

The Case of Christine M

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

A Visitor

"Doctor Gerard, a gentleman at the front desk to see you."

Peter looked up from the stack of paper on his desk at the speakerphone. A visitor? He frowned, but his curiosity got the better of him. He picked up the phone.

"This is Doctor Gerard," he said.

"Doctor, sorry to bother you sir, but a Doctor Gerhard von Folkstein is here at the front desk asking to see you."

"Doctor von Folkstein? About what?" Peter asked the receptionist.

"About one of our patients, sir -- he'd rather not go into it..."

Why today, Peter thought. "Okay, sign him in. I'll send Vicky to get him."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Peter shook his head and ran a hand through his walnut-brown hair. They didn't get many unannounced visitors -- at least not voluntary ones. He pushed another button on the phone to get his administrative assistant. "Vicky, there's a Doctor von Folkstein at the front desk to see me -- would you bring him up please? Thanks."

Peter put down the phone and turned to look out the window, waiting for his visitor to arrive. Grey, gloomy, going to rain again. He felt the wrinkles in his forehead -- a puzzle! He looked back to the pile of folders on the desk. Not that he didn't have a number of puzzles, as Director and Chief of Psychiatry at the Santa Mira State Hospital.

He stood in response to Vicky's polite knock at his office door. "Come in, please."

Vicky opened the door. "Doctor Gerhard von Folkstein," she announced.

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A short thin man, about five foot six, European-style dress, wire rimmed glasses, a formal three-piece suit. He had a winter overcoat draped over his arm, and carried a well-traveled leather valise. He looked to be at least sixty, from his silver-white hair.

"Doctor von Folkstein," Peter greeted his visitor, stepping forward to take the man's coat and drape it over one of the visitor chairs in the office, then shake the man's hand.

The man reached in his vest pocket and handed Peter a card. "Thank you for agreeing to see me under most unusual circumstances," he said with a mild European accent. Austrian?

Peter glanced at the card, reconsidering his age estimate. Silver-white hair, yes -- but a full head of hair, only slightly receding. Some wrinkles on the face, almost reminiscent of a mask. The skin on the man's hands looked supple, taut. Mid 40's? The card said Medical Doctor, Professor of Psychiatry, Lecturer, at a well-known University in Geneva. "Professor," he said, "I am intrigued. Coffee, sir?"

His guest considered for a moment. "*Ja, bitte* -- black, please."

Peter glanced to Vicky, who nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

Peter offered his guest a chair, then sat behind his desk.

"Professor von Folkstein, what can I do for you? It's not often we receive visitors such as yourself at such an out-of-the-way State mental hospital."

The professor's consideration of his remark was interrupted by a gentle knock on the door. Vicky brought in a cup of coffee, putting it on the desk. The professor thanked her, picked up the cup, and took a sip. "You have very good coffee here in the Northwest."

Peter forced a smile. "Yes, it makes up for the weather."

"Oh, this is what we have at home now, the onset of snow..."

They spoke of inconsequentials for a few minutes, gaining comfort in each other's presence. Peter was intrigued at his visitor -- close to his own age? Some of the marks his visitor bore, such as the lines on his face, were reminiscent of those seen in cases of extreme psychological trauma. That and the silver-white hair, the eyebrows similar, flecked with darker color....

The professor put down his nearly empty coffee cup, sighed a bit, and picked up his valise, opening it and retrieving a piece of paper.

"Doctor Gerard, I have here today come because of a young woman I believe you have in your care. A young woman with this mark on her lower abdomen." He handed the paper to Peter.

Peter looked at the sketch. He instantly recognized the mark, recalling the particular patient. A troubling case, very troubling, but then again most of the patients at the facility fell into that category, each in their unique way.

“Yes?” he replied noncommittally.

The professor allowed himself a smile. Such an open-ended non-response he should expect from a fellow psychiatrist.

“Yes, this is an unusual request. I do not know her name, I tell you that. But I am most interested in interviewing her. I propose to tell you of her symptoms. I propose to give to you a list of dates and times during the past months when her symptoms manifest. I propose also to tell you how to predict which of her two sets of her seemingly disparate symptoms will manifest. If I can do this, you will let me interview her, yes?”

Peter leaned back in his chair a bit. He pondered the man seated before him, and the offer and request he had made.

“Professor, if you can do any of those, I will be most happy for you to interview her. I would like anything you can provide which would shed light on this woman’s condition.”

The professor leaned back in his chair, relaxing visibly. A sad and troubled look formed on his face. “You have looked into her eyes when she has been in these states, yes?”

Peter sighed and nodded. “Yes...” It was more than just a phrase, the eyes being the windows to the soul. And for some of their patients, such as Christine M, to look in her eyes during one of her episodes was to look into a very dark and very troubling place.

The professor nodded along with Peter. “Yes -- many like her we do not see, *Gott sei dank!* This,” he took another piece of paper out of his valise, “is a list of the dates and times when her symptoms have manifest over the last nine months. She has been in your care for that long, yes?”

Peter took the page. As he looked at the two precisely hand-formed columns, his guest added, “The right column is your local time and date, the left is GMT. I hope I made the changes correctly; this Daylight Savings Time of yours is confusing.”

Peter pushed the intercom button for his assistant again. “Vicky, get me the file on Christine M? Right away, please.”

He looked to his guest. “She has been here for about two and a half years, if I recall correctly. Please continue, professor.”

“Please, call me Gerhard. You are not one of my students,” the professor said.

Peter nodded. “If you will call me Peter.”

“Of course,” Gerhard replied.

Gerhard dug into his valise once more, glancing over a yellow page, one of many.

“The young lady,” Gerhard began, “is breathtakingly beautiful, and has become more so since she has been here, her beauty increasing even with the severity of her episodes, *Ja?*”

Peter nodded. “Quite true.”

“Yet for her physical charms, when symptom-free, she does not seek out or participate in physical or sexual diversions. When symptom-free, she is an unremarkable, even boring young woman, borderline what you call Axis I neurosis, withdrawn, blunted affect, depressed mood, markedly diminished interest in all activities, psychomotor retardation.”

Peter nodded again. “Yet?”

Gerhard smiled. He glanced at the paper, then set it down. “Yet when her symptoms manifest, she changes -- oh how she changes! In the first mode, she regresses, becoming more withdrawn, terrified, and she seeks a place of refuge which is as high above the ground as she can get, and filled with light, perhaps with shining or reflective surfaces.” He paused to look at Peter.

Peter nodded, contemplating, his brow furrowed. “I hadn’t fit height into the pattern, but that’s quite true -- in one of the first episodes we are aware of, at her college, she was found huddled in a cardboard box in an attic. The box was lined with aluminum foil, and had a light bulb inside. The college health service people had no idea what to do.”

Gerhard continued, “Especially since those who encountered her during this phase, and those who have treated her, may find themselves being overcome by the terror, the fear the poor girl radiates -- and she regresses during those times, to a mental age of four or five years. The mark, it becomes warm, burning -- this can provide some warning.”

Peter was no longer leaning back in his chair. He leaned forward, looking intently at his guest. “We missed that aspect of the mark; she becomes quite disoriented and difficult to communicate with. You’ve seen similar cases, then?”

Gerhard continued, his voice becoming deeper, darker, troubled. “And in her other mode, she seeks depths -- in so many ways. She...”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Vicky silently brought in a file, handing it to Peter.

Gerhard sat back as Peter opened the file, scanning it quickly, comparing entries to the sheet of dates Gerhard had provided.

“This is remarkable,” he told Gerhard. “The dates you’ve provided correlate almost exactly with her periods of difficulty.”

Gerhard frowned. “A miscalculation?”

Peter was becoming more flustered by the moment. “No, no -- your dates are correct. If there are any major differences, I suspect our records. Please continue.”

Gerhard nodded, taking off his glasses. “It has for me been a long journey, my friend and colleague. Where was I ... Oh, her other mode -- descending into depths -- she seeks out depths, physically, emotionally, socially -- all her physical charms come into play -- she is sexually attractive to all those around her, radiating the lust of an animal. Yet if any tries to touch her in a sexual manner, she strikes out, viciously! In particularly strong manifestations, she smears herself with her own excrement, yet even in that state, those around her are drawn to her sexually, an attraction that increases when the sun goes down.”

Peter nodded. “Very true, and still hard to believe. That’s how she was brought to us, a wild animal, covered in her own excrement, radiating sex and lust, drawing others close to her, yet striking out if they dared try and consummate anything. One of our orderlies tried to take advantage of her in the middle of the night during a later episode. Sedated, supposedly restrained, she almost completely castrated him.”

Gerhard had a grim look on his face. “Yes, and there may be an undercurrent of terror in her at these times, overwhelmed by lust, but still it is there. And she calls out the same thing in both cases -- does she call out in her native tongue, or in an unknown one?”

“She is a native English speaker. She cries out in some language we’ve been unable to identify, and in English. She says ...”

“He sleeps; he dreams,” Gerhard interrupted, barely whispering.

“Exactly,” Peter confirmed. He leaned forward, intense. “How do you know? You said you knew why one set manifested over another? Please, I beg you...”

Gerhard nodded. “I have studied this for many years, my friend. As to which? That is simple. Do you have her on a contraceptive?”

Peter was startled by the question. He glanced at her folder. “No, why?”

“If you investigate,” Gerhard told him, “You will find that which set of symptoms manifests depends on her fertility -- if she is not fertile at the time, she regresses to a terrified little girl. If she is fertile, she descends into animal lust.”

Peter was startled at the simplicity of the explanation. “Yes,” he whispered, “but why?”

Gerhard smiled slightly. “If I may see her now?”

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Peter blinked and took a breath. “Yes, of course. She’s on the second floor, east wing. Most of our patients are in small wards or solitary rooms. She sleeps in a solitary room. Would placing her in a room on a higher floor be beneficial to her condition?” Peter stood up,

Gerhard stood up slowly. He was tired. He took a small hand-sized leather case from his valise and slipped it into an inside coat pocket. “Yes, it would -- the more sunlight the better.” He took a small atomizer from the valise and sprayed himself with it, then sprayed Peter. The room was filled with the scent of citrus and mint. “Mint and lemon calm her greatly. You will see.” He put the atomizer in an outside coat pocket.

Stepping outside his office, Peter paused at Vicky’s desk. “We’re headed to two East to see Christine M -- please call ahead for us.”

Vicky looked up with raised eyebrows, sniffing the air. “Of course, Doctors.” She picked up the phone as the two men stepped out into the hallway.

“Such a nice facility you have here, Peter,” Gerhard said as they walked the hallways.

“Yes, full of such troubled souls,” Peter added. “and if you can help with one, I will be in your debt.”

Gerhard sighed. “I may have an explanation, my friend -- but that is far from a cure.”

Examination

Two orderlies, one male and one female, were waiting at the entrance to the 2 East ward.

“Good afternoon, Director,” the woman said.

“Good afternoon. This is Professor von Folkstein. Is she inside? How is she doing today?”

The man shrugged. “Fine. The sun is still up.”

“Any sign of trouble?” Peter asked, an eyebrow raised.

“No sir, not for days,” the female orderly replied.

They walked down the hall, stopping at a door. The door was metal, set in a metal frame. A small window in the door let them look in to the room. A girl wearing sweat pants and a sweat shirt stood looking blankly out the window. In spite of her plain clothing, she was beautiful.

“We’ll wait outside, sir,” the woman said.

“That will be fine,” Peter told them, motioning for them to open the door. The male orderly opened it.

Peter stepped in first, followed by Gerhard.

“Christine,” Peter said, “I’ve brought you a visitor.”

Christine turned slowly and smiled. Her face was pretty yet plain, yet she bore the troubled signs common to many patients in the facility. She held her hands together in front of her, just below her breasts. “Hi,” she managed to say shyly.

Gerhard stepped closer. “Christine, I am Doctor von Folkstein. I would like to talk with you. Is this acceptable to you?”

Christine, frowned a bit. “Yes, I guess so,” she answered after a moment. She took a breath, then smiled more, her shoulders relaxing.

Gerhard smiled. “Good... Why don’t you sit on the bed so you can be comfortable.”

Gerhard held out a hand, and Christine took it, allowing herself to be led to her bed. The bed was standard sized, industrial, and bolted to the floor with a mattress sitting atop the plain gray metal frame.

Peter watched as Gerhard led the girl to the bed, and as he seated her, one of his hands moved to the back of her neck and the other moved in front of her face. Christine's motion slowed as she sat.

"Relax dear, that's right, relaxed and so safe with us now, relaxing more and more," Gerhard said softly, passing a hand in front of her face.

Peter sat down in one of the chairs and watched a master at work. After a few minutes, Gerhard turned to Peter with a smile, and stepped over to him. Christine was on her back on the bed, her face and body relaxed, her eyes closed.

"She is in deep hypnosis now," Gerhard whispered.

Peter nodded. "Those skills are seldom taught in our country," he whispered in reply.

Gerhard nodded sadly. "Yet they were the beginnings of our practice..." He looked back to the girl, then to Peter. "Come, sit while I interview her."

The chairs were lightweight plastic, and moveable. They sat near Christine's head.

Gerhard probed gently about her history and her family, if she had any sisters, aunts, cousins, any female relatives or friends showing similar problems. She didn't. He probed her on her early years, and the onset of her symptoms. Peter learned that the mark she bore appeared shortly after the onset of puberty, but her symptoms had not started for a number of years. Yes, she had some warning -- the mark felt hot, sometimes burning, before an attack. She became more agitated as the questioning continued.

After a pause, Gerhard glanced at Peter, then asked Christine, "Is he still sleeping?"

Her voice changed, now frightened, as she whispered, "He sleeps -- he dreams..." Then her eyes popped open, and her back arching, her hands clutching the sides of the bed, she cried in a troubled voice, "*Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn... Iä! Iä! Cthulhu fhtagn!*"

Gerhard took out the atomizer and sprayed it over the girl. She shuddered as the first droplets touched her. "I'm here and we are safe. Relax for me. Breathe deep and relax..." he said, comforting her.

Peter recognized Gerhard using a hypnotic deepening technique. He paid attention, hoping to learn from someone with different skills. The room was warm, and he felt safe, relaxed, now that he was learning more about what caused the girl's problems.

Peter found himself standing outside the room with Gerhard and the two orderlies.

"Move her to four East, near a corner where her room will get a lot of natural light," he told the orderlies. As they nodded, he added, "And she finds the scent of mint and lemon comforting -- I'll make sure that's noted in her files, but you should know as well."

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The two orderlies nodded. “Very good, sir -- we’ll let four East know and get the paperwork to you within the hour.”

Peter and Gerhard walked back to Peter’s office. Gerhard picked up his coat and bag.

“Thank you for your help, Peter. I can return home now.”

Peter shook Gerhard’s hand. “Thank you, sir. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.”

Peter walked Gerhard to the main entrance and signed him out. When he returned to his office, the paperwork moving Christine M to four East was waiting for his signature. He signed it and let Vicky put it into effect.

He sat in his chair, looking over Christine’s file, listening to the rain. It felt and sounded as if it was cooling down rapidly. Probably snow overnight, or by the morning.

He clipped Gerhard’s notes into the file, and put one of Gerhard’s cards into his wallet, the other in his desktop holder. He looked at the atomizer on his desk, and a small vial of fluid to refill it. He put the vial in a desk drawer, leaving the atomizer on a corner of his desk where it would be available when needed. He was momentarily puzzled. He had some questions Gerhard hadn’t answered. Not important, he told himself. They had more to go on, at least.

Interim

Peter sat with his senior staff about a week later. “Joan, anything new in Medical?”

Doctor Joan Flynn, his medical lead, responded. “Miss Christine M should be ready to transfer out of the hospital ward and back to four East in three or four days. The University labs helped us find an antibiotic which was effective against her infection. She’s recovering nicely.”

Peter shook his head. “Any ideas where or how she could have contracted a multiply-drug resistant pelvic infection? Any signs of the organism in anyone else, or in the facility?”

Doctor Flynn shook her head. “Peter, it’s as much a mystery to us, and the University. We tightened protocols as soon as we knew we had a pelvic inflammatory disease case. We haven’t seen any others, let alone multiply-resistant ones. We’ve sent samples of the strain to CDC for typing and further analysis. It hasn’t shown up anywhere else, here or at the University, and we’ve had their specialists working with us, crawling all over the place.”

Peter continued probing. “Hypotheses? Wild guesses?”

Doctor Flynn shrugged her shoulders. “No evidence of recent sexual contact, but some bruising of the cervix. Wouldn’t be the first time we’ve had a female patient shove something unusual up her cooter.”

Peter nodded with a slight smile. “Okay. Follow-up?”

Doctor Flynn looked at her notes. “David, my staff OB/GYN suggests putting her on a triphasic oral contraceptive to restabilize her menstrual cycle, as the infection played hell with her normal rhythm. He also wants to do a follow-up in a few months to check the patency of her Fallopian tubes; scarring is quite common in infections of this type and severity.”

“This episode could have rendered her sterile?” Peter asked, surprised.

Doctor Flynn nodded. “David wants to schedule follow-up tests to see. Given her condition and prognosis, is that an issue?”

Peter sighed. “No, realistically it isn’t. Okay, proceed as recommended with the triphasic and with tests in three months. How’s our multiple laceration case coming?”

Another Visitor

As Peter adjusted the visor in his car for the late afternoon sun, his phone chirped. Keeping his eyes on the road, he muted the radio and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Doctor Gerard? This is Doctor Baxter -- sorry to be interrupting your weekend, sir.”

Peter sighed. Baxter was on his first shift as weekend supervisor. Peter had half expected a call... “That’s okay Carl -- what is it.”

“Sir, we’ve gotten a number of calls from Europe for you, from a Doctor von Folkstein. He says it’s urgent that...”

“It’s Christine M,” Peter interrupted. “How is she?”

“She’s fine now, sir, acting a little uncomfortable and disoriented maybe -- but this guy says she’s going to have a really bad one. I checked her myself, and ...”

“Believe him, Carl -- I want her zapped with Thorazine, stat, and isolated per my instructions. Do you have her file?”

“Okay sir, Thorazine stat -- I don’t have her file.”

“I want to know when she had her last menstrual period -- when it started and when it stopped. Check day shift meds to see where she is on her triphasic contraceptive if her period wasn’t charted. I’m headed to the hospital, and should be there in under an hour. Call me if anything changes. Got that?”

“Yes sir -- medicate, isolate, and check her file. Do you want me to call with that information?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. If Doctor von Folkstein calls again, take the call personally, thank him, tell him what we’ve done, and that I’m on the way. Got that, Carl?”

“Yes sir -- sorry to ruin your weekend.”

“That’s okay, Carl -- get that girl medicated and secured. If she’s going to have a rough one, I want her where she won’t affect too many others. Were you with us the last time she had a really rough one?”

“No sir, but I’ve heard about it. I’ll take care of things.”

“Good, Carl -- who’s your nursing lead?”

“Miriam Carter, sir.”

“Rely on her, Carl -- she’s been doing this a lot longer than you have.”

“Yes sir -- she’s reminded me of that. I checked with her before calling you.”

Peter finally managed a smile. “Good. Now get busy!”

“See you soon, sir.”

Peter disconnected the call, looked around, and increased his speed. At the next opportunity he made a U-turn, turning away from the light of the setting sun and into the deepening gloom. No view of the full moon tonight, he told himself, not with that cloud layer.

Peter’s internal sense of turmoil and gloom deepened along the way. The sun had set by the time he pulled onto the hospital grounds. He was worried -- should he have called von Folkstein? Should he have checked back with Carl, or better, with Miriam? The last episode had been shy mode, but the two prior had been nasty. What would this one be, if von Folkstein was right? He knew it had to be in his mind, but somehow it seemed darker, gloomier, on the hospital grounds.

A light dusting of fresh snow covered the parking lot as he pulled into his reserved space. The clouds were low, thick, dark, and menacing. He got out, grabbing his coat but not putting it on for the quick dash to the door. One wave of his card key and the doors opened.

“Doctor Gerard,” the security guard at the desk called out, “you’re wanted in 1 West.”

Peter waved as he headed down the hallway to his office. 1 West was their emergency medical area -- he’d expected to go to 1 East and take the elevator to 4 -- were things going to hell already? He tossed his coat in his office, automatically dropping his keys and wallet, and grabbed the little atomizer from his desk -- something told him he’d need it. Heading toward 1 West he saw Miriam walking down the hallway toward him and his sense of unease increased. She didn’t look quite herself somehow -- and he thought she was pretty unflappable. She was in her late 30’s, smart, hard working, and even-tempered.

“Miriam -- what’s wrong?” he asked as he met her in the hallway. They walked by the nursing station as she led him past emergency medical to another hallway.

“Peter, I’m glad you’re here. We’ve got problems.”

“Where’s Baxter?”

With a wry smile, she shook her head. “He turned his back on some patients in the two East rec room, after turning off the television program they were watching. He went in without backup.”

Peter winced. Two East was a rough ward. “How bad?”

“Concussion, broken nose, scalp laceration with six stitches. Not bad, but he’s out of commission for a few days. Juan and Erika pulled him out.”

“A great first weekend for him. Who’s his backup?”

“I reached Beverly Miller -- she should be here in a few minutes.”

“She’s the closest?”

“That I trust,” Miriam answered very matter-of-factly.

“Bill Dawson?” he asked, inquiring about his Assistant Director.

“Briefed him and Beverly ten minutes ago. He’ll come in if needed.”

Peter nodded. “What’s happening with Christine?”

“Medicated, but Baxter insisted on putting her in the Pit. I wanted to keep her up in 4, but he’s the doctor...”

“Oh shit,” muttered Peter. Now their path made sense. The original hospital had been built in the 1950’s, the height of the Cold War. There was an underground section named “the Pit” by staff, which had a few very secure and very isolated rooms. For the last few years, the area was used mainly for storing emergency supplies. It was used rarely for highly notorious or violent patients. “Is she the only one down there?”

Miriam waved her card-key at the sole elevator which went down to the Pit, an old freight elevator at the far corner of the facility, as far away from everything else as you could get. “Yeah -- we left the gurney down there, but she’s getting bad. Erika went down with us -- we wanted her to stay, but she refused, and I don’t blame her. Peter, it’s hard to be within ten feet of that girl. I think that’s why Carl screwed up on two -- she got to him, and bad. *I* was tempted to jump her -- or him...” She gave Peter an intense look.

The elevator was slow, noisy, and loud. “So she’s at the peak of her monthly cycle?”

Miriam said, “Ripe as can be,” with a wry smile on her face.

“So he was right,” Peter muttered.

“Sure as hell seems that way. Carl talked to him, and I guess he wasn’t happy she was in the Pit either, but Carl insisted you said isolation. Want to move her?”

“Stat. We still have an open spot on 4?”

“Corner room, nobody nearby, the worst problem would be wheeling her by other wards on the way.”

Peter remembered the atomizer and sprayed himself generously. His eyes closed reflexively; as he opened them, he saw Miriam leaning against the side of the elevator, a stunned look on her face. “Miriam -- are you all right?” he asked, stepping through a cloud of droplets to be closer to her.

Miriam blinked. She seemed to change, her strange smile disappearing, her shoulders pulling up a bit, her face filling with a look of concern, and fear. “Peter, I’m scared,” she said in a voice only a little above a whisper.

“I understand,” he said. He held up the atomizer. “Here, this works wonders calming her.” Miriam seemed to recoil from the first spray, but straightened up, shaking her head as if to clear it.

The elevator groaned malevolently and bottomed out. An alarm buzzed. Miriam shook her head again and backhanded the control panel. She punched the “Door Open” button repeatedly. The door slowly creaked opened with a metallic groan.

She looked to Peter, her composure returning. “Peter, I’m amazed she can move, with the dose of Vitamin T we gave her. Carl wanted to go by weight, but I convinced him to go by history and severity of symptoms.”

Peter shook his head. So far, everything that could go wrong, had. “He’s really learning the hard way...”

Miriam looked at him. “Isn’t that how we all learn?”

They stood at the elevator door, looking down the gloomy hallway. Their goal was about fifty yards away, a group of eight secure rooms, four on each side at the end of the hall, a nursing/monitoring station between them. Storage rooms along the hallway leading to the small ward were filled with emergency supplies. The occasional night light along the hallway only deepened the overall gloom.

Peter shivered involuntarily as he stepped out of the elevator -- cold gripped him. “Did you get the heat turned up?”

Miriam gripped his arm. “Yes, all the way, but...”

“What? What is it, Miriam?” Peter asked. The creaking groan of the elevator door closing startled them. The cold sensation only increased once the elevator door closed.

“Peter, it’s weird -- the thermostats say it’s 70 degrees...”

Peter shivered again. As he looked down the long hallway, he felt a chill grip him tighter, chilling him to the bone. "Let's get her out of here." Holding Miriam, he took a step forward.

Peter found himself fighting back fear as they walked down the hallway. The darkness surrounding them seethed with an almost palpable foreboding. He was in his own facility, he reminded himself. Yet that thought was not reassuring -- he found himself almost paralyzed with fear as they walked by an open door to one of the storage areas, an open door revealing blackness inside, blackness concealing ... what? Not daring to turn his head and look inside, he stepped forward, looking up to one of the few lights illuminating the corridor.

They paused about fifteen feet from her room. "My God," Peter muttered. "I can feel her already!" He took another step and was hit by a gut-wrenching combination of arousal, terror, lust, fear -- strong animal sensations. He jumped as Miriam grabbed his arm.

"We're lucky we whacked her up when we did -- ten minutes later and we'd have been in big trouble. Peter, she frightens me, this whole thing frightens me," Miriam told him, her usually professional voice unsteady.

"It frightens me too, Miriam. Let's get her on the gurney and get the hell out of here." The waves of sensation increased in strength as they got closer. A cold white fluorescent glow emanated from the observation window in the door to room 3. While the light from 3 contrasted with the cold darkness of the other rooms, a cold darkness their eyes tried to avoid but were drawn to nonetheless, the light from room 3 provided no relief from their fears.

He stopped at the nursing station and picked up the phone, punching buttons, and setting the atomizer down next to the phone. "This is Doctor Gerard. Who do we have that can pass gas? Get him, stat. ... Henry -- I want you at the elevator to the Pit with a gas rig, Halothane or sevo six percent, ready to go, in two minutes. Yes... We're in the Pit now, moving her up to 4. Yeah, set up with a Bennett. Good -- glad you're here, Henry."

As he hung up the phone, he saw Miriam standing by the gurney. She was holding on to it, shaking. As he walked over to her, a loud barely-human moan came from room 3. He stepped to Miriam, who turned and gripped him tightly. His heart was pounding as he reeled from waves of terror and lust pulsing from the room.

"Henry will be waiting to gas her. Bev Miller just arrived. Let's do it," he said, his voice wavering, pushing the gurney toward the door.

Another moan issued from behind the door, louder, one which carried increased levels of terror, lust, and longing all intertwined.

They stopped. Another feeling -- Peter felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. Suddenly he'd never been so frightened in all his life.

Miriam gasped. Both of them turned quickly, ducking down behind the gurney as they looked down the hallway, responding to the animal-instinct sense of something approaching, something very menacing. The only thing they saw was the ominous glow of the night lighting interrupting the dark gloom. As much as they didn't want to look into the darkness, their eyes were drawn to it.

Like small animals sensing their own impending doom, they felt it approaching. They could feel it, in their stomachs, in their throats, in their bones. Another moan from room 3 as the terror increased.

"Peter," Miriam gasped, clutching at him.

Peter forced himself to take another step to the door. All he had to do was grasp the handle and pull it open. The two of them could move her to the gurney in under thirty seconds. One more step...

The moan from room 3 was answered by another sound, a sound which humans cannot produce, yet one which humans and their ancestors understood. As that sound increased in volume, their patient in room 3 answered in screams of terror mixed with desire.

Cold, clammy, dank, and fetid breath bore down on them, approaching with the gathering darkness, so close, almost upon them. Peter instinctively closed his eyes and pulled Miriam closer, trying to shield her from the approaching terror. Miriam shook in fear.

They screamed, primordial screams of terror tearing through them. From out of the depths He arrived. Peter and Miriam clutched each other like terrified animals, trying to hold on to the gurney as the ground underfoot betrayed them, shaking violently, knocking them off their feet.

Peter started to open his eyes as the earthquake subsided, but only momentarily as another series of shocks flipped the gurney on to its side, the announcement of His arrival throwing them down the hall, the very Earth shaking in terror. They clutched the gurney and each other as they screamed, trying to shield themselves from the terror. Lights flashed, some exploded, and all but a few of the emergency lights went out.

The sounds of the earth shaking beneath them, of the walls and ceiling crumbling around them, of their own screams, were matched by the sounds coming from room 3, one barely human in origin, the other definitely not.

As the earth stopped shaking, Peter looked first to Miriam, then to their surroundings. They were alive. They were also thirty feet down the hall.

"My God," Miriam gasped as she looked down the hall to the room.

Peter looked as well. The area was a disaster, ceiling tiles and lights fallen, portions of floor and walls cracked and slanted, only a few of the emergency lights operating.

From the window in the door to room 3 an eerie red-orange glow flickered, accompanied by the sound of a female animal, and of some thing else.

Peter looked behind them. The hallway back to the storage area, and to the elevator, was blocked by debris, the floor heaved up in one place he could see, the walls buckled.

He looked back to the room. "We've got to try and save her," he managed to say. He looked to Miriam. "Are you injured?"

She was pale, shaking. He imagined he was the same.

"No," she managed to say.

Together they managed to stand, pulling the gurney upright, pushing aside debris.

As they pushed their way down the hall, both of them gasped. The feeling of terror vanished, replaced by lust. The way they clutched each other changed.

"Let's try the phone," Peter managed to say. "See how bad the quake hit the facility."

As they approached, Peter saw that the phone had been smashed by a large chunk of concrete. A chill went through him as he realized the atomizer as well as the phone were under hundreds of pounds of rubble.

"Peter," Miriam called out. She was walking toward the door, toward the glow coming from the window.

As Peter stepped closer to her, he realized she wasn't *walking* to the door, she was being *drawn* to the door, being drawn to the pulsing glow and the unhuman waves of sound and sensation.

Peter rushed to her, grabbing her shoulders to pull her away.

The glow pulsed and sensation washed over them as the emanations from the room changed again, changed to raw sexual desire.

Peter fought aside the sensations washing over him, gripping Miriam with both hands, pulling with all his strength as he screamed out, "You can't have her! Leave her alone!"

The sounds, the light, flickered and changed. It struck out, not in malice or anger, but as one would brush away an infinitesimal distraction.

Peter found himself on the other side of the hallway, across from the room.

He got up to try again. He had to. Miriam was at the door, still trying -- what? He had to help. Together, they could get the girl out.

As he approached, the sexual feelings flooded him again. *He* was in there, mating with *her*. That he knew.

Two more steps... One more; reach for Miriam.

He touched Miriam, on the shoulder and the hand.

And as they touched, sensation swept through him.

Miriam spun around. Her eyes glowed, matching the pulsing glow emanating from the room. She grabbed his head, pulling his lips toward hers.

As they kissed, the waves from the room stripped away their thin veneer of civilization, overpowering them and plunging them into animal lust. They quickly shed clothing and humanity, landing together atop the thin mattress which had once been on the gurney. Their voices, bodies, and souls joined the demonic chorus from within the room.

Peter pulled himself deeper into Miriam, thrusting, thrusting, squeezing. Miriam did all she could to pull him in deeper, pressing her lips to his, joining at both ends.

Outside the room, two animals mated, driven on by the mating going on within the room. The animal that had been Peter felt orgasm approaching, approaching from outside himself, driving them both on. Heart pounding, he thrust again, and again, and again, then pressed as deep as he could as orgasm tore through them all.

As Peter filled Miriam with his seed, He filled the vessel once known as Christine with His demon seed...

Peter started to collapse, his heart pounding, his arms giving way.

But that was not to be allowed. The power from the room took hold of them again. Peter found himself on his back, Miriam on top of him, her eyes glowing. He felt the hunger, drawing him inside her, drawing him hard once more. The waves took them both, driving them on again, again, again through the dark dream, through *His* dark dream.

Hours later, with more rumbling and shaking, It left, not satiated, but needing to move on...

Knocking, pounding, crying... Peter dragged himself up from ... somewhere. Part of him was cold, but part was entwined with a soft, warm female form, a nipple in his mouth. He sucked more, instinctively, holding tighter, feeling her respond in kind. But the cold, the crying, the knocking didn't go away.

Peter pulled away, rolling to his back. Something poked him, the pain helping to clear his head further. He was naked, cold....

A moan escaped his lips as fragments of recent memory came together. Peter looked around at the disaster. He looked to Miriam and moved to check her. He touched her -- again, he realized -- and she moaned. Reverting to professionalism, he checked her for injury.

“Miriam, Miriam,” he called as he shook her shoulders gently, watching her breasts move. What had taken them? He glanced over to room 3 -- whimpering, crying sounds, human sounds, came from the dark room, with an occasional sound of someone hitting the inside of the door.

“We’re here!” he shouted. “We’re trying to get you out!”

He looked down as he felt Miriam stirring. Her visage shifted from the slack of unconsciousness to a pleased smile, then a frown. She gasped and her eyes sprung open in panic. She sat up suddenly, reaching for him. Peter hugged her as she gripped him.

“Miriam, I’m so sorry,” he whispered, holding her.

“Oh Peter -- what the hell is going on?” she asked.

More crying and pounding on the inside of the door.

“She’s still alive!” Miriam whispered in wonder.

“How are you? Can you stand?” Peter asked.

“Help me,” she replied.

They helped each other to standing, brushing each other off. Both of them winced as they brushed off debris. They were covered with abrasions, their knees, elbows, backs scraped and cut. Peter saw marks that looked to have been inflicted by fingernails -- his? Had he done that? As he moved, he knew he’d violated Miriam repeatedly. He looked away from her and for their clothes.

“Peter, it’s okay -- we’re alive,” Miriam told him, grabbing him and hugging him.

“Yeah,” Peter sighed, his body responding to the contact of hers again.

Under the dim emergency lighting they managed to dress, putting on humanity with each piece of clothing.

Gingerly, slowly, they approached the door to room 3. Peter pointed at the corners as they approached. Miriam put an arm around his waist.

“Look -- the corners aren’t even -- the door frame’s been bent, the whole wall buckled and shifted,” he said.

“Help me,” cried a voice from inside the room.

“We’re here, honey,” Miriam responded. “We’ve had an earthquake, and we’re figuring out how to get you out. Just hang in there, we’re here to help you.”

Peter looked at her. “But who’s going to help us?” he whispered.

The crying from inside the room degraded into whimpering.

Peter looked at the door again. Both of them grabbed the handle and pulled -- jammed solid.

“Tools -- do we have any tools?” Peter asked, to himself as much as Miriam.

“Our emergency supplies might be accessible -- let’s check,” answered Miriam.

“Okay, I’ll go check, you stay with her.”

Miriam gripped his arm. “I’m not letting go of you,” she said, her voice trembling in fear once again.

Peter nodded. “Okay, together then.”

The sense of terror which had gripped them earlier had dissipated. Together at least, they were able to brave the darkness.

One area was accessible. They found food, water, emergency blankets, medical supplies, and some tools. Peter selected a small bundle of tools and a crowbar. Miriam gathered some medical supplies, and they headed back to the jammed door.

“What’s your plan?” Miriam asked.

“I’m going to try getting the pins out of the door hinges -- the door looks jammed mainly on one side. With the pins gone, we might be able to pry it open,” he said, pointing to a place where the metal door frame was no longer square and tight with the door.

Miriam gave him a squeeze before stepping away.

Using a hammer and a screwdriver, Peter pounded the pins out of the door hinges.

“I’m cold!” whimpered the voice from the other side of the door.

"I'll get some blankets," Miriam told Peter. She squeezed his shoulder before stepping away.

"The emergency lights are giving out," Miriam whispered as the final pin came loose.

Peter shook his head, then wiped the sweat from his brow. "They're supposed to go for eight hours. My watch is dead -- there should be lightsticks in the emergency packs."

He picked up the pry bar and put one end into the gap between the door and the frame. He pushed, and one corner of the door moved out about half an inch.

"It's coming," he told Miriam. "Ready with the blanket?"

"Yeah, and I've got two loaded hypos -- one a sedative, the other Thorazine."

Peter glanced back at her. "Good work." He pushed again. Part of the door splintered.

He pulled out the bar and jammed it in again, pushing as hard as he could. The door moved a bit more. "Help me -- one more should do it."

Miriam stepped closer to him, and helped him push on the bar, pushing against him as well. "One, two, three, push!"

The hinge side of the door broke free from its distorted frame. Peter tossed the bar to one side and pushed the door out of the way. It fell with a crash, raising a cloud of dust and debris. As if in response, the last emergency light in the area started flickering. "Lightsticks," he called out.

Through the last flickers of the emergency lighting, he saw her, sitting on the floor naked, her arms wrapped around her knees. He moved closer.

The stench hit him -- sulphurous, dank, cold, mixed with odors of fear and animal lust, and the primeval odor of some *thing* else, an odor imprinted upon Man from the dark past.

As Peter forced himself to reach forward, Miriam pulled him back. "Gloves!" she commanded.

The stench spilled from the small room as they put on the blue nitrile gloves. Peter stepped into the room and helped the girl to the doorway. He was glad for the gloves -- her skin felt covered in something slimy. In spite of his medical training, he recoiled at the feeling and the stench permeating the area. Holding her in front of him, pushing her through the doorway, he felt and tasted fear, fear from the darkness behind him, reaching out with cold talons to grasp him by the heart and pull him back into...

"Here dear, let me help you," Miriam said, holding a glowing green glow stick in one hand, along with the corner of a blanket.

Christine whimpered as they pulled her from the room, Peter holding her up, hands under her armpits.

“Oh dear...” murmured Miriam.

Christine was covered with scratches, abrasions, and something else, a layer of slime, from head to toe.

“Let’s get her down and wash her off,” Peter said, moving them away from the blackness of the doorway.

As he moved their wobbly patient, Miriam shook off the mattress which had been on the gurney. In the illumination provided by the lightsticks, Peter saw a large stain in the middle of the mattress, the stain he and Miriam made. Miriam flipped that side down, covering the mattress with a blanket.

They lowered Christine. “We’re going to clean you off dear,” she said, her professional voice present again.

Christine whimpered and reached out to grasp Peter’s arm, gripping him tightly through his sweater. Peter looked down at her. Looking in her face, her eyes, he saw only a frightened young woman.

“We’ve got you now,” he told her.

“Cold! That stings!” Christine cried out.

“That’s all right, it will only be for a moment -- we need to get you clean,” he told her, noticing that Miriam was rinsing her with sterile saline solution.

Miriam used one of the other blankets to wipe off the slime, whatever it was that covered the girl.

“Relax, dear, and let us help you. Peter? Please?” Miriam said.

Peter left Christine’s head and moved closer to Miriam.

“Left pocket -- sedative,” she whispered. Then in a louder voice, “Hold a light stick for me, so I can rinse her pelvic region.”

Peter felt around to Miriam’s back pocket and removed the loaded syringe. After this, he might need medication, he thought.

He flexed a high-intensity lightstick, shaking it to help it glow, and held it over Christine’s midsection.

“My God...” he whispered. Christine’s body was scratched and cut. It was apparent her breasts, back, and buttocks had been pawed at by some large, clawed animal. Christine whimpered as Miriam poured saline between her legs, washing her.

“It hurts!” she cried.

Peter shook his head, holding her hand again. It was no wonder it hurt -- she’d obviously been ravaged multiple times, vaginally and anally. Miriam paused with her cleaning to take the syringe from Peter and administer the sedative, calming the girl until it took effect.

As Miriam continued rinsing and wiping, a stringy mass of ... something ... oozed from the girl’s vagina. Peter saw Miriam shudder, and a similar shudder ran through him as well.

“The mark...” he whispered...

The strange mark on her abdomen which had appeared as a red outline before was now dark, looking burned, as if scabs had formed atop it. Peter realized it was just above where her left ovary should be.

“It was glowing and hot when we brought her down,” Miriam whispered.

Rolling her to one side and moving her top leg up closer to her chest, they could see more signs of her violation. Peter saw the marks on the girl’s buttocks, and the ones extending from her hips to the front of her abdomen. Visions and sensation flashed in his mind, the Beast gripping the girl’s hips taking her from the rear, coinciding with memories of when he gripped Miriam’s hips as he took her from the rear.

The girl whimpered more as Miriam rinsed torn and violated tissues, teasing another string of beastly seed from her anus.

They worked methodically in the cold green glow of the lightsticks, cleaning the poor girl from one end to the other, spending quite a bit of time rinsing the slime from her hair. “What are these marks?” Miriam asked, pointing to marks along her face, the sides of her head, her neck. “Tentacles?”

Peter looked on in horror and wonder.

After a final rinse, they moved her to a clean mattress pulled from another room, wrapping her in a clean blanket and placing her on her side.

They rinsed each other, tossing their contaminated gloves into a pile with the blankets and other material they’d used to clean the girl.

They cleaned off two chairs and sat down, close to Christine. They shared some water from an emergency kit.

“Poor dear,” Miriam whispered as she took Peter’s hand.

“She looks so normal now,” he said.

With a sighing breath, he looked around, the only illumination now provided by the dim but long-lived lightsticks.

“How much light do we have left”?

Miriam moved, placing her hand on his thigh as she rummaged a pack near her feet. “Four of the high-intensity sticks, six, no seven, long ones.”

They settled in, moving as close as they could be to each other in the chairs, watching their patient. Their time was measured in the life of the lightsticks.

After a short while, exhaustion set in. They dragged a thin mattress from another room, placed it on the floor next to their patient, and huddled together, holding each other instinctively, letting sleep take them. But the terror they had lived through followed them even there.

Upward

“Peter!” Miriam cried in terror.

Peter awoke to Miriam clutching him. Even before his eyes focused on their surroundings, the awareness hit him, and he turned in Miriam’s grasp.

He turned in the grasp of a nightmare, a child’s bone-deep haunting, peering once more into the darkness, a seething darkness he wanted to tear his eyes away from, yet was too paralyzed to move, feeling the cold, the darkness, the hideous unknown lurking once more in the room which had held Christine.

Miriam shook him from his paralysis. “We have to move,” she cried.

Peter couldn’t decide which was worse, to keep peering into that darkness, or to turn away from it, exposing his back to it. The thought sent cold shivers up his spine.

“Peter!”

They piled what was left of their supplies on the thin mattress, dragging it and the mattress with the still sleeping Christine as far away from the malevolent door as possible. They pulled things to a corner formed by two broken walls. They huddled together in the corner, clutching each other, the feeling of cold and dread seeping up around them. Peter reached out and pulled Christine’s mattress closer.

They felt it creeping up on them, cold and malevolent. Christine moved, whimpering in her drugged slumber.

“Five bright ones left,” Miriam said, rummaging through a bag, holding a dim lightstick.

“Give,” Peter whispered. His hand was shaking as he accepted the lightsticks from Miriam. He flexed one, lighting it, and after shaking it to full intensity, tossed it a few feet in front of them. It landed in a small pile of debris. He flexed another, shook it, and tossed it out as well. It landed across the first one he’d thrown.

Peter and Miriam sighed in relief as they felt the cold menace retreat from the light. It retreated, angrily, but it didn’t leave.

“Hold me, please,” Miriam whispered, pulling Peter closer as she wrapped a blanket around them. They snuggled closer and fitful sleep overtook them once more.

Peter awoke to a dull noise close to them. He held Miriam tighter before he recognized the sound -- man-made sound! “It sounds like equipment -- someone’s trying to get to us!”

“I told staff we were headed down,” Miriam said.

“And I talked to Harry -- he and Bev both knew we were in the Pit.”

Even though they recognized the sound as man-made, they didn't release their grip on each other. Peter tried to think, to focus -- what was above that area? He tried to visualize the model in the lobby -- volleyball court, or was it grass?

“It's right down the hall,” Miriam said, moving a little.

As the sound grew louder, they stood up. Peter bent to pick up one of the remaining high-intensity lightsticks. Miriam checked their patient. They held hands and walked down the hall a short distance.

As Peter stepped, he winced in pain. His left testicle hurt, and the muscles in his abdomen from his groin to his diaphragm. The muscles in his buttocks complained of each step. And what must Miriam be feeling, he wondered.

“What's that smell?” Miriam whispered.

Peter felt his shoulders creep up, even before he dared take a breath through his nose. He managed to take a breath. Cold, dankness, the remains of ... “Shit -- fuel oil!” he said. He tried to think -- he'd read about an old civil-defense generator and fuel storage tank, but hadn't it been decommissioned decades ago?

“There -- light!” exclaimed Miriam, pointing.

A small shaft of light appeared over the debris. Peter flexed the lightstick, shook it, and then started waving it over their heads. The hole was about a foot in diameter. Something metallic extended down from the hole, circling. It stopped its motion when it pointed to them, stayed for a while, then pulled up.

Moments later a phone handset on the end of a wire descended. They both rushed for it. Still holding on to each other, Peter raised it to his ear.

“Hello? Hello?” he said.

“This is Captain Wilcox of the Fire Department. Is this Doctor Gerard?”

“Yes, this is Gerard. Listen, you've got to be careful -- we're smelling fuel oil or something down here, and it's getting thick.”

The voice on the other end was muffled for a moment, but returned. “Okay, that complicates things. How many down there and what's your condition?”

“Myself, Miriam Carter, and one patient, Christine M. Miriam and I are ambulatory. Christine is sedated. How long is it going to take to get us out?”

Peter's optimism had been increasing with every word, but that optimism was dashed with the first sigh he heard in response to his question.

"Fuel fumes complicate things, as I'm sure you understand. We have to move carefully. No injuries?"

"Minor abrasions and trauma, that's all," Peter replied.

"It may be a few hours. Do you need water or anything? Blankets?"

Peter's throat went dry in response to the question. "Water, yes -- and light. We need light more than anything else." Miriam squeezed him, adding her urgency to his request.

"Okay, we're on it. Please move back from the hole -- we'll let you know when we're going to lower supplies.

Peter tugged gently on their lifeline to the surface and moved back to the corner.

As he stood looking at the light pouring in from the surface, the skin on the back of his neck crawled. He felt Miriam holding him tighter. He knew, they knew -- the presence in the room didn't like the light. They moved to sitting in their corner, trying to concentrate on the hole, trying not to look behind them.

Miriam clutched at Peter and whimpered a few minutes later when the light from the hole flickered and disappeared. Peter wrapped his arms around her and almost cried.

But the light broke through again as a canvas bag lowered on a line through the hole. Peter breathed again. He realized the phone handset down by his feet was making noise. He picked it up.

"Yes!"

"Supplies in the bag -- the lights are intrinsically safe and should go for six to eight hours."

Peter's hopes soared and were dashed.

"But we expect to have you out in less than two hours."

His hopes went up again and he hugged Miriam.

"That's good."

"We're sinking a pilot hole due south of you, mostly to monitor air quality. We'll keep you informed. There's someone on this end at all times."

“Thank you -- get us out, please,” Peter said.

He turned in Miriam’s arms and hugged her, kissing her neck. She held him, feeling his body press against hers.

Peter pulled back. “They expect to have us out in two hours or less -- lights and water in the bag!”

As he started to step away to retrieve the bag, Miriam gave him another hug.

They retrieved the bag, and in the green light of the lightsticks, took out one of the lights and found the switch. Turning it on, the area was flooded with a crisp, cold fluorescent glow.

Peter felt the smile on his face, and Miriam’s arm around his waist as he raised the light in front of them. They felt it -- they felt something retreat, sullen and angry. Miriam quickly pulled the other light from the bag and switched it on, holding it up as well. She managed a nervous laugh.

“We’re going to make it,” Peter told her, his arm going around her waist.

They set the lamps at each end of Christine’s mattress, and checked their patient once more. She was resting peacefully, her vital signs strong.

The two sat once more, opening bottles of water, drinking deeply and then washing off their faces and hands.

They sat together more relaxed. Miriam found one of Peter’s hands with one of hers and held him. Soon Peter put an arm around Miriam’s shoulders. Holding grew to embrace, and flowered into a kiss. Peter wrapped his arms around Miriam’s body as she put one hand behind his head and the other around his shoulders.

Their kiss was interrupted by a noise down the hall from them. They looked toward the source, apprehension returning. It was still there, in room 3, crouching, waiting, malevolent. They gripped each other tighter.

With a rumble and a crack, a small shaft of light struck the floor about thirty feet away from them. They felt the rage build, then dissipate as the power of light triumphed once more. More noise started from around the larger hole.

After a few minutes, Peter realized the headset was squawking again. He picked it up.

“Yes?”

“We’re going to widen the last section -- keep away from the hole, as there may be flying debris. Once it’s widened, we’re lowering two rescue workers. We’re bringing you two out first, then lowering a stretcher for the third. Got it?”

“Okay. We’re ready.”

Peter hunched down in the corner, pulling Miriam to him. “They’re going to break through.”

With more rumbling, debris rained down from the large hole as it grew even larger. A rope descended, then another. A pair of booted feet appeared, lowering.

Peter and Miriam sprang to their feet, but stayed in the corner.

“Over here!” Miriam cried as one rescuer’s feet touched the ground.

The second rescuer was quickly lowered. Together they checked over Christine, then Peter and Miriam.

“Let’s get you out of here -- this place gives me the creeps,” one of them said.

“You first,” Peter said, urging Miriam toward the light.

They placed a harness around her.

“Hold here,” one of the rescuers said. “I’ll hold your feet, guiding you until you’re in the shaft. Head down, close to the line. Don’t look up, as that will only expose your head more, okay?”

“I understand,” Miriam said, her voice quavering. She turned and gave Peter another hug. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“Lift away!” called one rescuer up the shaft.

Peter watched as Miriam moved slowly, disappearing into the shaft.

“You’re next,” the other rescuer said to Peter as he started putting a harness around him.

From above ground, Peter heard Miriam cry out, and the sounds of commotion.

“Miriam!” he shouted, “Are you all right?”

Hands secured his harness to the line and moved him under the shaft of light. A hand pushed his head towards the line. “Lift away!” the rescuer called out.

Peter felt hands on his body, then his legs, guiding him up. He held his eyes closed, pressing his forehead to the line. The harness squeezed his chest. He held his arms close, too scared to breathe.

He emerged into light, hands grasping him, pulling him out of confinement. He blinked and squinted. The tightness on his chest released and he gasped, his head going back, pulling in air, then crying out in pain.

“Him too!” a voice called out.

Peter felt a burning sensation on his left arm, then on his legs and feet. He looked and saw his sweater was smoldering, as were spots on his pants, and his shoes. His sweater -- where Christine had grabbed him!

Hands were pulling off his shoes, his clothes. “It’s sunlight!” he cried out. “Sunlight -- we were contaminated with something down there, and it reacts to sunlight -- Christine was covered with it -- protect her from the sunlight!”

He was stripped, bundled in blankets, and rushed inside on a gurney. “Protect her from the sunlight,” he called to them again.

Once inside the building, the rapid pace slowed. One of the radios crackled, “He’s right - - it’s the sunlight -- decontaminate.”

“Staff showers, up the corridor and to the right,” Peter told the people manning the gurney.

“That’s where you’re going,” one of them replied.

Wheeling in, Peter managed to get a look at a clock -- three twenty in the afternoon.

“Do you need help?” one of the firemen asked him.

“No -- I keep a set of exercise clothes in the bureau in my office, if you could have someone get them for me.”

“Okay -- fifteen minutes in the shower, at least!”

“You don’t have to worry about that!” Peter replied.

He took the full flow of the spray in the face. Adjusting the temperature, he turned and let the water flow over his head. “Where’s Miriam?” he called out. “How is she?”

A voice from outside the shower replied, “She’s in the women’s showers next door. She’s asking about you.”

“We should have showered together,” Peter called out quickly, and just as quickly regretted. Only mild laughter though in response.

“Peter, I’ve got your clothes,” a familiar voice sounded a while later. “You can come out when you want -- towels are ready, but we want to check you over first.”

“Bill!” Peter called out, recognizing Bill Dawson’s voice. “What the hell happened? What’s our status?”

“The only physical damage was to the Pit, and a few windows in the cafeteria. I’ll brief you fully later. Your patient is in Emergency Medical -- she lost some hair before those idiots blocked the sunlight. She’s being decontaminated. What the hell happened down there?”

Peter grabbed the towel which appeared over the glass shower door. “Bill, I wish I knew,” he replied as he rubbed his face dry. He looked himself over as he dried. Scratches, abrasions, nothing serious. He winced in pain as he moved his hips; he still hurt -- groin, left testicle, lower back, buttocks.

He stepped out of the shower. Bill was there with one of his medical staff. Peter reclined on the wooden bench and let himself be examined. “Where’s Miriam? How is she?” he asked Bill.

Bill smiled. “She’s waiting for you, and from what I understand, in similar condition.”

“Thank you, Doctor Gerard,” the young doctor said.

Peter sat up, took the clipboard from the young doctor, and examined it. “Too cursory,” he said. “You didn’t ask about pain, loss of consciousness, head trauma, blurred vision...”

Peter could see he was being too rough on the young doctor. “You did a good job. Thank you.” He handed back the clipboard and extended a hand. The young doctor shook it, then left, shaking his head.

Peter put on underwear, then started pulling on his exercise sweats. “Okay Bill, what’s our status?”

But when he looked up, Bill shook his head. “Peter, things are under control. We want you to take a day off, at least. The two of you have been through hell. We’ll talk about it later.

Peter pulled the sweatshirt over his head. He started to say something, but stopped as he passed a mirror. He turned and looked at himself.

His hair was silvery-white, and his face bore the unmistakable marks of trauma.

Quietly, shaken, he turned to his Assistant Director. “Bill, you’re right.”

Peter took a breath, slowly. He looked closely at his hands. The hair on his hands, normally brown, was now silver-white.

“Where’s Miriam?”

“This way.”

Peter followed Bill to Emergency Medical. As they turned the last corner of the corridor, he saw Miriam, and she saw him. Her hair was silver-white as well. She ran up and threw her arms around Peter. He held her close, closing his eyes.

“Where’s Christine?” he asked when they parted briefly.

Miriam led him by the hand to the area that served as their emergency ward.

Peter saw her in a bed, her hair also silver-white, with patches missing and the length uneven.

“What kind of monster attacked this girl?” one of the nurses asked.

Peter looked up, recognizing the speaker -- another of his battle-proven veterans, with a look of shock and horror on her face. She was opening up a sexual trauma evidence kit.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “but I think you’re close. Chart?”

The other nurse automatically handed over the chart. Peter glanced at it. Her vitals were nominal. None of her injuries required suturing. He handed back the chart. “Make sure she gets moved back to 4 as soon as possible, and gets plenty of sunlight.”

The nurse nodded. She blinked, shook her head, and with a sigh started writing on the chart.

Holding hands, Peter and Miriam walked back to the nurse’s station. Hearing heels clicking down the corridor, he turned.

“Beverly,” he said, as Doctor Miller, one of his senior staff approached, a look of shock on her face.

“Peter, Miriam...” She looked back and forth between the two. With a sigh she asked, “What now?”

Peter didn’t let go of Miriam’s hand. He glanced to Bill, then to Beverly. “Bill wants us to take off for a while and rest. We’ll see you tomorrow and debrief. Acceptable?”

Beverly sighed once more and nodded. “Yes. We’ve got things contained. Do you need someone to drive you, or any medication?”

Peter squeezed Miriam’s hand and looked in her eyes, then back to Beverly. “No, I think we’re covered. We’re going to get something to eat, then get some sleep.”

Beverly nodded. “Go,” she said, waving them off with her hands, “Quickly!”

They walked to Peter’s office, where he retrieved his keys and wallet. They walked out, hand in hand, not exchanging a word until they were outside the building. The sun was low in the sky, the air crisp and cold. They’d gotten about an inch of snow.

Peter turned to Miriam. “Stay with me, please?”

Miriam looked in his eyes. “You don’t have a choice.”

Questions

They stopped at a coffee shop and had a light meal, only exchanging about a dozen words in the process. It was dark as they pulled into Peter's place a little after nine, a bright full moon illuminating the area.

Peter dug through a closet and found a first-class airline travel kit, giving it to Miriam. "I'll look for a T-shirt or something," he mumbled to her as they stood outside his master bathroom.

She took the kit and kissed him on the nose. "That's okay -- I'll be fine. You'll need to keep me warm, that's all."

Peter wandered the house a bit while she cleaned up. He turned up the thermostat, raising the temperature upstairs, and setting the thermostat to keep it up through the night. He also left a few lights on downstairs, checking to make sure doors were locked.

He entered the bathroom through the hall door; the other door into the bedroom was closed. He got a T-shirt out of the bottom drawer, looking at himself in the mirrors. Bruises and abrasions -- but the striking thing was the silvery-white hair. He looked at his armpits -- silvery-white. His groin -- the same, even the hair on his toes.

As he brushed his teeth, he looked at the face in the mirror. Strange -- he recognized and yet didn't recognize the face. Then he shuddered, realizing that the aspect he recognized was the look he saw on patients in the hospital, that look of deep psychic trauma. He thought about his emergency bag downstairs in the office, oral medication, or stronger. With a sigh, he shook his head.

He turned off the light and quickly opened the other door into the bedroom. The bathroom nightlight gave him very little comfort.

The drapes were open, flooding the room with moonlight. She stood naked in front of the window.

He stepped to her, touching her gently on the hip. She grasped his hand and pulled it around her waist, pulling him closer. Both sighed at the contact of skin against skin.

"I was thinking," he said softly, "About what to say... They're going to question us... I thought I'd tell them what happened when we went down, up to the point ... where we tried to open the door, and after that I don't know what happened, but we regained consciousness, and then worked to get her out..."

Peter felt Miriam's arm go around his waist, holding him. He glanced to her. She was looking out into the moonlit valley, and to the mountains beyond.

"I don't know what else to say..." he whispered, looking into the valley himself.

“That we were touched by a god?” Miriam said, her voice strong and calm.

“What?” Peter whispered, looking to her again.

She turned, taking his hands in hers. “Oh, I agree -- they wouldn’t understand. We were touched by a god. He sits, dreaming, watching over the Old Ones, waiting for the time and the stars to be right for their return. And as he dreams, the sensitive ones hear him. There have always been those who hear his dreams. And some of those he chooses, like our Christine, to bear the next generation of his priests and priestesses, helping to prepare for the Old Ones return.”

“How?” Peter asked, looking to her in wonder.

She shook her head. “I need you to hold me,” she whispered, pulling him close.

Peter closed his eyes as she held him close. He felt his body responding to her closeness, softness, and warmth. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He moved away and pulled down the covers for the bed.

They got in. He was on his back. She moved closer to him, curling up at his side. He put an arm around her and she sighed, kissing his chest, snuggling in.

His eyes were still open, bathed in moonlight, not really focused on anything. Yes, she was right -- they had been touched by a god. And he knew she was right about the sensitive ones -- it made sense, especially in the troubled world most of their patients lived in.

Not asleep, not awake, he saw Them, saw the Dreamer. Cold touched his toes, creeping up his legs. He held Miriam tighter, trying to throw off the vision of the Dreamer, sitting, dreaming, reaching out and touching ...

He woke with a start and a cry. Miriam’s arms wrapped around him and pulled him to warmth. His arms went around her waist and his mouth found a nipple. He gripped her, whimpering. Arms held him, whispering, “Shhh... I’ve got you...”

He let go to warmth and comfort, holding, suckling.

Some time later, he felt a hand slide down his side to the inside of his hip, fingers gliding gently, sensuously. He tried to pull away, but her other hand held him tighter to her breast as she whispered strange lyric phrases.

Peter tried to pull back, but her hands and her whispering were too insistent. With a moan he gave in, now trying to fill himself with warmth and sensation. He gave himself to sensation, reveling in skin, hands, breasts, mouths, letting himself become inflamed and pushed on to his back, mounted and ridden...

A twinge from his hip opened his eyes. He held her waist tighter as she rode him. In response she leaned forward, lowering a nipple to him again. His eyes closed as he accepted her gift. It must have been the moonlight that made her eyes seem to glow.

Peter awoke to morning sun striking the mountains on the other side of the valley. Deliberately avoiding looking at the clock, he got out of bed and went to the bathroom. He flushed, then went to the sink and started brushing his teeth. He was still sore in a number of places.

Bending over the sink, he felt a hand touch his back. He saw Miriam sitting on the toilet, smiling. He looked back to the sink, rinsing his mouth.

He heard the toilet flushing again, and was drawn into a kiss. He let his eyes close and wound his arms around her, enjoying warmth and softness once again. When they paused, he opened his eyes.

“Look at you,” he whispered in surprise.

Miriam smiled and moved seductively. “Like what you see?”

“No, I mean yes, but there’s hardly a mark on you -- you’re almost completely healed!”

He looked at her again, and at himself -- they’d been in much the same condition yesterday, he seemed to remember.

A hand touched his chest and slid up, raising his head. As he looked in her eyes, another hand slid down from his waist. “I know how to heal you,” she whispered, her eyes smoldering.

Peter let himself be led back to bed. Once again he found himself on his back, held to a sensuous nipple. This time he gave himself eagerly to passion.

Debrief

Peter sighed as he leaned against his desk, running a hand through his white hair. The day had started out so well -- making love, drifting to sleep in Miriam's embrace, waking to make love again...

But driving to the hospital after lunch, the crowd of vehicles over The Pit, State Police and Fire Marshall vehicles parked in front, meeting with Bill Dawson and getting the news...

Carl Baxter dead -- in their ICU, wired up to monitors, resting, suddenly crying out in terror and going into cardiac arrest. Erika dead -- found in a closet in 4 West, all indications pointing to cardiac arrest. And as those two died, another dozen patients, either screaming and trying to flee, or trying to seduce the nearest person of the opposite sex, kept the weekend staff racing, trying to maintain control.

Looking at the lightly falling snow, Peter nodded, remembering what Miriam had said -- sensitives -- that would be the thread linking them together, that sensitivity.

After the three of them had been extracted, one of the rescuers had been taken out from below ground screaming in terror, completely incoherent -- hair silvery white -- he'd been sedated and taken to their ICU.

When they'd lowered in a camera and high intensity light, a fire erupted. The Fire Captain said that it burned like the fires of hell. It burned and burned, resisting their efforts to extinguish it, until finally the underground structure collapsed. That had been a dicey time, eventually concluding the hospital was safe and didn't need to be evacuated.

And now, their "debrief" -- inquisition was more like it. He told them what he could. They kept questioning. No, it didn't make sense, and no, he didn't have any explanations. After more than an hour he'd been dismissed, and they started on Miriam.

He opened the desk drawer and took out the vial von Folkstein had left. He unscrewed the black plastic cap. Hmmm, something like a shaker top underneath. He flicked a few drops onto his hands, then raised one to his nose -- mint and citrus.

He capped the vial, slipped it into a pocket, and walked to his office door.

"Vicky, I'm going to emergency medical."

His assistant looked at him, a painful look. "Yes, sir. I'll page you if..."

"Thanks, Vicky," he said, and walked out to the hallway.

As he looked in on Christine, one of the duty nurses approached.

"How is she doing?" he asked.

The nurse shook her head. "Sir, I don't know what to say. You can hardly tell anything happened to her, she's healed so quickly, yet she's still ... so troubled."

Peter nodded. "Chart?"

With a professional nod, the nurse went to get the chart.

Before stepping into the room, Peter took out the vial, putting more on his hands and patting his face. The scent was comforting to him as well, and right now, he needed it, he told himself.

He stepped up to her bedside and picked up her right wrist to check her pulse. She seemed to twitch, almost recoil at his touch at first, but then as he watched, the troubled look dissolved from her face, tension leaving her face, then neck and shoulders, and as he held her wrist, feeling her pulse strong and regular, he felt her relaxing.

Hearing footsteps, he turned and accepted the chart.

"She looks much better now than she did half an hour ago," the nurse said.

"Has she regained consciousness?"

"Not really. She came up a bit yesterday, but was quite disoriented..."

"Yes, I see Doctor Conn's notes." He looked at the young woman, now in a more restful pose. "Don't we have someone on staff who does hairstyling?" he asked.

With a sigh the nurse answered, "That was Erika, sir."

Peter shook his head. "Sorry. We should do something about her hair."

The nurse gave him a questioning look. "What on earth could turn your hair white like that?"

"I wish I knew. Our fireman friend is next door?"

"Yes, sir -- everyone agreed he'd get the best care here, at least for the first few days. Would you like his chart?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, please."

They walked to the door together. She turned right and walked to the nurse's station, he went left and in the door.

He thought he was prepared, but it was still a shock. An obviously quite healthy young man, with a head of silver-white hair, restrained and sedated, with that same troubled visage. Peter shook his head. What would they say if he told them they'd been attacked by demons, or as Miriam had said, a god?

He frowned and took the vial out of his pocket. Taking off the black cap, he stepped closer. He flicked it toward the fireman deliberately, purposefully. He watched as the man's body recoiled at the first drops, but then started to relax and unwind.

Hearing footsteps approaching in the hall, he gave one more purposeful flick, then capped the vial and returned it to his pocket.

The nurse gasped as she stepped into the small room. "Sir -- you should visit more often!"

Peter managed a wry smile. "Perhaps I'm still good for something." He took the file and glanced at it. The intake forms showed what he'd been told -- the man had been underground when suddenly he started screaming and trying to get to the surface. His partner had a very difficult time getting him to the surface, and once on the surface, still screaming incoherently, he had to be physically restrained, then sedated.

Peter stepped back to the hall. "Thank you. If you see Doctor Conn before I do, tell him I suggest we let them come out of the medication and see how they're doing."

The nurse smiled and nodded, taking the chart. "Yes, sir -- they look a lot better now than they did earlier."

Peter headed to Conn's office, but was intercepted by Vicky.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Sir, they'd like you back in the conference room," she said, tension in her voice.

"Okay -- I'm going to make a quick pit stop first. Let them know I'll be there in two or three minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Choice

“Peter! Miriam on line 2!”

Peter looked up from his paperwork, surprised -- surprised at the interruption, surprised that Vicky hadn't called him “Doctor Gerard.”

Peter picked up the phone. “Miriam -- what's the matter? Where are you?”

“Peter, I want you to know I love you,” Miriam said. “?” She sounded as if she was talking on her mobile phone.

“Miriam -- I love you -- where are you? What's wrong

“Peter, I've talked to him. Peter, I have The Mark.”

“Who did you talk to? What mark? Please, Miriam!”

“Doctor Von Folkstein -- I just spoke to him. Peter, I have His Mark on me. We deprived him of one vessel, so He's chosen another.”

“Peter! Von Folkstein on line 3!” shouted Vicky, opening the office door.

“Tell him to hold -- no, conference him in!” Peter called back.

“Miriam -- are you sure? Please, where are you? Let me help you.”

“No, Peter -- I've made my choice. It's funny, somehow -- so many have wondered what happens when the Free Will of Man clashes with the omnipotence of Gods. Von Folkstein was right. Peter, I've made my choice. I'll always love you, Peter. Goodbye.”

“Miriam! Miriam! I love you! Let me help you!” Peter cried out into the phone.

His only answer was the echoing hiss of the phone line.

“She has made her choice, my friend,” Von Folkstein said a while later.

“What happened? Tell me,” Peter whispered.

“This I could not foresee; I was unprepared. She was correct. We deprived Him of his vessel, so He chose another. I had thought, I had believed that they were chosen at birth. The Mark appeared on her. She felt it forming, and recognized it when it became visible.”

“What did you tell her? What can we do to help her?”

The Case of Christine M

“My friend, we can do nothing to help her; she has made her choice. Those who choose to defy Gods must be prepared to pay the price. You should be proud to have known someone of such strength and courage.”

“No, no, no,” Peter sobbed, letting the phone fall from his hand.

FIN

Rev 2008/10/02

The Case of Christine M

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