps over the words.

"You back? You looking for work? How long? You want I get Rick?" she asks, rapid-fire, as she teeters on spike-heeled boots toward the counter, stopping briefly to grab a sheaf of papers off of a desk at his nod. Passing them through the nearest slot, she veers off to a door at the back of the office, shouting "Rick!" at the top of her lungs.

Another large window of the same wire-reinforced glass fronts the warehouse manager's small private office. If John leans right up against the glass in the hall, he can just see Rick talking on the phone, waving Estela off.

"He's on the phone!" she shouts across the meager five feet between them, and John feels his mouth attempt a smile at Estela's characteristic exuberance.

John is finished filling out paperwork and is catching up with Estela and her girls by the time Rick is done. A door at the end of the hall opens, and Rick steps through, hand extended in greeting.

"Hey, John, how's it going?" Rick is a skinny, threadbare man, but his hands are strong and calloused, his grip firm.

"Fine, thanks. You?"

"Good, good." Rick glances at the pages on the counter. "You've got good timing: we're short-handed, right now. How long are you in?"

"Two weeks, then up to Alaska for the salmon season." His voice is smoothing out, becoming a land voice, a voice for something other than barking out the minimum necessary to bring in the catch. The patter is familiar, soothing in its sameness: surly drivers, day workers who steal, the new office-girl who has called in sick two days out of three and the week isn't half over, yet.

Rick is always shorthanded. John has been working for him for nearly a decade, since he'd hitched a ride up from Portland with a trucker as a skinny teenager, returning to the land that birthed him just a year after he'd left it. Henry had turned "the damn-fool kid, like to get himself killed" over to Rick. John had lasted six months on land, before he finally found and followed the voice that called him, but he kept coming back to this place, and Rick kept shaking his hand and finding something for him to do.

The past year or two there has been another reason to return to land for longer than it takes to do laundry and banking. He follows Rick back out of the office door and up a set of short concrete stairs to the loading dock, where the big metal doors are rolling up, the first trucks backing in.

"Greg'll be glad to see you: he's had two guys quit, not even bother to show up, this week." Rick shakes his head, as if he still can't believe it, even after all the years he's spent repeating this same lament.

Abruptly, Rick throws his arm up, shouting, "Greg!" over the rumble of engines.

A sturdy, sharp-faced man looks up, as Hispanic as the men outside, hoping for a days work. A grin lights up his face and he strides across the open loading-dock as if he owns it, which he does, in a sense. This is his dock, these are his guys; Greg is responsible for everything and everyone that crosses the yellow line. He wears it easily and John envies him, again and always, envies the comfortable swing of Greg's arms.

"Walker," Greg says, as he reaches them, slapping John's back in a quick near-hug.

"Chavez," John replies, gripping Greg's shoulders in return, for a brief moment.

"Good to see you! How long are you back?"

"Two weeks," John repeats once more, stepping away from Greg.

"Great-- I can use the extra hands, if you don't mind lumping." John shakes his head: no, it's a given, but Greg always asks. "Let me show you where to put your pack."

Rick sends him off with another handshake and John follows Greg back to the small break-room where the warehouse workers keep their personal belongings.

"You got a place to stay, yet?" Greg inquires casually, as John stows his pack in an empty locker.

"Not yet," he says to the closing locker. He checks the door, rattling the metal to ensure that the latch has caught, before turning around.

Greg's hand rests on his shoulder, again, more gently this time. "I've got room, if you don't mind the mess."

"No, I don't mind. Thanks." The smile on John's face is more than an attempt as the cool, watery song of the ocean fades to a murmur before the cedar-scented warmth in front of him. The ground is firm and steady beneath his feet.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Abbie Strehlow has lived all over the world and worked odd jobs such as shoveling goat manure, body guard, magician's assistant and band roadie. She draws her inspiration from all over, but mostly from nature. This is Abbie's first sale.

Julia Talbot has been acquired by Texas, and lives happily among friends and dogs, trying to make a living off writing and winging it as she goes. She has been published by Torquiere Press, Changeling Press and Chippewa Publishing, among others, and you can visit her on the web at <http://thegates.net/juliatalbot>.

B. A. Tortuga enjoys indulging in the shallow side of life, with hobbies that include collecting margarita recipes, hot tub dips, and ogling hot guys at the beach. A connoisseur of the perverse and esoteric, BA's days are spent among dusty tomes of ancient knowledge, or, conversely, surfing porn sites in the name of research. Mixing the natural born southern propensity for sarcasm and the environmental western straight-shooting sensibility, BA manages to produce mainstream fiction, literary erotica, and fine works of pure, unadulterated smut. Her Rednecks and Romance website is www.batortuga.com.

JoSelle Vanderhooff's speculative poems "Danse Macabre" and "Joan" were nominated for 2006 Rhysling awards. Her poetry and short fiction can be found on line and in print in several publications, including *Star*Line*, *Reflection's Edge*, *Cabinet des Fees*, *Byzantium*, and several others. To date she has published two novels through Papaveria Press, *The Tale of the Miller's Daughter* and *Owl Skin*. Also a freelance journalist, critic and editor, she lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. For Torquere Press she has edited *Sleeping Beauty, Indeed*, a collection of lesbian fairytales.

About the Editor: Meredith Schwartz's "Undertow," a lesbian twist on Cinderella, appeared in the Torquere Press anthology *Sleeping Beauty, Indeed*. Her stories "Double Time" and "Override" have appeared in *Reflection's Edge* (www.reflectionsedge.com). When she is not editing she can often be found talking while eating, reading while walking, or dancing while dressed in silly outfits.

Comments or questions? Let us know at alleys_and_doorways@yahoo.com.