Demetrius
By Matt Stalnaker

Demetrius rolled over and half-opened his eyes in the drunken haze of half-sleep. He grabbed whatever was covering him and pulled it closer to his body, trying to fend off the cold of the alley. The flakes of snow were small and they fell gently on his skin as muffling sleep enveloped him.

When he awoke, he blinked at the sight of emerald blue effused with wisps of white. A large rubbery sheet lay over him. It lay across the width of the alley, twisting with the grabb....
At each canvas it was the same. The energy possessed him. The image revealed itself. Then, *Move on.*

The final painting took him considerably longer than the others. He had no sense of how much time had passed since he started. But after a final squiggle of red, the voice said, *Enough.*

Demetrius wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. He ran his paint-covered hands through his hair. After what had happened earlier, he was wary about looking at the painting before being instructed to do so.

*Go on. You can look at them now.*

Demetrius decided to look at them in the order he had done them, so he turned to his right. A humanoid figure with elongated limbs and devastating black eyes leered at him. It was garbed in an intricately patterned robe that would have been beautiful if the figure hadn't been stomping on the skull of a man at its feet.

The next depicted several mammal-like sea creatures—not unlike manatees—swimming through a submerged cityscape. Schools of fish swam in and out of the open windows of skyscrapers.

The third painting showed an aerial view of a strange world dotted with domed structures. In one corner, there was a mass grave piled with bodies.

And finally, Demetrius turned to his right one final time in order to survey the last painting. He gasped when he saw it. It was like a beautifully patterned stained-glass sky. It was so finely detailed that it seemed to undulate and twist as the eye tried to make sense of what it was seeing.

"Why did I paint these?" Demetrius wondered aloud. "What could they mean?"

They signify things to come.

Demetrius did not want to consider that right now. He wanted to go to sleep. He lay down on the floor ready to give in to his exhaustion.

*Get up.*

Demetrius blinked his eyes and hesitated before standing.

*Get up or the paintings will be gone when you wake up.*

Demetrius did not want that. He wanted to sell the paintings so that he could buy food and booze and drugs. He wanted them out of his life so that he wouldn't have to think of these things to come. If he was lucky, perhaps he would O.D. or suffocate in his own vomit some night so that he might be spared whatever cataclysmic events could bring about the nightmarish stuff of his paintings.

"I'm exhausted," Demetrius whined, "What am I supposed to do?"

*There's an art gallery a few blocks from here. Take them there. Everything else will work itself out.*

Demetrius knew the place, so he pulled the nails out of the wall and carried the paintings back to back—two in each hand. When he got outside, he was surprised that it appeared to be early evening. Luckily, it was not a windy day. He made his way onto the sidewalk. People gave him a wide birth. Some seemed to find his paintings shocking; others seemed entranced.

A bell clanged as Demetrius pushed his way through the door of the gallery. It was mostly empty. A couple and an older gentleman were milling about when Demetrius barged in.

"Can I help you?" the gallery owner asked. She was a tall, slender woman in her mid-fifties, and she seemed to be assessing the danger of this situation.

"I painted these," Demetrius said as he practically shoved them into the woman's hands. "They're of the future."

And having delivered the paintings to the gallery owner as instructed, Demetrius passed out and came crashing to the floor.

He heard someone yell, "Quick. Call an ambulance!" as he slipped from consciousness.

Demetrius woke up in the hospital. There was an IV drip in his arm. He looked about the room and then he felt a pain in his chest. He lifted up his hospital gown and looked to see what was wrong. There was an immense scar from his collarbone down to his abdomen.

"Infective endocarditis," a man said that Demetrius hadn't noticed before. He looked up from inside his hospital gown at a well-dressed man wearing a suit and tie. It wasn't the standard suit of a businessman; the man looked stylish—flamboyant even. "You ever heard of that before?"

Demetrius shook his head.

"It's an infection of the heart valve," the man said. "Ya get it from shooting up with dirty needles." He bit his tie and pretended to inject himself with heroine. Laughing, he spit out the tie. "No more dirty needles for you, my friend. If you want, you can pay big-titted strippers to inject dope in your dick with all the money you've got comin' to you from those paintings you did."

Demetrius's eyes widened. "Who are you?"

The man stood up. "My name is Danny Delgado," he said with a slight bow. "I'm an entrepreneur, an art collector, and an enjoyer of fine things." He extended his hand out to Demetrius.

Demetrius took it. "Demetrius Karoski." The two shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you, Demetrius," Danny said. "Tell me, Demetrius. Are you a painter or a junky?"

"Well, I like to think of myself as a painter who does drugs on the side," Demetrius said with a smile.

Danny seemed satisfied with that answer. He sat down and grew more serious. Demetrius sat up in bed and gave Danny his full attention. "Demetrius, I'm going to be straight with you. We've got a chance for you and I to strike up a partnership. When I saw the story about you on the news, 'Homeless man collapses in art-gallery after painting the future,' it caught my attention. There was an auction. I bought two of your paintings for twenty-five grand a piece. Some son of a bitch out bid me on the other two. But unlike those other vultures, I came to check on you in the hospital. At first, they didn't want to let me see you. But when they told me you didn't have any insurance and I offered to cover your hospital bills, they softened. You've been unconscious for a couple weeks. They said if you'd waited any longer to come to the hospital you'd have died for sure."

Danny paused. The weight of what he had said washed over Demetrius.

"Now, Demetrius," Danny said earnestly. "You've spawned somethin'. People are goin' nuts over your paintings. The sci-fi freaks are sure aliens are gonna kill everybody
and then flood the world. Everybody started painting on sky canvases after you did. This world’s comin’ to pieces, but everyone seems hell-bent on having a good time while it does. We have a chance to make a fuck-ton of money. What do you say?"

“What are you proposing?” Demetrius felt like his head was spinning. Money was something that he held in his hands. He couldn’t comprehend all those zeroes.

“I’ll be like your patron. I’ll make sure you have a place to live. I’ll acquire pieces of sky for you to paint on. I can help you manage your money if that would be something that you’re interested in. It can be very stressful becoming rich all of a sudden.” Danny smiled. His offer sounded genuine. He had waited around for Demetrius to come too, and he had paid his hospital bills. Demetrius wanted to trust Danny, but he was not used to people helping him. In fact, this was the longest conversation he had had with another human being in some time.

“You can trust him.

The weight of decision-making was lifted. “Deal,” Demetrius said.

“You made the right choice, my friend,” Danny said as he stood and clasped Demetrius’s hand. “You made the right choice.

And so the two became friends—in so far as their economic arrangement allowed. They stayed in lavish hotels. Danny bought Demetrius clothes—tailored suits, soft fabrics, everything starched and pressed and perfect. Danny was always on the phone with sky-hunters, negotiating deals for rare and exotic pieces. Demetrius could create a masterpiece in a day. The process of painting was still as exhilarating and effort-less as it had been that first time. Painting the sky was like a drug for Demetrius, and Danny made sure that Demetrius always had his fix. A Karoski began going for millions of dollars. Owning one became an exclusive ticket into an elite class of society.

So when the holes began forming in the sky and the panic started. Danny and Demetrius used their money to commission a dome for themselves. They brought six beautiful women with them, and they started their own world with the money they had made from the destruction of the old one.

They had procured all the necessary items to keep them blissfully intoxicated until the end of their days. They grew pot and coca plants and opium. They built distilleries and made high-proof alcohols.

Demetrius painted the sky amidst that non-stop celebration until he breathed his last breath and gave himself over to that orgasmic creative expenditure of the self.