

Juno Steel and the Blank Slate
(Part One)

By

Kevin Vibert and Harley Takagi Kaner

[Trigger Warnings](#)

INTRO

(THE PENUMBRA EXPRESS: A TROLLEY TRAVELING
ALONG A TRACK WHICH CUTS THROUGH AN ENDLESS
PLANE OF FOG AND SHAPES WHICH SHIFT IN THE DARK)

SOUND: RAIN.

MUSIC: PENUMBRA THEME.

CONDUCTOR:

Ah, good evening, Traveler. And welcome to The Penumbra.

Tonight's tale is...

SOUND: DOOR CREAKS OPEN.

Juno Steel and the Blank Slate.

SOUND: RAIN FADES OUT.

MUSIC: FADES OUT.

Scene: 1

(INSIDE A KITCHENETTE FOR A SECRET UNDERGROUND MEDICAL LAB.)

MUSIC: JUNO'S THEME.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Here's a question: let's say you and a few friends get together and really, *really* piss off the most powerful law enforcement agency in human history. Where can you hide where they'll never find you?

No, I mean I'm *asking*. Because if there's an answer... me and the other Aurinkos can't find it.

But I'll tell you a good place to start: Jupiter. Yeah, that Jupiter. Everyone thinks of checking the big Spot, where the cities are, but the rest? Twenty-four billion square miles of poison gas and... yeah, basically just the gas? That, at least, takes time.

I wanted to get further away. A small, scared, animal part of me wanted to pick a direction and just start driving, never stop, see what they're up to the next galaxy over, that kind of thing.

But it had to be Jupiter. Because a place where things are so easy to hide attracts people who want to hide things. People like a doctor named Hanataba, who I already owed my life to... and who we hoped could save Jet.

SOUND: A RUSTY HANDLE TURNING.

VESPA:

(STRAINING)

Ha ha, it's really here!

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS ECHOING ON A METALLIC GARAGE FLOOR. ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT CHIRPS, BUZZES, AND WHIRS.

I never thought I'd see a Hanataba joint in person, but here it is!

RITA:

Oh wow! Mista Steel, ain't this the place where Mista Jet

took out your eye?

JUNO:

Not the same one, but... how'd you know where this place was, Vespa?

VESPA:

One of my medical connections told me about it years ago. Didn't even believe him, but here it is. For a class of what I would call *underground* Doctors, Hanataba is our Lucas Mitts!

MUSIC: ENDS.

JUNO:

Lucas who?

VESPA:

How do you not know Lucas Mitts?

JUNO:

I dunno, I just don't listen to the oldies, really.

VESPA:

Oldies?! Mitts is a classic! A rock star! The Hanataba of the music world!

RITA:

Who's Hanataba?

VESPA:

The Lucas Mitts of underground medicine!

BUDDY:

(LAUGHS)

JUNO:

(LAUGHS)

RITA:

(GIGGLES)

VESPA:

What? It's not... it's not...
(CHUCKLES)

BUDDY:

Oh. I'm sorry, darling. I still just can't believe we're out of that horrible prison. I--

(GASPS)

JET:

(GROANS)

SOUND: HE PASSES OUT AND HITS THE GROUND.

RITA:

Mista Jet!

SOUND: VESPA RUNS TO JET.

VESPA:

He must've passed out again. Steel, you wanna help me get him in that bed, over by the end of the garage?

BUDDY:

Why is there a bed inside a garage?

SOUND: FOOTSTEPS.

VESPA:

If the stories are true, Hanataba's methods are... a little unorthodox.

JUNO:

(SNORTS)

"A little."

VESPA:

But this clinic was made for rehab from experimental drugs. Complete system scans, chemical flush, xenospecimen analysis, nanotech neutralizer...

Hell, maybe we can run *you* through this thing, Steel. Get that Martian crud out.

JUNO:

Maybe.

BUDDY:

What was that, Vespa?

VESPA:

I've just gotta read the instructions, but if this place is as good as they say I'll have Sikuliaq on his feet in a week! And then we can all... um... uh...

Ah, just help me lift Sikuliaq, Steel.

SOUND: JUNO AND VESPA PULL JET UP OFF THE GROUND. AMBIENCE
FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The high from escaping Aurinko Permanent carried us for a few days. But by the time a week passed, we'd spent our good mood jackpot -- every cent. And the big guy wasn't getting any better.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

VESPA:

(SIGHS)

I'm calling this meeting because... I think we need to change things around a little. With Sikuliaq's detox and rehab.

BUDDY:

Change things? But weren't there instructions to follow?

VESPA:

Well... the instructions are one of the problems. Hanataba's procedures are amazing, but their instructions are all over the place. It takes forever to sort through which parts are legitimate medical procedure and which parts are fuzzy-wuzzy "let's all share a hug" stuff.

JUNO:

Maybe just... follow all the steps, then?

VESPA:

Really? Oh, excuse me, Steel, but I was under the impression that I was the doctor here.

JUNO:

I just meant, y'know, what's the harm of doing the fuzzy wuzzy stuff too?

VESPA:

If you'd let me finish my goddamn sentence, you'd know I'm trying to do it. I just don't understand what the hell it's asking for. Listen to this.

SOUND: VESPA DROPS A HEAVY BOOK OF INSTRUCTIONS AND FLIPS A PAGE.

"Detox is a chemical procedure; rehab is not. One of many prerequisites for the patient's recovery is a desire to recover. Therefore, this treatment will not work unless the patient is kept in close quarters with something they want to grow *for*."

RITA:

I don't get it.

VESPA:

You and me both, hacker.

RITA:

No, I mean... ain't we in Hanataba's place for their medical machines and stuff? Can't we just use 'em on Mista Jet anyway?

VESPA:

(SIGHS)

The filtration machine only works if Sikuliaq himself activates it. Hanataba was serious about rehab, not just detox.

BUDDY:

Then... Jet isn't cooperating with his own recovery?

VESPA:

Worse than that. A few hours ago I caught him setting himself further back. That's why we're having the emergency meeting.

SOUND: VESPA PUTS SOMETHING SMALL AND GLASS DOWN ON A TABLE.

Look at this. That look familiar to you, Steel?

JUNO:

That's... the vial of Neos Director W was taunting the big guy with.

VESPA:

Close. It's *almost* that vial.

RITA:

Then what is it?

VESPA:

I just said. It's *almost* Dark Matters Neomethamphetamine. And it came from the freaking *car*.

JUNO:

The Ruby 7 made that?

VESPA:

The most coherent story I could figure from talking with Sikuliaq was that he took the vial from Director W when the lights went out, then gave it to the car -- and the car's been trying to replicate it whenever Sikuliaq asks.

RITA:

(GASPS)

Just like on Neptune!

BUDDY:

What happened on Neptune?

RITA:

When we were with Mx. M'tendere, and we were tryin' to get away from Dark Matters, the Ruby made... a bomb. One they both recognized.

BUDDY:

A *bomb*.

VESPA:

If the replicated Neos are any sign, the bomb wouldn't've been as powerful as the original. I've been running some tests on this sample I caught Sikuliaq with, and it's incomplete. Still addictive, still Neomethamphetamine, but there are all kinds of traces that don't belong in here. Things that could be part of some kind of nanotech, maybe, if they were finished. It's like this is a rough sketch of

the real thing.

BUDDY:

But even if it isn't perfect... how in the world did the Ruby 7 recreate it?

That car... we knew it was something else, but... what is it?

JUNO:

(CLEARS THROAT)

Well... actually, about that...

(WINCES)

Ow.

RITA:

Mista Steel? Are you okay?

JUNO:

Uh... yeah. I think so. I was just saying that the Ruby 7 is...

(GROANS)

VESPA:

Steel? You feeling all right?

JUNO:

Sure. Hey. Yeah, can we just, like...

(CLEARS THROAT)

take five?

VESPA:

Take five for *what*?

BUDDY:

Take your time, Juno. We'll be here.

JUNO:

Thanks.

SOUND: JUNO STARTS TO WALK AWAY.

RITA:

Mista Steel, do you want me to--

JUNO:

No, thanks, I'll be all right.

SOUND: JUNO'S FOOTSTEPS, A DOOR SLIDING OPEN AND CLOSED.

AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

My head and heart were still pounding as I closed the kitchen door behind me. Each time I'd come close to saying what the Ruby really was, panic hit me like a club to the side of my head. And yet... somehow, I could tell it wasn't my panic I was feeling.

It wasn't a hard distinction to make, honestly. I'd been feeling a whole lot of panic in the days since we came into this Hanataba clinic hidden in the Asteroid Belt. We were all feeling it... even if nobody was saying it.

My name's Juno Steel, and I'm pretty sure I'm completely screwed.

But we'll get to that in a minute. For now, let's talk about those headaches I was having -- and the alien-car thing that was sending them to me.

It's the leftover Martian junk in my blood that lets the Ruby 7 communicate with me, I think. I started noticing it back on Io, or back when we went to Mick's place, and the Ruby's beeps and boops started sounding like... words. I started understanding what it was saying even when I couldn't see the monitor on its dashboard, even when it transformed so it didn't have a dashboard. It had been subtle for a long time, but in the weeks since I entered Aurinko Permanent... well, apparently the Martian junk had been growing overtime inside me, because now I could see and hear and feel the Ruby's emotions as clearly as my own, when it wanted me to. And now it clearly wanted me to.

So I walked to the observation room outside Jet's recovery chamber. He and the Ruby were the only two in there.

Jet was slumped over its hood, dead asleep, and the Ruby was just sitting there, doing its best impression of a car that wasn't also a shapeshifting alien.

Then its headlights shifted towards me. Watching.

SOUND: A SWITCH FLIPS.

And I decided to see if our connection was a two-way street.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

JUNO:

Why don't you want the others to know what you are, Ruby?
(GROANS)

SOUND: FLASHBACK AMBIENCE FADES IN WITH A WHOOSH. THE RUBY'S MOTOR BEEPS AND BOOPS FAINTLY.

JUNO (FLASHBACK):

Where the hell were you?

RUBY 7 (FLASHBACK):

(DEJECTED WHISTLES)

JUNO (FLASHBACK):

Shut up! Enough with the beep-beep-boop-boop-I'm-just-a-car garbage. Your secret's out, I saw you when you were... whatever you really are. Hell, I bet you're the one that pulled us out of the drink on that desert planet, aren't you?

RUBY 7 (FLASHBACK):

(TENTATIVELY PROUD WHISTLE)

JUNO (FLASHBACK):

I knew it. I knew it! Well, where the hell were you today, Ruby? When your family needed you, where the hell were you? Answer me, damn it!

RUBY 7 (FLASHBACK):

(SAD WHISTLES)

SOUND: THE AMBIENCE WHOOSHES BACK TO THE CLINIC.

JUNO:

(PANTING)

All right. All right. I get it. You're afraid they'll be angry.

Fine, then. Have it your way. Just leave my brain out of it.

SOUND: JUNO WALKS OUT. AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Everyone's allowed their secrets -- secret thoughts, secret shames, secret names. If the Ruby was too ashamed to volunteer what it was, I wasn't going to force it. I had bigger things to worry about.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN. JUNO WALKS BACK TO THE GROUP.

VESPA:

'Bout time you got back here, Steel. Get lost on your way to the bathroom?

JUNO:

Oh, I'm sorry, was I keeping you from going somewhere, Vespa?

BUDDY:

That's enough. Vespa, you were saying about Jet's treatment?

VESPA:

R-right. Um.
(MUTTERS TO HERSELF)

SOUND: VESPA SCROLLS THROUGH SOME DIGITAL NOTES.

Yeah. So even though Sikuliaq is using the car to set his recovery back, we can't take it out of his room.

RITA:

Why not?

VESPA:

It's that stupid instruction I can't figure out. "This treatment will not work unless the patient is kept in close quarters with something they want to grow *for*." The Ruby 7's the best lead I've got on that.

JUNO:

And the fact that it's not even working doesn't bother you?

VESPA:

Of course it bothers me. That's why I called this goddamn meeting, all right? Because obviously we're on the clock, Steel, and if Dark Matters finds us they'll take everything in this Hanataba lab, too, and then poor suckers like Sikuliaq will have nowhere to go once Dark Matters has perfected whatever nightmare-cocktail they've been shooting into his veins. We need to get the hell out of here pronto, so that when Dark Matters finds us...

(GROWLS)

BUDDY:

Then it sounds like we need to solve the riddle of this instruction quickly. Does anyone have any ideas?

RITA:

What about... us?

BUDDY:

Let's not think about that just now, darling. All things in their time.

RITA:

No, I mean... maybe Mista Jet would wanna grow *for* us. Y'know?

I mean... I know he loves us, and we love him. So maybe... maybe if we could just show him that, he'd get all... better.

JUNO:

I don't think there is an "all better" that comes that easily here, Rita.

VESPA:

No. I think the hacker's got a point, actually. And besides... we need someone to watch him and make sure he doesn't ask the car to make any more Neos.

JUNO:

So we all just lock ourselves in there with him and, what, hold hands?

RITA:
That sounds kinda nice.

VESPA:
Obviously we take shifts. Through the night, too, just so somebody's watching him.

RITA:
Can we go back to the holding hands part 'cuz--

VESPA:
Three hours each. And if anything changes... we meet up with the group and talk it over.

BUDDY:
That plan seems sound to me. Is everyone in agreement?

VESPA:
Yep.

JUNO:
Sure.

RITA:
Okay, but I'm gonna try to hold his hand.

BUDDY:
Excellent. Now, if there aren't any questions... I think this meeting is adjourned.

RITA:
Oh, oh, I have a question, actually.

BUDDY:
Yes, Rita?

RITA:
After we're done helping Mista Jet get through this, um... where do we go next?

Cuz, I mean, there must be another safe place for us to go. Somewhere Dark Matters can't find us.

Right?

BUDDY:

All things in their time, Rita. All things in their time.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES OUT.

Scene: 2
(IN THE HANATABA CLINIC ON JUPITER.)

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Time moved like a fishhook through flesh down in that Hanataba bunker. Every gust of the poison storm outside sounded like a Dark Matters ship touching down. Every click and thrum like the beating of their shiny black shoes. They could find us any second, and that made every second feel like our last.

Would've given anything to talk to Puck then. To hear them try to talk some sense at me. Or Mick, just to laugh, just to... just to feel something other than that same heavy dread hour after hour. But we couldn't risk our calls being traced, so all we had were ourselves for company.

Ans much as I loved my criminal family, they were in the same boat I was -- and secretly, quietly, all of us knew that it was sinking.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

VESPA:

(DISTANT)

Damn it! Damn it, damn it, god *damn* it!

JUNO:

The hell?

SOUND: JUNO WALKS TOWARDS VESPA'S RAGING. METALLIC EQUIPMENT RATTLING.

Uh... Vespa? Is everything--

VESPA:

Don't finish that sentence, you moron. Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to.

(HEAVY BREATHS)

Radiation treatments. All the radiation treatments here are expired, decades ago. They weren't sealed up right. And meanwhile I'm already seeing things, hearing things, and I'm... I'm almost out of the treatments I stole from the prison's med ward and then what am I supposed to do, huh? If I'm jumping at every goddamn thing that isn't there, how

am I supposed to...
(GROWLS)

SOUND: GLASS SHATTERS.

Just get the hell out of here, Steel. Never asked you to come staring at me.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):
The anger wasn't the worst of it, though. I was used to Vespa's anger. But hopelessness... it does funny things to people.

SOUND: BUDDY'S FOOTSTEPS. AMBIENCE FADES IN.

BUDDY:
Is everything all right, Juno? I thought I heard Vespa shouting.

JUNO:
Yeah, I think... I think she just needs a minute.

BUDDY:
Mmm. Don't we all.

JUNO:
You've been awful quiet since we got here, Buddy.

BUDDY:
Have I?

Well. I suppose I've been thinking. About... what's next.

JUNO:
Your retirement, you mean?

BUDDY:
(SCOFFS)
Retirement. Yes. Oh, but it feels like years and years since I thought about that. No, I think we've made ourselves difficult enough that Dark Matters won't allow...

It's time for a change of tack, I think. So long as we're in trouble, I think I'd better cause as much trouble as I can. And rest will be for... another life, it seems. One where things worked out differently.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

And in the lead-up to my first shift watching Jet, I couldn't help but notice a pattern: everybody seemed much, much worse after spending their three hours with him.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

RITA:

I just keep thinkin' about... what comes next, y'know? Captain A and Miss Vespa are gonna retire, and then you and me plus maybe Mista Jet, we'll all go be PIs again, or maybe thieves still, or maybe, I dunno, superheroes. But whatever we do, we're gonna... I mean, we have to...

Mista Steel? We're... gonna get outta this, ain't we?

Ain't we?

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

So... I love Jet. But I wasn't exactly thrilled when it was my turn to babysit.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN. JUNO SLIDES OPEN THE DOOR AND WALKS IN.

JET:

(SHIVERING)

Oh. You're up next, huh?

(SNIFFS, THEN A SAD CHUCKLE)

But hey, maybe you'll join me! So long as we're just counting down the days until Dark Matters blows a laser through each of our brains, we might as well have some fun, right?

(WEAK LAUGH)

JUNO:

Join you? Whaddaya got a deck of cards or something?

JET:

No, I mean...

We could ask the Ruby, you know. It knows how to give us a good time.

JUNO:

(SIGHS)

Big guy... what happened to getting better?

JET:

I did the math. I have decided it isn't worth the time.

JUNO:

What?

JET:

Time, Juno. We have so little of it left, with Dark Matters--

JUNO:

Big guy, I really don't wanna hear this.

JET:

And I've done all this before! The detox, all of it. I've done it before, and it's hell, and it takes *too long*. Are you truly saying I have to spend however many days we have left miserable?

JUNO:

Just shut up, all right? Shut up!

Just... take a nap or something, all right? You're not making any sense.

JET:

(SNORTS)

Take a nap.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

But he was making sense, to part of me. The part that said that all this pretending there would even be a "tomorrow" was just burying my head in the sand.

I tried to shake that part off. There had to be a way to survive this. I'd worked too hard and too long to get the rest of the Aurinkos free to give up now. But goddammit, I couldn't see it, and Jet wasn't helping.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

JET:

Please, Juno. I don't want to beg, but please. You don't know how awful this feels.

JUNO:

Withdrawal? Yeah, I-I know how it feels. And I know it'll get worse if you feed it now.

JET:

No you don't. This Dark Matters stuff, it must be special.

JUNO:

Big guy, you're killing me, here.

JET:

That's it. I think it's killing me. I'm going to die suffering. Is that what you want?

JUNO:

Y'know, how about we talk about something a little more productive, huh? Like what are we gonna do after you've gone through this rehab from hell?

JET:

I'm trying to tell you, we're going to get hunted down and killed by Dark Ma--

JUNO:

Nope, stopping you right there. You and me, we're not going to let this time go to waste, all right? We're going to think of a way to survive this. Together.

JET:

Survive this. Yeah, sure, we can think about that.

JUNO:

... Really? Wow. That was a lot easier than I--

JET:

Just... I think I need something to clear my head first.

JUNO:

There it is.

JET:

I can't think like this, Juno. You understand that, right?
I need the Neos to think, I always have, so if you'd just
give them to me--

JUNO:

(GROANS)

SOUND: MIC FEEDBACK AS THE RUBY 7 ACCESSES JUNO'S MIND.
FLASHBACK AMBIENCE IN THE RUBY 7 WHOOSHES IN.

JET:

(DISTANT)
Juno?

RITA (FLASHBACK):

No, I mean that hissin'. M'tendere, d'you hear...
(GASPS)
M'tendere!!

M'TENDERE (FLASHBACK):

Sorry to ruin the mood, friends.

JET (FLASHBACK):

Rita, keep an eye on our rear.

RITA (FLASHBACK):

But but Mista Jet, M'tendere just got shot and oh no I
can't just sit here and watch someone die, I can't--
(CRYING)

JET (FLASHBACK):

Rita. I will care for M'tendere. You will keep an eye on
our rear and ensure that we sustain no more fire. Then we
will all escape alive. Do you understand?

RITA (FLASHBACK):
(SNIFFLING)
Y-yeah, Mista Jet. I understand.

JET (FLASHBACK):
Good. Ruby, print a patch for the hole in that window. Then
continue our course to the Carte Blanche.

RUBY 7 (FLASHBACK):
(ASSENT WHISTLES)

SOUND: AMBIENCE WHOOSHES BACK TO THE GARAGE.

JUNO:
(PANTING)

JET:
Juno? Are you all right?

JUNO:
Yeah. No thanks to *someone* in here.

RUBY 7:
(APOLOGETIC WHISTLE)

JUNO:
But I think I get your point.
(SIGHS)
Of course you can think without the Neos, big guy. You've
come up with plans that have saved our skins plenty of
times. Like... what about when you and Rita needed help
to escape Neptune?

JET:
A terrible example. M'tendere is dead.

JUNO:
Yeah, well, you and Rita and the Ruby would all have died
too if you hadn't taken charge, right?

JET:
You do not know that. You were not there.

JUNO:

Yeah, well, if anyone in here was there, maybe they should speak up.

JET:

You are trying to distract me. It will not work, Juno. I have thought this through. I need those Neos.

JUNO:

Well, you're not getting them, all right? None of us can leave this stupid planet until you're rehabilitated, and I am not going to set us all back.

JET:

That is not true. You could leave at any time.

JUNO:

Not funny, big guy.

JET:

It was not a joke. In my present state I would only slow you down, and time is of the essence in your escape from Dark Matters. You must--

JUNO:

We're not just gonna leave you here!

JET:

Not here, of course. It would be a tragedy if Dark Matters shut down one of Hanataba's clinics. But on an asteroid somewhere--

JUNO:

We already risked everything to save your life, and we are not giving up on you now!

JET:

Do you understand what they will do to us if we're caught again? Swift death would be the kindest option. It is more likely that they would bring us to one of their Headquarters. And do you know what Dark Matters keeps there?

JUNO:

Don't try and distract me. We are not leaving you behind, so--

JET:

Everything. From its inception, Dark Matters has gained all of its technological progress from confiscation and theft: just as they wished to do with the Curemother Prime, they take and they hoard scientific marvels from across the galaxy, and they keep them in their Headquarters. That means torture devices, war machines, experimental chemical treatments, all of them are in those Headquarters, and when we are captured this time, they will likely test them on us.

JUNO:

If they catch us.

JET:

And they will if you do not leave me behind.

Think this through carefully, Juno. In my current state, I cannot drive. I cannot even stand for an extended period without being violently ill. If you wish to remain free of Dark Matters for any length of time, you must move quickly. I cannot do so.

JUNO:

I'm not listening to this.

JET:

You should! There is a point where "selflessness" becomes selfish. Each of you has risked yourself for my sake again and again and again. How will I feel when your recklessness gets you caught?

To ask me to witness your deaths, and for my sake, is cruel. I will not watch you give up so much for so little.

JUNO:

You are not "so little," Jet.

Actually, nothing about you is little, cuz you're really--

JET:

My own death does not concern me. After all I have done, it is no great loss.

RUBY 7:
(PROTESTING WHISTLES)

SOUND: MIC FEEDBACK AS THE RUBY 7 ACCESSES JUNO'S MIND.

JUNO:
Oh, not... again...

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):
The Ruby 7 was frustrated. It was scared of what the big guy was saying, what it might turn into. And in response to that fear, the little nudges it had been giving me became huge, weighty shoves.

SOUND: FASTING WHOOSHING SOUNDS.

RITA:
Thanks, Mista Jet!

BUDDY:
I can't tell you how grateful I am, darling.

VESPA:
Nice work, Sikuliaq.

JUNO (NARRATOR):
Time after time after time that Jet had done things for us spun in my head, raced up and around and inside my too-full skull: Rita holding back tears while Jet put a huge arm around her, Buddy sharing tea with Jet, Vespa and Jet counting through stolen radiation treatments, and in all those moments the Ruby sat silent in the background, watching.

I could hardly see for all the memories. It was every moment the Ruby could think of thrown at me all at once, and it took everything I had to squeeze out the words,

SOUND: WHOOSHING FADES. GARAGE AMBIENCE FADES IN.

JUNO:
You're worth something to us, big guy. You always have been. Remember when you--

JET:

I assure you I remember. And I assure you that it is not enough to make up for the terrible things I have done. You must go on without me.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I wanted to say something to him -- not to the wall he was putting up, but to *him*, because I recognized those words and that tone. Self-loathing always arrives with bricks and with mortar, ready to build a wall that will keep anything good about you out and all of the self-hate packed tightly in. I wanted to tell him that he couldn't trust the feeling, that it lied, that I loved him and all of us loved him, and if he could only see that love he would never say he had no value again.

I don't know if that would've gotten through to him. I don't think so. It's never got through to me over the years of Rita saying it, Mick saying it, Benten saying it, each in their own ways.

But I never got the chance, because that's when things got... weird.

Every other memory the Ruby had shot me had been like watching from the outside in. But this memory didn't start with sight, or sound, or smell.

SOUND: WHOOSHING STARTS AGAIN.

It started with... *lightning*.

SOUND: ELECTRIC CRACKLING. RUBY 7 ENGINE BEEPS AND BOOPS.

My blood was a battery, sparking with life and energy and speed. I was going fast, I knew, faster than my own body could go, and I felt scared, terrified. Until I heard that voice:

JET:

Forty degrees left, Ruby. Reduce power to back thrusters.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

He was talking to me, and in an instant the fear was gone.
I did what Jet said. He'd never steered me wrong before.
We'd hit the Pelican Bootleg together. We'd done the
impossible. I couldn't be in safer hands.

Then, like a cold splash of water, the memory left me --
and I was just Juno Steel again, sitting on the floor of
that secret lab and panting, exhausted.

SOUND: WHOOSHING FADES. AMBIENCE FADES IN.

(PANTING)

JET:

Juno? Are you all right?

JUNO:

You're worth something to the Ruby 7 too, you know.

JET:

What are you saying?

JUNO:

None of us want to see you in pain. We all owe you so much.
And the Ruby 7 feels the same way.

JET:

The Ruby 7 is a car, Juno. A highly-advanced car, but even
so. I do not think it gets a vote in the question of my
value.

JUNO:

(GROANS)

Ruby, I can't take this... just... tell him!

JET:

Tell me what?

RUBY 7:

(PANICKED WHISTLES)

JUNO:

Life's too goddamn short... especially ours, right now.
(CHUCKLES)

Tell him how you feel, Ruby. Or you're gonna... you're gonna regret it.

JET:

Juno, are you ill? Juno!

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I couldn't take it anymore. I'd felt the Ruby's mind, and it wasn't... the same *shape* as mine. It felt like my mind was a balloon, round and stretching, and its memories all came to sharp points and barbs. I could stretch around its mind for a while... but soon, I knew mine would tear. A rush of relief. The Ruby's thoughts left mine. And I watched from my sweaty heap on the ground as the Ruby 7 began to change.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN. THE RUBY TRANSFORMS WITH A RUSH LIKE A RAIN SHOWER. WET DRIPPING AND BUBBLING.

JET:

What the... how...?

RUBY:

(SHY WHISTLES)

JET:

Ruby... is that really you?

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Jet stood and stepped toward it on quivering legs. The Ruby had transformed into a molten monolith, a liquid mirror reflecting Jet back at himself.

Except... it wasn't exactly Jet in that reflection. He looked at the Ruby's version of his reflection, saw the calm and comfort in its face, saw the hands rough and scraped from building things, fixing things.

MUSIC: JUNO'S THEME.

But the Ruby saw something in the big guy that I hadn't,

because the Jet in the mirror, he looked... not delicate, exactly. More... precious. Worth holding and protecting.

He looked like the Ruby thought of him, I realized. What love did to its strange, alien eyes. It was clearer than any words could have been.

The big guy stumbled, put a hand out to catch himself, and the Ruby's flowing body hardened to sheet metal to catch his weight. Then, slowly, the metal began to melt again -- and streams of it closed like tender fingers around Jet's hand.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

JET:

R... Ruby...?
(SWOONS)

SOUND: JET STUMBLES. JUNO RUSHES TO HIS SIDE.

JUNO:

Whoa there, big guy!

JET:

Juno... I think... I think...

JUNO:

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's pretty amazing, too.

JET:

No, I think... I've been standing too long.

SOUND: HE THROWS UP ON JUNO.

JUNO:

Oh! Oh. Oh. Oh, oh, no.

JET:

(COUGHING)

SOUND: JET CURLS UP ON THE GROUND, UNCONSCIOUS.

JUNO:

Wow. That's uh... I hope you feel better, at least. Glad

I could catch most of it.

Oh, I do *not* have a change of clothes.

RUBY 7:

(HELPFUL WHISTLE)

SOUND: A MECHANICAL HATCH OPENS. AMBIENCE FADES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The Ruby rippled. Underneath its liquid surface I heard something mechanical grind.

SOUND: MECHANICAL GRINDING.

Then a hard, rectangular drawer extended from within the goop of it, and within that drawer sat...

MUSIC: ENDS.

... my clothes. The same clothes I'd been wearing the day Dark Matters raided the *Carte Blanche*. They were clean.

SOUND: AMBIENCE FADES IN.

MUSIC: FAINT JAZZ DRUMS FADE IN.

RUBY 7:

(TRIUMPHANT WHISTLE)

JUNO:

Thanks, Ruby. Hell, I guess you've already cleaned a mess off these clothes once... before...

I gave it those clothes... and it *made* these...

(LAUGHING FIT)

SOUND: THE DOOR SLIDES OPEN.

VESPA:

Steel? I thought I heard...

Holy hell, what is *that*?

JUNO:

Oh, that? That doesn't matter.

MUSIC: ELECTRIC GUITAR FADES IN.

VESPA:

Uh, I think it does!!

JUNO:

Vespa, I figured it out.

VESPA:

Are you covered in *puke*?

JUNO:

Emergency family meeting! Come on, go get everyone. I'll get changed and drag the big guy along with.

VESPA:

Steel--

JUNO:

Why are you not more excited? *I figured it out!*

VESPA:

Figured *what* out?!

JUNO:

How we're gonna beat Dark Matters.

It-it needs some of the old Buddy magic, but... come on, let's go.

Oh, Director W is gonna love this.

TO BE CONTINUED

OUTRO

(THE PENUMBRA EXPRESS.)

MUSIC: MAIN THEME PLAYS OVER THE RADIO.

SOUND: RAIN.

CONDUCTOR:

If you've enjoyed this tale, please consider donating to The Penumbra on Patreon. Our artists work tirelessly to bring you these stories, and if you have the means, we hope you will support our efforts. Every dollar helps. You can find that page at patreon.com/thepenumbrapodcast.

If you support us on Patreon at the \$10 level or higher, you will receive access to commentary tracks like this one, from actor Sarah Gazdowicz and co-creators Harley Takagi Kaner and Kevin Vibert:

SOUND: DOOR OPENS.

SARAH:

I think something similar to what a lot of people have been going through over the past two years-

KEVIN:

Mm.

SARAH:

Which is, you go back to your touchpoints. You go back to the things that are most familiar with you to handle circumstances, to handle and to process circumstances. And even though there is a desire for fundamental change in the way that you live your life and the way that you take care of yourself and the way that you determine to move through the world, people will still always go back to the things that they've always done that-

SOUND: DOOR CLOSES.

We would like to give thanks to all who support us on Patreon, but especially to [Patreon supporters] for their incredibly generous contributions per episode. Thank you.

This tale - "Juno Steel and the Blank Slate" - was told by the following people:

Joshua Ilon as Juno Steel;
Alexander Stravinski as Jet;
Chloe Cunha as Vespa;
Sarah Gazdowicz as Buddy;
And Kate Jones as Rita.

The Penumbra is created and produced by Harley Takagi Kaner and Kevin Vibert. If you wish to know more about our ever-expanding infinitely-creative team of artists, musicians, editors, designers, and managers, you can read about them in the show notes of this episode.

I'm afraid that is our time for today, dear Traveler. We hope you will join us again soon.

SOUND: RAIN FADES OUT.

MUSIC: FADES OUT.

Trigger Warnings:

- Physical and mental illness
- Enclosed spaces
- Sudden loud noises
- Violence and threats of violence
- Threats of self-harm/self-destruction
- Depictions of addiction

Attribution:

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (3.0) license.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/legalcode>

"Kind of Girl" by Jeris, featuring spinningmerkaba

[UI, Mechanical, Text-Scroll, 03, FX, 01, LOOP.wav](http://freesound.org/people/InspectorJ/sounds/458587/) by InspectorJ

<https://freesound.org/people/InspectorJ/sounds/458587/>

"Microphone feedback.wav" by tosha73

<https://freesound.org/people/tosha73/sounds/638527/>

"Boiling Water, Large, A.wav" by InspectorJ

<https://freesound.org/people/InspectorJ/sounds/412843/>