

Courante

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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.

Follow-on to Allemande - read that one first!

I don't know what brought me, but I was at the mall again, sitting on the bench, the same place we'd waited to meet each other. What, hoping for the crowd noise, the bustle of people, to anesthetize me, dull the pain? If I closed my eyes, I could remember sitting right where I was, her coming up and touching me, kissing me. She was gone. And Jen was gone, now running an Apple store in Southern California. Even Pamela was gone, off in Seattle.

"That's what happens," a man said.

I glanced to the side; a nondescript man, mid forties, sitting a few feet away from me on the bench, looking away from me, out across the mall.

He spoke softly about how it didn't matter, thralls were barely sentient, and how I had decisions to make, to decide what side I was on...

It didn't ring true, and it made me mad as hell. Not just being used, but used as pawns...

I gathered energy, focusing, reached over, and touched him as he spoke.

As I touched him, I struck.

Oh, he tried to put up defenses, mental defenses, but I shattered them with ease, taking what I wanted. He was a Son of Churl, a Freeman, but he was owned by one of *them*, bearing their marks, *her* marks; I saw her in his mind, her eyes glowing. Who did it? Did he know who did it? Who hurt Wendy? I tore through his mind with rage, searching. He, they didn't know, but they were happy to use the occasion to turn me against others, to probe me, probe how much I'd learned, what I could do.

I pressed more, taking, ripping information from him. Anything he tried to hide -- I ripped that out of him -- his secrets, his fears. I saw so much, so much of how she'd taken him, used him, twisted him, the tricks she'd used, they used. And how much he'd loved it.

Fueled by fury and rage, I pressed on, tearing through him.

He made a gurgling noise and fell to the floor.

“Help!” I called out. “Help!” I knelt down by him. He still had a pulse and was breathing; his eyes rolled up in his head. I turned his head a little, feeling something; there on the back of his head was the mark. He twitched, and I took all I could from him.

One of the mall security guys ran up. “What’s happening?” he asked. When I looked at him, he did a double-take, recognizing me.

“This guy made a weird nose and fell over! He’s still breathing, and has a pulse.”

I stepped back and let security take over. As I stood, I closed my eyes, I did something, searching for more of *them*, searching for *her*, the one I’d seen in his mind.

Some others, close by? *She* was far away.

Medical showed up quickly. I retold my story -- I was sitting there, a guy sat down next to me. I thought he might be talking on a phone, I didn’t know what he was saying. Then he made this weird noise and fell over! That’s when I called for help.

Fire and paramedics hauled him off; he didn’t look good. Mall security and management remembered me, all too well. We reviewed things yet again in the security office. One of the guys brought up a security camera recording. It showed me sitting there, elbows on knees, the other guy sitting down, looking off into the distance. You couldn’t see enough of his face to tell what he was saying. I touched him, my face empty, and he fell over. I smiled a bit. Here’s one for yoga, staying relaxed in the intensity of the moment...

One of the mall guys got called out to talk to the cops.

Damn, I felt tired. What a mess... So tired. My head was heavy, hard to hold up, so hard to keep my eyes open. As I relaxed, I glanced over and saw the mall security guy, head down on the desk, eyes closed, face slack...

That set off something inside me. I dipped my head, focusing, taking a breath, gathering ... and striking out, at something, at someone -- it felt like a man, not the woman I’d seen. I struck once, twice, viciously, tasting bile... The feeling of tiredness was gone, replaced by cold stomach-churning fury.

I looked at the snoozing guard. What to do? I moved the chair noisily and farted. He sat up, startled, shaking his head, then rubbing his face. I looked off into the distance.

The cops and the other mall guys came back. They had to run to another one -- report of a guy collapsing down the mall a ways. They knew how to reach me. Yeah, so did a lot of people.

A security guy escorted me to my car. I thanked him, and headed home.

Fuck. They were watching me. Multiple groups, which in and of itself was interesting, were watching me. May you live in interesting times. May you come to the attention of powerful people.

What was the third prong of that curse? I'd find out soon enough, the way things were going. The bastards... Watching me and willing to let an innocent die. Willing to send an innocent to her death, to die screaming in mindless terror. Just a thrall, hardly sentient to them.

Driving out of the parking structure, Winchester to the 280 Freeway Northbound. I needed to move into the right lane, coming up on the Winchester Mystery House.

I glanced to my right. Jetta with a guy in it, his eyes glowing, he looked at me, stared at me.

Something clicked -- I cast a thought, a feeling, at the woman driver in front of him, the sudden panic sensation of something darting in front of her car. She hit her brakes, hard. He rear-ended her, his head still turned. I passed them, moved to the right lane, and turned on to the freeway northbound.

Fuck 'em all!

I lived.

The dreams returned.

Not Vanessa, visiting me in my dreams as she had early on, but the other woman, the one I'd seen in his mind.

At first, I was searching for her, seeking peace, seeking release in her eyes, seeking the pleasure she'd given *him*.

But it was the typical stuff of dreams, waking before that key moment.

I searched for her in my dreams.

One night, she found me. The look of wonder in her face, surprise and pleasure, and the pleasure filling me as she took me in her glowing eyes, and I came to her touch, waking, wanting to return to her.

She returned to my dreams, at first pleurably, teasing, pleasing, taking me so nicely...

But that changed. Still pleasurable, falling into her eyes, feeling dream hands on me, but she was whispering, and while I couldn't quite understand what she was saying, I was uncomfortable. I turned away; I tried to get away. She came for me in my dreams, and I tried to get away, with my legs and arms not working right, so hard to move, but I had to get away from her, and I'd wake up just as...

Awake in the middle of the night, heart pounding as I stared into the darkness. I'd escaped her.

Again.

Waking up, night after night, throwing off dream paralysis, getting up to pee whether I needed to or not, washing my face.

The other dreams... I was little. Again? Four or five years old? In our old house, a man at the door, an uncle? His eyes were glowing! One of *them*! I screamed and ran as he chased me.

He came after me, smiling but his eyes glowing. Trying to get away, arms and legs not working, knowing he was reaching for me, waking up, heart pounding in terror.

With her, I knew those were dreams. But him... They had the feeling of more, of recurring dreams that I'd had before, many times. So hard to remember -- did I have nightmares as a little kid? Nobody to ask, nobody alive to ask anymore. And what *is* real? If I'd had those dreams as a little kid, if I could "see" them as a little kid, what did that mean? I didn't know. So confusing.

In meditation at the end of yoga one night, a hard class, a good class, letting go on the floor in savasana. The thought hit; I almost laughed. Why don't they team up? Why doesn't *he* chase me to *her*? Oh, weeks ago, how I wanted her, how I wanted to give myself to her and the pleasure she brought. But I knew, somehow... Her whispering, something she was trying to do, menacing, as menacing as him. I knew, even though he was chasing me as a little kid, and she was chasing me as ... an adolescent, an oversexed teen, both of them were after *me*. Both were intent on hurting *me*.

One night, standing alone in my dream, like standing alone in an arena, waiting for them to come after me, again. I stepped into Warrior, raising my hands above my head, drawing energy down, down through my hands, spine, down to my feet. I returned to standing, raising my right hand, palm up, then opening to the ground around me, turning three times, casting a barrier around me, and on the third time, raising my hands over my head, lifting, drawing the energy I'd woven into a sphere, enclosing me, feeling a pulse of searing heat as it sealed around me, then dissipating into coolness. I was safe.

I slept well, for the first time in many nights.

The next day at work, the phone rang.

Vanessa. "What did you do?" she asked enthusiastically.

"Come talk to me if you want to find out," I spat, and hung up.

The phone rang again. "What?" I demanded of her.

"Why did you hang up?" Vanessa asked. "I only wanted to talk to you about..."

"*You* wanted to talk? You want information?" I interrupted. "Well so do I! It's a two way street! Come talk to me!" I hung up again, and stormed away from my desk.

I walked to the company cafeteria. It wasn't open for lunch yet. I walked back to my lab.

Something shifted; I was more focused, more intense. What I'd thought of as a glow of energy in my palms I now thought of as a lance, a rapier. Not a club, a fist, to swing and strike, pummel and destroy, but an edge, sharpened, honed, to strike with precision. I practiced with intensity, sharpening, hardening, honing. Honing, preparing a weapon. I'm not going without a fight!

I practiced other things, too, things I'd seen in his mind, and hers, things she and others did.

I took her tricks, their tricks, and made them mine, honing, polishing, strengthening. I combined and extended, refining.

Lunchtime in the cafeteria at work, hearing a sow spreading rumors about cow-orkers. As she stepped towards a checkout line with a full tray, I cast the image of something darting at her left leg, something small with nasty teeth. She shrieked and her tray went flying. As she spun around, I cast another one at her, and another, until she ran out screaming.

Queue up at a grocery store, the express queue, ten items or less no checks please, the turkey two in front of me had a damn full cart and pulled out a checkbook. I cast ... bladder pressure. A few more pushes and he pulled his cart out of line and bolted for the heads in the rear of the store. I pushed again, hard. He didn't make it.

At Borders on the way home after a yoga class, not really looking at books and too late for coffee, I turned to see a young oriental woman looking at me, that blank smile, another moth drawn to my flame. I smiled and made eye contact and more, filling her with lust. Her eyes dilated and she blushed as she stepped closer. She tilted her head and reached for me, kissing, dropping everything she'd been carrying. I kissed and squeezed her, touching the side of a breast, breathing orgasm through her, searing, mind-blanking pleasure. I held her while she shook, muffling her moans with my mouth.

I released her and stepped back; she staggered against the end of an aisle of books. I bent down and picked up the things she'd dropped. "You dropped these," I said quietly, returning them. I gave her another thrill as our hands touched, and another orgasm as I caressed her waist and kissed her forehead before I turned and walked away. What a dim, dull life she lead. People around us -- some stared, some pretended not to stare, some felt it and were drawn closer... What had that twit in the mall called them? Sheeple... Nice portmanteau term that, told me a lot about them and how they thought.

I even returned to a small yoga studio, asking a particular instructor if she did private lessons. We wore each other out for two and a half days. No pretensions, no illusions -- we used each other.

But it was a facade -- and beyond that facade was a gaping wound festering with rage.

Heading home after a good yoga class. Good, but... The instructor, Diane, who does the evening classes, had been talking to Kimberly, who does the morning classes at work. They agreed; while I was making great progress, and demonstrated depth and dedication to the practice, both felt I was overdoing it, and needed to find more balance in my life.

Right.

We spent a while after class talking. I showed a depth and an awareness in the practice they didn't understand; it was clear I was on a different level. Both of them knew Wendy, what had happened, and how I'd been shaken. Well, they knew *part* of it, how I looked on the outside. They saw how I'd withdrawn, yet when I helped in yoga, I showed such understanding and compassion. They saw

the focus and intensity, yet how reserved I was. Both wanted me to help more. They especially worried that my focus and intensity was turning into anger. That was wrong -- I'd passed anger a long time ago, deep into rage... Diane even suggested that there were women in the classes that might be interested in *helping*... That would have been humorous... But what can I tell her, them? Yes, I'm holding back. Even when I help, I'm holding back. I can look in your eyes, touch you, and give you the most powerful orgasm you've ever had in your life. I can fill you with lust and sweep you off your feet into delirium. And if you're lucky, you'll live?

I thought about it driving home. Another two or three week meditation retreat was looking good.

But is that escape? The bastard back in the mall had a point; I had decisions to make, and avoiding them was deciding, whether I liked it or not.

I had to do something. The rage was building. I was striking out, and what's worse, I was putting myself in risky positions, risking exposure or injury. That's got to stop! Maybe a month-long retreat...

Park the car in the garage, take a breath, start thinking about dinner.

But walking in from the garage, a different pattern of lights illuminated the house. I smelled cooking -- good cooking.

And there sitting on the sofa in the family room was Vanessa, holding a glass of white wine.

She smiled and nodded.

I paused, rage and bile rising, preparing to defend myself, preparing to attack.

She set her wine glass down. "Truce," she said, raising her hands. "I promise. Come, please sit down," she offered, motioning to the love seat adjacent to the couch.

I dropped my bag and sat down, still on edge. Noise from the kitchen.

"Betty?" Vanessa called off to the kitchen. "He's home."

A young woman wearing a blouse, dress, and an apron came in from the kitchen. Round face, round body, round, round, round! Somewhere between full and chubby? She smiled when she saw me. Her eyes didn't glow. The remnants of a mark on her forehead? A quick probe, automatic for me now, but the results didn't make sense? Centered on me? Damage?

"Oh, dinner has been ready for a while; we didn't know when you'd be home! I know you need to unwind first, but I need you too, so I thought..." As she approached, she unbuttoned her blouse, revealing ample breasts in a smooth white bra. She unfastened part of a bra cup as she climbed into my lap, straddling me, slipping a hand behind my head.

Enveloped in her, held to her breast, filled with her warm, sweet milk. I let go.

The razor cleaves as it moves; what was one is now two. I felt the tugging, cold yet searing passage of the razor, leaving one part relaxing into her softness, letting go, being comforted and filled, yet leaving the other part on edge, poised to defend against the attack that could come at any moment, poised to scream and strike with rage and fury.

After a while she moved me to the other side, not speaking, but encouraging me by the way she held me and moved my head. So comforting -- part of me wanted to curl up in her.

As the razor cut deeper, not only separating, but leaving an open wound.

She held me for a while, nestling me, letting me feel the comfort of her warmth, her weight and the beating of her heart.

She kissed the top of my head and moved off me. "I needed that almost as much as you did," she whispered. "I'll finish with dinner and set the table."

As she left, Vanessa came back into the room, with two wine glasses this time, putting one down on the coffee table in front of me before she sat down on the couch again.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

She nodded. "I need your help. We need your help."

I didn't know whether to snarl or cry; I was still blissed out. "Wendy," was all I could say, picking up my wineglass.

Vanessa sighed, taking a sip of her wine and putting down the glass. "Not our doing," she started out.

"Well, *that's* certainly gratifying," I spat.

She looked pained. "Paul, we, I, didn't know about it until it was over!"

"And the bastard in the mall, the woman who owned him, the two men after?"

She looked surprised. "You can identify her? You know about her?"

I nodded.

She gave me a fierce look. "Paul, we are not a unified group. There are factions, and factions within factions. Those actions were taken by a splinter, radical group. We, others of us, stepped in when we learned of them. You learned something from the freeman in the mall?"

I nodded again.

“Paul, I’m trying to help, please. His mind ... is destroyed. We can’t learn anything from him.”

“How unfortunate,” I spat back.

She looked pained. “Paul, oh please! Everyone I’ve met and spoken with about you tells me how compassionate you are! Please, don’t let that be a facade!”

I looked at her, then away at the wall. The memory seemed so far away. “I didn’t harm him deliberately. Oh, I know, that doesn’t make any difference. I acted and my actions caused harm. But it doesn’t bother me any more than squashing a bug. It *should* bother me, because I don’t relate to him as if he was human. I went in, into him, looking for answers. That’s all. Like going into a sewer.”

She nodded. “And what did you find? Can you tell me, please?”

I shook my head. “I saw so much. Too much. I saw *her*, and how she took him, captured him, trained him.” I smiled. “I learned a lot of tricks from what he went through. I also learned that he, she, don’t know who hurt Wendy. They don’t know, but they’re willing to capitalize on the event.”

She nodded. “Interesting. We thought they were directly involved. You’re sure?”

I shrugged. “That’s what I found in him. Who tried jumping me later?”

She frowned a bit. “I’m not sure what events you’re...”

“While I was in the mall security office,” I interrupted tersely, “Someone knocked out a guard, and tried to get me, almost got me. I whacked him; it felt like a him. Mall security reported a man going down about that time. Then the guy in the car on the drive out -- I could see his eyes glowing.”

“Really? You could see his eyes glow?”

I nodded. “Just as I can see yours.”

She shook her head. “Paul, we really, really need your help! The one in the mall, he was another ... attacker is as good a label as any. We don’t know who or where he is; he got away. You certainly surprised a lot of people!”

“And the one in the car?”

She looked more wistful. “A friend and colleague, assigned to protect you, arriving too late for the mall, following you. We’d been watching you, from a distance, and as soon as you acted, we sent people in. What did you do? We still don’t quite understand?”

“To the guy in the car?”

“Yes.”

I smiled. "It's something I picked up from the guy I clobbered, something she did. I've practiced and refined it, it's almost a limbic system thing."

"Can you explain, show me?" she asked.

Why not. "Put down your wine glass first."

She put her wine glass down. As she raised her hand away from the glass, I did it.

She gasped and jumped, then looked at me with a big smile. "That was wonderful!" She creased her brow in concentration for a moment, looking once more to her side to check. "It's as if ... something was jumping out at me from the side, something in my peripheral vision."

I nodded. "It's one of *their* tricks. I've refined it a lot. One refinement is to not do it to the sensitive, but to someone nearby. I did it to the driver in front of him -- the sensation of something darting out in front of her car -- she slammed on her brakes, and he did the rest."

She nodded thoughtfully. I heard plates being handled in the dining room. "Yes, that's a good one. Didn't know about that." She looked directly at me again. "Paul, the small group, a clique really, who acted against you in the mall *sincerely* wishes they had not. You are safe, as are those around you. We, I, and my colleagues will insure that."

Not sure what look I gave her; it wasn't charitable.

"Oh, I know, and I agree -- please continue to be quite skeptical. I want to demonstrate to you that we do not act that way. Life is sacred to us."

"I thought it was to me, too," I muttered.

She shook her head. "Oh Paul, any of us in that situation would have done the same or worse!" Quietly she added, almost in a sigh, "Many of us have..." She perked up more. "What did you do, a few weeks ago, in your dreams? You did something!"

I almost threw my glass at her! "I suppose you like cockfights, too? Or are they not bloody enough?"

Vanessa sat back, turning pale.

"I was being stalked, harassed, in my dreams -- you knew about it, and you didn't do squat! I'm going nuts, no way to contact you, no place to turn, and what do I get from you? Nothing! Then I find a way to protect myself, and *now* you're interested, *now* you want to talk!"

She shook her head. "Paul, please... You're giving us credit, and blame, for far more than we can actually do. I had no idea what was going on, other than they were trying something. A ... a person on the edge of their group told me, and this is all I know, that she, and her name is Patricia, we know that now, she found you, and was making progress, and suddenly you disappeared. I didn't find out any

of this until the morning I called you. Have you felt *anything* recently in your dreams?"

I shook my head, smiling a little. "No."

She smiled and nodded. "Whatever you did is a tremendous success, Paul! They've been trying, she's been trying, but nothing is working!"

"So I'm safe?" I asked.

She nodded. "It seems that way. Can you explain what you did?"

Betty appeared in the hallway. "Dinner is almost ready, if you'd like to clean up."

I turned and stood up. I'd use the loo and wash my hands and face.

That's what I did.

The dining room table, set as it hadn't been for quite a while, with the good plates and serving dishes. Stroganoff, noodles, salad. My wine glass in front of my plate, Betty on one side, Vanessa on the other. Dinner was delicious, if surreal. I hadn't had such a good home-cooked meal in a long, long time. Betty was bubbly, wanting to know how I liked my shirts laundered, what time I expected to be home for dinner, meals, a heartwarming and heartbreaking patter of domestic trivia.

For the first time in too damn long, I enjoyed a meal, eating at a tempered pace, savoring so much of the experience. Betty was acting like a fixture, as if she'd always been part of my life.

A cold thought -- had she been made my thrall? That sure seemed to fit.

At the conclusion of dinner, Betty announced she'd clean up. She rested her hands on my shoulders and kissed the top of my head, then took things to the kitchen. Vanessa and I went back to the family room.

"Is she my thrall?" I asked point blank.

"If only it were that simple," Vanessa replied softly. "Can you tell me about Wendy, at the end, what happened?"

So many people had urged me to talk about it, to talk things out. Now one of the few people on the planet who could actually understand was asking me to do just that!

I settled back on the couch, sighing, forcing myself to relax into the intensity of the moment. "The whole thing hit out of the blue -- I didn't understand it then, and I'm not sure how much better I understand it now. The Wendy I'd known was ... shattered into madness. When I saw her at the mall, she screamed. She fought and ran from me, from others, going over the railing and falling to the floor below. In the ICU, I found that I could ... push the madness away, push somehow, and calm her. It wasn't until after she'd died, that I realized I could have saved her. I could have made her my thrall,

pushing the madness away, sweeping away those broken pieces. Was I right? Somehow, I felt that pushing the madness out, doing it finally, would leave her ... a thrall, mindless and incapable of independent action, because I'd have to push those broken parts out of her. Wait! That can't be right ... I don't understand. One of them told me that thralls were mindless; yet the guy in the mall, and the one in Chicago, they were owned -- I saw how completely the guy in the mall was owned -- yet they were capable of independent action." I looked to her, confused. "I don't know anymore."

She smiled, a sad smile. "Paul, you're on the right track. It isn't binary; it's a spectrum. Think of a scale, one to ten. The men you ran into, they were about a three. Yes, owned, but still independent. From what you've told me, what we've learned from others, Wendy was at the other extreme. As you said, she was not ... recoverable. While you might have been able to save her, the cost to you would have been enormous. No, the cost to you would have been more than you could possibly bear. You simply don't have the capabilities required. I spoke to Doctor Carlson." She shook her head, becoming agitated, angry, her hands betraying the strength of her feelings. She looked at me again. "What was done to both of you shows such callousness, inhumanity. And what you did for her was incredible. I ..."

She lowered her head and shook it slowly. She took a deep breath and let it out.

I smiled grimly. I'd been there.

She sat back, looking at me again. "A number of us came out here to deal with this situation. We, so many, were and still are outraged. In the process of cleaning out ... those vermin, we found Betty. She was being ... prepared ... five or six on that same scale, much farther along, but recoverable - just barely. Given the right environment, she will recover. Oh, with clouded and lost memories to be sure. But I think you can understand that not having some memories could be a blessing."

I nodded. "And you want me to heal her?"

She smiled again, a complex smile. "Given the right environment, she will heal herself. Part of what she needs, especially now, is a focus, someone to be the center of her universe. If you give her the chance, she will heal *both* of you. Given the opportunity, the chance, she'll care for you, over time recovering and rebuilding her independence, until one day both of you will realize you're healed."

"Or until someone intervenes," I suggested.

Vanessa smiled fiercely. "Oh, that won't happen, even though some of us hope they try... If you decide to do this, you will be very well protected.."

The razor again... "Anything I do, I'm deciding, taking sides."

She nodded, sad-wistful. "But that's life, isn't it?"

"And if I don't?"

She shrugged. "We go away."

“What happens to her?” I asked quickly, I had to ask.

Vanessa smiled.

The razor again, cutting deep, separating, exposing. “Fuck you!” I shouted angrily.

Vanessa looked surprised, and hurt.

“I’m being used, manipulated!” I told her angrily. “As soon as I asked the question, you smiled - I care! Dammit, I care! But I cared about Jen, and about Wendy! Where did it get me, them?”

Vanessa nodded slightly. “And *I* care, Paul,” she whispered. “I care about you, and Wendy, and Jen, and Betty. A number of us care. We’re trying to make lemons into lemonade. Will you help?”

I laughed, but bitterly. “My weakness -- I can’t turn down calls for help.”

“They know that as well,” she said, suddenly quite somber. “It’s a flaw many of us share.”

I flopped back, looking at the ceiling. No way to win in some of these. Basic thermodynamics, the Second Law -- you can’t win, you can’t break even, and you can’t pull out of the game.

I looked at her. “How long?”

Her smile crept back. “A few months at a minimum, seven or eight perhaps. You don’t have to make a final decision right now. We can re-evaluate next week.”

“After I’ve spent a week in her arms?” I mused. Anger and bile filling me as the razor cut deeper. “So I get to forge my own shackles and hammer them in place? Save someone the trouble?”

She sighed. “No, Paul. I’ll admit -- it’s going to be very pleasant for both of you. And the question you haven’t asked -- if I wanted to take the risk, and it would be a risk, we could bind the two of you together. Things would take longer, but the end result ... would not be the same, you wouldn’t learn... That, and it’s not the way we do things.”

“Okay, what next?”

“Thank you, Paul. I’ll leave shortly. I’ll be around to help over the next few days, getting Betty situated. And Paul, here’s what I won’t do: I won’t try to manipulate you. I would like to know more about Patricia, what you learned from them, about so much... The easiest way to do that involves you opening up to me. If and when you are ready, when we have that trust, we can proceed.”

“Fair enough. Any clues or suggestions for Betty?”

Vanessa smiled. “She knows what you need. One request, though.”

Just one? “What?” I asked.

“Paul, whatever you did to protect yourself from them, do it to Betty -- protect her. And I would really like to know what you did, if you can explain it. We might be able to help others.”

I leaned back, looking at the ceiling again. “I took too much from him, in the mall,” I mused. “I took all the memories, the pleasure, how she snared him, took him, bound him to her... I was so hungry -- I went looking for her in my dreams. And damn, I found her! And she found me. And she was taking me, so good, but something... Something she did scared me, and I ran, tried to run. Other dreams, dreams from when I was little...”

I looked right at her. “You know more about me than I do -- did I have nightmares as a little kid? Could I always see you, the glow, the marks, detect you, your kind?”

She looked confused. “Paul, I don’t know, we don’t know. What does it feel like to you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what’s real, how to tell what’s real, especially with memories! How can I possibly tell if a dream I had is a recurring one I had as a little kid? I can’t! In my dreams, I was a little kid, you know the perspective of furniture and everything when you’re little; an uncle, or at least my parents called him my uncle, glowing eyes, trying to get me -- I ran, tried to get away. That’s the dream, and it felt like I’ve had it over and over since I was a little kid, but I don’t know... One night, standing in a dream, waiting for them to come for me again, I figured out how to protect myself. I made a ... barrier, I guess. Spun it around me, lifted it up, enclosing me. I knew I was safe. I am safe. I have been since. Normal dreams.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’ll talk to the others... It would help if you could protect Betty the same way.”

I could see that. “So what’s with her?”

“She needs time to recover, to heal.”

“Well, does she work during the day, or what?” I pressed.

“No. She has her own car, so she can and will do shopping, things like that. Her expenses will be covered. She’s going to be dependent on you, so expect to make decisions, at least in some realms.” She smiled more as she said that.

“And what’s next for me?”

“Your parents ... did you know you were adopted?” Vanessa told me.

“Bullshit!” I replied quickly and forcefully.

She nodded. “Look for family pictures, earlobes.” She stood up. “I should be going. Paul, let me earn your trust?”

I stood as well. Trust? After all that?

She went to the kitchen; I went to the downstairs bathroom and took my damn time.

When I was through, Betty was puttering in the family room, picking things up.

She smiled and took me by the hand to the couch, pulling me to her, snuggling. "Do you have your class early in the morning?" she asked.

"Yes, on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday," I told her. Her warmth...

She held me. "We'll need to wake up earlier then... And we should go to bed."

She was so comfortable and relaxed around me, more so than I was! She puttered in and out of the bathroom as I did my thing. When I finished in the bedroom and bathroom, my bags packed for the next day, she was by the alarm clock, changing things. As I reached for the t-shirt I usually sleep in, she said, "Not tonight -- why don't you get in bed, and I'll be right back..."

I got into bed naked, with a growing erection. She turned out the light and went into the bathroom, closing the door.

She crawled into bed and held me to a perfumed nipple, feeding me. So good, but not relaxing! Soon she was on top of me, holding me where I wanted to be, telling me to suck. She rode me, drained me, and eventually switched me to the other side. I went to sleep in her arms.

And when the alarm went off in the morning, still in the dark, she silenced it and rolled to me, drawing me to her again, whispering to me, telling me what she needed. Oh, so warm and comforting in the morning! I don't remember switching sides, but I was on the other side when the alarm went off again, waking me. We got up and showered quickly; I dressed for yoga, and left after a hug and a kiss.

I spent some time at work reading about earlobes. I have "free" or detached earlobes. They're considered dominant. Attached are recessive.

Returning home was interesting. The place looked a lot cleaner. The family room was far more organized. Noise and good smells coming from the kitchen.

Betty appeared, sweeping me into a hug and a kiss, pressing me against the wall. "Oh, I missed you!" she whispered, smiling. I squeezed her more, kissing her again, enjoying becoming lost in her.

She giggled as we parted. She pointed to a damp spot on my shirt, and corresponding ones on her blouse. "I guess I need you more than I thought," she told me.

I pulled her to the couch and on top of me. This was a problem I knew how to address.

But she pulled away!

“Oh, I’ll be right back!” she told me. “I need to make sure dinner won’t burn!”

She scampered away, returning via a brief stop in the little bathroom.

“Where were we,” she whispered, unbuttoning her blouse and letting down one side of her bra.

I pulled her on top of me, devouring her.

“Gentle!” she cooed, squeezing me, filling me. I guess I was surprised when she switched me early, and pulled back a while later.

She kissed my nose and told me, “You’ll get the rest later, don’t worry! I get full, and it hurts!”

I held her, nestling between her breasts. So hard to be angry around her.

Another nice meal. She talked about what she’d done, cleaning and organizing, and what she intended to tackle next. She had plans and enough to do for a while! She let me putter after dinner.

I dug through boxes of pictures, even got one out of the garage. I’d been an only child, and both parents died while I was in grad school. Picture after picture, both had attached earlobes, as did their siblings. From what I’d read, that didn’t work. At least if I understood it. Either what I’d read on the net was wrong (fancy that!), I misinterpreted things, or I wasn’t their kid.

I’m still enough of a scientist, a researcher; if the data doesn’t fit the model, change the model. I started putting pictures back in boxes. What else can they take from me!

Betty came in and ran her hands over my shoulders. I sighed and turned to her. She nestled me into heaven. “You need to close up so we can go to bed.” She kissed me on top of the head. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

I gave her a squeeze. “Wait and let me undress you?” I asked.

She held me close and rocked a bit. “Just don’t take too long.”

I didn’t take very long at all!

She was just about finished in the bathroom when I got upstairs. When I finished, she was sitting at the foot of the bed, hands in her lap.

“Thank you so much for waiting,” I whispered, pulling her to standing, and kissing her, running my hands over her. Something special about running my hands lightly along the sides of her breasts, feeling the smooth satiny fabric of her bra, and the warmth and fullness filling it. I sat on the edge of the bed, pulling her closer with just her blouse and bra still on, running my hands lightly up her body from her knees to her waist and up her back, pulling her closer, burying my head between her breasts.

I don’t remember what I did, but she pulled her bra off, pushed me back on the bed, and climbed

atop me, holding me to a nipple. So good, and it only got better...

Thursday morning at work, looking forward to the weekend again, when we could spend more time snuggling, especially in the morning...

The phone rang -- Vanessa. Could I meet her for lunch? The rage flared, but quickly dissipated. Okay, where? She mentioned a place a few miles from work. Fine, a quarter to twelve.

How to approach this? Open hand or closed hand? Open hand, inviting, soft touch, or the fist, pummeling, fighting, driven by rage. Looking at my hands, my fists, holding so tight...

Deep breath, let go, relax, shake them out. Raising open hands, smiling. Open hand -- it can be *both*, inviting, soft touch, and *shuto uchi* -- the side-hand knife strike. That *both - and* thing again... Let that be my model, open hand, ready with both.

Going in the back door to the place from the parking lot, I felt for her -- over there. But I walked to the booth she was sitting in, standing next to her, and she looked up in surprise. But she stood and we hugged before I thought otherwise. Her hug was warm and full. We sat down.

After I ordered, she asked, "Well? How are you doing?"

I shook my head. "Tell me more about Betty -- I'm getting glimpses..."

Vanessa smiled. "In what circumstances? Good things, or potential problems?"

I took a sip of my iced tea. "Good, I guess. I subscribe to *The Economist*, and as I was glancing over an article, she made an interesting comment -- she's a very bright lady."

Vanessa agreed. "Yes, she is. But she still needs so much..."

I nodded my head. "Last Friday night she was practically in tears, not wanting me to go to my Saturday morning yoga class, needing me to stay with her longer in the morning."

A sly smile. "And did you?"

I nodded. "I stayed in bed with her, and I'm very glad I did... Sunday morning was even better, more relaxed. Looking forward to this weekend!"

Vanessa chuckled and shook her head. "That's wonderful... What else?"

"It's definitely taken the edge off me at work, in yoga. Some of the ladies may not be happy about it, but I feel like I'm not radiating lust all the time now."

"Unless you want to?"

I nodded. "I haven't wanted to, but yeah, I feel ... different. More of that energy, and more

control. I'm not as ... nasty, I guess. What's happening?"

Vanessa shrugged a little. "Just curious as to how things are going. You look better, calmer."

"And how long before I'm ripe?"

She got a pained look. "Paul, it's not like that..."

I returned her look, looking into her glowing eyes. "But it's happening, I know it. I'm changing, growing again. I can do things now that I couldn't have imagined last year. I know their tricks; I can see some of what they've done to her. And I feel there's a destination, a goal of some kind out there for me. A destination, a goal, and a test."

She nodded. "I don't know, hatching or unveiling, maybe?"

"And when the chrysalis opens? What comes out?" I prodded.

She shook her head, and offered a hand over the table.

I touched her hand, frowning a bit.

"Paul," she told me, "I don't know. We don't know." She shook her head. "There are so many possibilities. We won't know until we get there."

"So who were my parents?" I asked, still touching her hand.

"We don't know," she whispered.

I think I'd know if she wasn't telling the truth. I had a feeling I could tell with "normal" people, but with the Children of Jarl, I wasn't sure.

"What did you do?" she asked.

I flicked one of my earlobes, then reached over and touched one of hers. When I touched her, she responded, sighing quietly, her color deepening a bit.

"From the pictures I dug through, my parents, or rather, the people who acted as my parents, both had attached earlobes, which is recessive. I looked through a *lot* of pictures. Mine are detached, which is dominant. If I understand correctly, the two of them were most likely not my parents."

She nodded. "An understanding supported by blood typing."

I shook my head. "So where does that leave me? I don't understand. That uncle in my dreams, my nightmares -- memory or dream? -- was there one, one of *you*? Glowing eyes, when I was little? Could I tell, back then? But what happened in the interim, last year?" So confusing; was this an aftereffect of my lab accident, or something I'd had since birth?

She shook her head as well. “We don’t know, at least not yet. Another part of your puzzle. As you realize, memories can be suspect, and dreams?”

Still touching her hand, I felt her more... She didn’t have that thing...

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m confused again. You don’t have the ... thing in your hand that the freemen did ... do.”

She smiled. “No, only they have it.”

I wanted to be sure. “*Only* freemen, not Children of Jarl, not thralls?”

She nodded. “That’s right. Only freemen. Call it autosomal dominant.”

She held my hand for a moment. “What is it?”

Laugh or scream? “Hell of a test, then! Only detects freemen -- makes them seem like the odd ones out! How do you tell the difference between thralls and Children of Jarl, then?”

A wry smile. “Is there a difference?”

I sat back. “Well, the eyes...”

“Do you *see* that, or *sense* it?” she asked, leaning back a bit more.

I frowned.

“What are you sensing? How? What are we sensing? We sense something, by touch.”

I remembered, that frantic night. “The freemen said that, feeling it.” I shook my head. “They can detect the mark by ... touch. So can I, that pig at the mall...”

We ate lunch. As we were finishing, she dug in her purse, taking out a card and a fountain pen, writing on the card, waving it in the air gently, and handing it to me, with a small envelope. Her name and a phone number. I looked in the envelope -- a little plug-in card?

“A SIM card,” she said. “Pick out a phone, an unlocked one. We handle the rest.”

I smiled; gift, concession, olive branch?

Then I thought of the last card, the last gift I’d gotten from her, at the airport, months ago.

“Thank you,” I told her. “What was on that handkerchief?”

A wry smile. "You didn't try it..."

"No, but a young lady did, and she nearly raped me on the spot..." A dark thought; I frowned. "Is Betty using something similar?"

Her smile disappeared. "No, Paul, she isn't." She shook her head, looking at me. "Paul, that would be counterproductive, at best."

"Then why did you try it with me?" I accused.

She raised an eyebrow, sighed as it went down. "I made a mistake. A lot of people have made mistakes when it comes to you."

"But what did you expect to gain? I don't understand."

She shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it. From the first, in Chicago, I was interested in you. I guess I'm a victim of my own predatory habits in that respect, seeing you at first as the usual diversion. You are far more than that!" She extended her hand on the table. "I do hope to earn your trust."

"I can call you with questions?"

She nodded, smiling. "Please." She sighed. "Not that I can guarantee I'll have answers, but I'll help as I can. Call even if you don't have questions. Oh, did you protect Betty?"

I nodded, smiling. "We were standing together, in a dream. She was clinging to me, scared of something. I could tell, something was after her. We were both teenagers. I told her I'd protect her, and did that thing again, weaving a shell around us, around us both, three times. In the morning, she told me she'd slept better than she had in a long, long time. We're closer, somehow. I can ... reach out and feel her."

Vanessa smiled and held my hand.

We parted with more hugs.

After a few days, I had time to get a phone. Had an idea from talking to folks at work which carriers provided good coverage in our area. Went to one of their outlets in the mall. As soon as I said, "unlocked," the guy I'd been talking to gave me a look and walked away. He doesn't know how close he came to crapping his pants. But I saw a gal at the other end of the counter. Not really my type, skinny on top, but what the hell.

I made eye contact, turning the charm to about "3." "Can you help me?" I asked, smiling.

"Sure," she said, moving closer. "What can I do for you?"

She reeked of cigarette smoke! Ugh! Still, I pulled up a stool and sat down. She sat on a similar

one on her side of the counter, leaning closer. I took out my little envelope. "A cabal I'm associated with gives us SIM cards, but we have to get our own phones," I told her. "and I'm having a hard time getting any help. When I say 'unlocked' people treat me like I've got some loathsome disease..."

She looked at my SIM card, touching hands, nodded, then made eye contact again. "Must be a pretty modern cabal... Yeah, the carriers aren't interested unless they can tie you down..."

"Being tied down can be nice," I told her softly, moving closer, looking into her pretty brown eyes, "in the proper circumstances..."

She smiled. "Oh, yeah," she whispered, with smoker's breath. Then she smiled more, patted my hand, and said, "Stick around -- let me talk to the boss for a minute."

She walked away, swaying her hips, to talk to a taller gal, one overburdened with makeup and jewelry. They glanced to me, and I turned up the charm to about four and a half... The one who'd been talking to me said something, they both chuckled, and the manager nodded and put a hand on the other gal's shoulder, whispering. With a nod, that gal turned and went into the back room for a moment.

She came out with a phone. Looked okay, in a case and everything. She put it down between us, putting her hand on mine. "Here's the deal," she told me, making eye contact again. "We took this as a trade-up. It's about six months old and works fine -- some people insist on the latest, and we love 'em. It's yours if you want it."

"Just like that?" I asked.

She nodded, smiling. "Just like that. If you want to buy a charger, that would be nice. When we take these in, they get sent off to corporate and most of the time they just end up crushed."

I smiled. "Okay, set me up with a home and a car charger then, and let's fire it up."

She took the envelope, with more skin-on-skin contact than really necessary, and walked away with the phone.

I left a few minutes later, forty two bucks plus tax, with a working phone, a card with Rosa's personal phone numbers on it, and the feeling she had mine. Bet I could get her to stop smoking...

Picked up the manual for the phone on-line, thanks to a Google search. That same search told me that my phone included GPS, and was strongly implicated in some surveillance activities, and could be commanded to turn on its microphone remotely. So I'll leave it powered off, and if I'm really paranoid, pop the battery off. That's the trick -- a thin strip of paper slipped between the battery and the phone, wrapping around to the display in front. Really hard to backdoor no power.

I did use it, though. The first time I called Vanessa...

Dull and boring is nice. Dull and boring is predictable. Life with Betty was very nice. She took very good care of us. Both of us grew, and healed.

A weekend with a bad storm, high winds, power failures (which are rare for us). Power went out Friday evening just after I got home. Glad it waited; Betty freaked when the lights went out. The hot water heater is gas with a pilot, so no problems. The cooktop is gas with electrical ignition, but you can light it manually. Electric oven and refrigerator are out of luck. We ate dinner by candlelight, but I could tell Betty was still on edge.

I built a fire in the fireplace after dinner, pulling out cushions for us. She took a flashlight and went upstairs. She said she had a surprise she'd been saving for me. She came downstairs wrapped in a blanket from the linen closet. I could tell she had a hand towel in one hand. This was looking interesting... She suggested I visit the bathroom.

When I got back, she'd rearranged the cushions and added some pillows. She was wearing a robe. As I got closer, closer to her open and beckoning arms, I saw that it was a plush robe, very plush and soft. She wrapped me in her softness, the robe's softness, holding me. She held and suckled me, moving me to my back and riding me. So different on the floor than on the bed, more intense.

We spent the night on the floor; I got up to add more wood to the fire. I added more in the morning; power was still off. After a quick trip to the loo, we were back on the cushions, wrapped up in each other.

I don't know what was driving her; she needed me so much. We barely got up, barely separated, even though power came back Saturday night. Sunday the same thing -- that robe, her breasts, perfume, holding me, smothering me, riding me, keeping me so blissed out. I think she enjoyed it too!

Monday morning though, she let me get up so I could go to yoga. She let me get up after holding me, teasing me, riding me, and holding me again.

Trying to get out the back door, she grabbed me again, wearing that robe, opening it partially and holding me to a breast, telling me how much she needed me, about how good it was. When she finally let me go, after smothering me between her breasts for a moment, I hugged her close. I needed her, too!

I held her head and kissed her on the forehead, enjoying so much -- her embrace, the softness of her robe, her perfume, the afterglow.

And as I stepped away and glanced back at her, I saw the mark glowing on her forehead.

The mark I'd put there.

Sitting in the car, pondering... I'd done it. So? I started the engine and drove to class.

How did I feel at yoga? Any different? Rounder, softer if anything, the result of holding and snuggling for the weekend. So peaceful, so comforting, nestled in her softness, wrapped up in her robe.

As usual, I showered after yoga. Drying myself off, focusing on the day, some kind of glare in my vision? I glanced in the mirror. My eyes were glowing. I smiled. The chrysalis is opening?

On my way upstairs, I took out my cell phone and gave Vanessa a call. Left a message for her. "Interesting morning -- like to talk to you," was all I said.

Went to my lab to research that glare-like feeling, like a really short UV, fogging things and making it hard to focus. And hot damn, the spectrophotometer saw something! I tried some filters quickly -- yes, in the ultraviolet, well outside "normal" vision.

I borrowed a colleague's wideband optical spectrum analyzer to better characterize the signal. Spectral shape, all those good things. A spiky spectrum, definitely not black-body. Fluorescence? Not sure, fluorescence involves output wavelength longer than input wavelength. Some kind of luminescence phenomena.

Threw together a foam coffee cup with a pair of optical fibers and diverging lenses, opaqued the cup with gaff tape. Dragged out the tunable laser source. One fiber/lens to the TLS for excitation, the other to the spectrum analyzer to measure response. Couple the two to the computer, a quick hack to drive the instruments and subtract the TLS excitation spectrum from the response.

Hmmm... Remembered the safety sign some folks use in their labs, "Do not stare into laser beam with remaining eye." Put attenuators in the TLS path and limited its power.

Take a breath, hold the cup over my left eye, take a chance...

It looked like a luminescence effect, with pretty broad sensitivity to excitation. Didn't have the long decaying tail of phosphorescence. Some kind of pumping? Where was the extra energy coming from? From me? I was chuffed -- finally something the instruments and I agreed on!

The cell phone rang -- Vanessa.

I shifted the TLS to standby as I answered it. "Yeah?"

"You've had an interesting morning?" she asked.

"The chrysalis seems to be opening," I told her.

"Oh?"

I told her of marking Betty as I left the house, and seeing my eyes glowing after yoga. She thought it was wonderful news. She wished me well, and told me to take care of Betty, and more important, to let her take care of me. I laughed and told her I would.

Sitting at lunch with some of the ladies from the yoga class (some of them don't give up, but a couple told me they wanted to "just be friends"), I was a lot more relaxed. Being careful not to focus on any of them, my mind drifting, drifting back to memories of being in Betty's arms, the softness of her breast, the fullness of her nipple in my mouth, the softness of her robe surrounding me, the music of her heart beating... The haze faded from my vision. Glanced at myself in the mirror behind the booth we

were sitting in, and my eyes were *not* glowing! I blinked, startled, and they glowed again!

Half an hour practicing back in the lab, and I could turn it on and off! Haze and glow, no haze and no glow! Very weird! Especially since from a physics point of view, it made no damn sense at all!

I toyed with it for most of the afternoon, exploring. Yes, I could “gate” the response, although whatever the gating signal was, it wasn’t very fast.

Exploring that gating response, with a pumping phenomena, you’d expect there to be a peak response at a particular excitation wavelength. I plotted curves, guesstimated where the peak should be, took some more data to refine the guesstimate.

Cranked down the excitation power more, did whatever it was that I did to “turn off” the glow, and put the cup over my left eye. No glow. Okay, “turn on” the glow again.

Something flared in my left eye! I snatched the cup away, covering my eye.

Idiot!

Uncovered my eye and opened it. Covered the right one. Shit! Can’t see out of my left eye!

I closed my eyes and focused on my breath, moving energy back and forth, trying to regain focus, control.

When I blinked my eyes open, I saw a blur on the left side. Big sigh. My vision returned over the following very, very long minutes. Did a quick test after half an hour, and spectral sensitivity in both eyes was about the same. Damn, that was close! Secured my lab and took a meandering walk back to my office, both eyes seemed okay. Damn, dodged a bullet, and one I’d fired at that! Idiot!

Puzzled over it the rest of the afternoon, even as I drove home and went into the house. Somewhere in there was a molecule in a higher (spin?) state; it captures a photon ($h\nu$), boosting it to an intermediate unstable state, where it emits a photon ($h\nu'$) decaying to a lower state. Something in me then takes it back to that higher (stable?) state? What? How? Weird!

On my back on the couch, Betty on top of me, my mind empty as she fills me. No thoughts, just her surrounding me.

Damn, that’s where I want to be.

But that’s not how the world works.

Still, we spent as much time as we could wrapped up together, snuggling, making love, snuggling more.

Over time I learned to hold in the glow, to stay “on the edge” but not showing it. I learned how to take away the mark I left on her forehead, marking other parts of her instead...

She healed, she healed both of us. She got stronger, more independent. Got home one day and she'd replaced all the bathroom towels and the rugs, so everything was coordinated, ranting about nothing matching. Yes, they'd been a mish-mash accumulated over a decade and a half of living alone. She re-did drapes in the dining room, and had me looking at new carpet.

A Wednesday night, I got home and she was wearing that robe, perfume, and a smile. I put down my bag, took a breath, inhaling her, and gave myself to her.

Snuggling later, her head on my chest, she asked, "Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Did you know ... me ... before. What happened?"

I kissed the top of her head and held her gently. "No, why?"

"I was shopping, at McCarthy Ranch. I saw some people that I think I worked with, before. I can't remember; it's all so screwed up..." She sighed so painfully.

I held her closer. "I've got you."

"What happened to me?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I told her honestly. "All I know is that something happened, a friend brought you here, and told me to take care of you."

She hugged me. "Oh, and you have..."

We talked more that night. The next morning I talked to Vanessa. More than one chrysalis opening.

The next few weeks weren't hard, they were uneven. Betty's memories were returning, and some of them were not pleasant. We still needed each other; making love, holding, and being held may not have been the cure, but it was the best we had. And it was pretty damn good.

I could feel her changing, a core solidifying inside her. With that core came a spark, a drive. Her humor was sharper, more focused. Her needs, her drives were more intense.

We held each other together. She remembered family in Oregon, and spoke to them on the phone. That helped a lot. She concluded she'd had a breakdown of some kind, and gone through a troubling period she couldn't and didn't want to remember. She was better now.

We'd talk about it; she'd talk and I'd listen, doing what I could. We'd end up in bed, her riding me and rocking us to sleep.

Oh, I worked with Vanessa, learning more. I “saw” where Betty’s memories had been damaged, her personality altered. I smoothed out rough spots, making them less troublesome. Vanessa put me in touch with others who helped. Well, some of them helped. Most of their ideas were so simplistic! Yet they held the spark of something solid, and helpful. Like mining ore, I had to do a lot of work refining what I found. The goal of such work isn’t to knock the crutches away from someone, but to strengthen and heal them, so that one day they’ll realize they don’t need the crutches anymore, and drop them.

One evening after dinner, Betty told me she was going to go up to Seattle to visit her sister, surprise her for her birthday. We talked about it. She’d leave Monday morning, and drive back the following Monday. From the way she talked, I knew she needed to do it alone, and it was important for her to do it alone -- she was taking steps without the crutches, spreading her wings once again.

We spent the weekend in passion. She was worried -- what would I eat while she was gone? That’s what she whispered to me as she held me to a nipple, squeezing the back of my head, urging me on. Oh she was going to miss me, she moaned as she swirled her hips, riding me, smothering me. Oh, I was going to miss her, who was going to hold me, I asked, as I nestled in to go to sleep in her arms, the sweet music of her heart filling me.

I missed yoga Monday morning, getting to work late -- we both needed it. I made up for it by doing a longer class Monday night. Betty called me just before I got to the class; she’d enjoyed the first part of her drive.

We talked again on the phone Tuesday evening before yoga. She knew my schedule; she was about half an hour from her destination for the night. She sounded good, enjoying the drive, stopping along the way to enjoy the smells and sounds, missing me there to share it with her.

Yoga ended; I made my way back to the car. I’d enjoyed the class, and had helped out. Thanks to Betty, I was more relaxed and open.

There’s a multi-story parking structure behind the building with the yoga studio; if I can’t find a spot right away on the ground level, I head right for the top. That’s where I was parked. Full of energy yet relaxed, I ran up the stairs.

I felt something strange as I exited the stairs at the top. I paused at the metal railing, closing my eyes and taking a breath. Another twinge -- what? I took a breath, holding on to the metal railing.

Betty! She was under attack! I could almost see through her eyes, a man in front of me/us, pushing into her mind. I struck out through her, mentally, following through with screaming, a knee to his groin, gouging at his eyes!

Pain and impact -- she’d been shot! I saw another man, holding a gun. She held on to her original assailant, fingers digging into his face, the sensation of a nail tearing. Reach for him, Betty, reach for him! She reached out, moving, staggering towards the shooter. He fired again! Searing pain! She fell forward, but as she did, she touched him.

That’s all I needed. In a flash I was in his mind. Three of them, they’d planned it well, rushing

her hotel room, coordinating with others. They knew I'd be in a class. The ones waiting for me at my house... The third man came into the room. I shot him, double-tap to the head. I turned to the one who'd attacked Betty initially. He was holding his face, screaming. Two to the head.

Reaching out to Betty -- she was dead.

I ravaged the bastard's mind for whatever I could find, tearing, searing.

I felt him put the barrel of the gun into his mouth, trying to escape. I helped him pull the trigger.

It took a while for me to open my eyes.

I looked at my hands; they were glowing, grasping the rusty tubular metal rail.

And the rail was bent.

I made it to my car, sitting in the seat, door still open, forcing cold night air through my lungs, struggling to keep down what little I had in my stomach.

They'd been watching us for weeks, learning our schedule, following us. Damn! I picked up the cell phone and called Vanessa. No answer, as usual. I left a message. "This is Paul. Patricia and her mob picked up Betty in Oregon. The only thing that's left is a mess. I'm headed home to take care of the vermin waiting for me."

The plan, according to what the Oregon bunch knew, was that Patricia would be waiting in my house, with backup nearby. The good news for me, if any, was that I wasn't being tailed.

I took a slightly different route home, deviating in the last few blocks and pulling into a local 7-11 mini-mart. If they'd been watching me, they'd seen me pull in here before.

I held the steering wheel and closed my eyes. Remembering what I'd done to that metal railing, I moved my hands to my lap, relaxing. I took a breath and reached out.

Patricia, in my house. Next door neighbors arguing as usual. Something feral mating under a porch. A block away, two men in a car -- one of the mighty overlords in the passenger seat, and Patricia's thrall, a freeman, in the driver's seat.

I insinuated myself into the driver's mind. He was playing with a plastic ball, three or four inches in diameter, one of their new tricks. It was a catch-field generator, that mind-blanking field they used to catch thralls. The balls generated an incredibly strong field for a couple of minutes, strong enough to stagger Patricia or Steven, the overlord sitting next to him in the car. And there were motion-sensitive ones in the house, waiting for me, as they'd heard a rumor I could sense when they were operating. Patricia had placed them earlier, and had lured him into one, without telling him it was there. The result was intense, almost as good as being taken by her... And she'd told him he could have my house when they were done.

The other guy, Steven, was looking out the car window, waiting for word from Patricia.

Using the ball was easy. Turn the top until it clicks, now it's armed, toss it at the target. You could select time or contact activation.

Steven turned at the click, and reflexively reached to catch the ball as it was tossed to him. He tried to avoid it at the last moment, and it fell into his lap.

Which was just as good, that triggered the ball, engulfing them, fogging their minds.

The thrall's mind clouded over as I jumped into Steven's. I'd been unsure about taking him on directly, and from what I learned, that had probably been a good decision. His specialty was mental attacks. I picked up quite a few new nasty tricks.

I was getting better at mental ransacking. I learned how I could have helped Betty more. The one in Oregon who'd gotten the eye gouged out was their expert in training and mental reprogramming. Pity I'd not had more time with him. But I learned a lot from Steven, such as how I could explore internally; useful. I learned, but -- is this all? His knowledge seemed so partial, incomplete, not thoroughly thought out. Ah well.

They really wanted me alive -- they hadn't been able to touch me, or Betty, remotely, not even at night when we were asleep. They didn't understand that. Patricia was supposedly one of the best at dream seduction, and she hadn't been able to get through to me for months. I was amazed -- they'd spent a few nights parked near the house, trying! They'd tried, failed, and gone away! Steven had argued for throwing a few balls through the bedroom window at night and barging in, but had been overruled.

You fucked up, Steven, and it's going to cost you. I saw how easy it was to change people. Push a little here, much easier thanks to the catch field, and in a few seconds one of the self-styled Overlords of Mankind is a comatose lump. He'll recover in eight to ten hours. Maybe.

And while they evidently couldn't do the same to me remotely, if one actually *touched* me, well, I think that would be a different story... And if I were them, the only touching I'd try would be with a 50 caliber from a distance, as members of their group had suggested.

The catch field faded; I left Steven and went back to the thrall. Before he could blink, he was loyal to me; he'd die for me. Soon. He searched Steven. Nice Glock, a 9mm, full clip and one in the chamber. Glad they have a pragmatic side. How nice; Steven likes to carry a lot of cash! So did the thrall. I had him get out of the car and put the cash and the Glock into the small bag with the extra balls and some other goodies.

I drove by, rolling down the passenger window so he could put the bag on my passenger seat. I had him get back in his car and wait.

I drove the rest of the way home, parking in the garage as usual.

According to the thrall's memory, a motion-triggered field generator was stuck to the ceiling in the family room, covering the door to the laundry room and garage. I could feel Patricia sitting on the couch in the family room. I took a deep breath. While I might be protected, and might be able to jump her remotely, I didn't want to risk it. I got one of the balls from the bag and checked it. Press the halves together gently and a little LED inside blinked green. I set it for contact activation. Picked up my yoga bag and got out of the car.

Opened the door to the house and stepped into the laundry room. The family room door was closed, as usual. I felt Patricia becoming more alert. She was "feeling" for me, and not finding me! Interesting! And they didn't know Oregon had gone to shit; couldn't they sense things at that distance, or was it something to do with the close connection Betty and I had. Had -- past tense.

I opened the family room door, but instead of stepping in, I tossed the ball right into Patricia's lap. She didn't even have time to jump! It landed in her lap and a nice warm glow surrounded her.

I took two steps back and tossed my yoga bag into the family room. The glow of the field surrounded it, but I was clear.

I pounced on Patricia's mind. It wasn't a pleasant place to be. But, I was getting better at it -- practice and all that. Oh, picked up a lot of useful things... She wanted to turn me into her thrall, to use me. Interesting, use me as a weapon... Memories of her watching me leave yoga classes, lusting...

Ah! The catch field gadgets had a remote! It was hard to get her to move, but she took the remote out of her bag and pressed the button. The glow around my yoga bag went away. I grabbed a towel from the laundry basket and tossed it into the room. Nothing.

I stepped into the family room.

Idiot -- should have paralyzed her first! I did that, a simple nerve block, easily reversible. The ball had a while to go yet. Got a broom and knocked down the catch field gadgets over the front door and the patio doors. Disarmed them, and put them and the remote away.

Patricia wasn't carrying a gun. She did have a loaded syringe, though, and some perfume bottles. The syringe was a sedative, good for about six hours. One of the perfume bottles was the instant mindless lust stuff. Nice to have; I put those in a safe spot.

"Patricia, Patricia," I said, sitting down in the loveseat across from her.

The loveseat where Betty had taken me the first time, months ago, climbing into my lap, holding me to a nipple, feeding me, healing me, healing us...

I felt the rage and bile rise, but breathed through it, letting it dissipate. The catch field was fading; I made sure I had control of her mind, and that she couldn't hurt herself, or me, or alert others.

The big question -- if I let you live, will you and your kind leave me the hell alone?

Her cell phone rang. I picked it up, looking at the number and probing her mind. One of her partners, Alan. Alan? I probed more. Yes, the one in Chicago; he'd been with Vanessa that time. Interesting.

I flipped open her phone, answering. "Good evening, Alan, this is Paul."

"Ah, Doctor Harris, good evening. Is Patricia there?" he replied dryly.

I almost laughed. "Yes, but she can't speak right now. Which is a pity, as I had a question for her."

"Ah, yes? Possibly I could help."

My cell phone rang -- Vanessa.

"One moment, please. I'll be right back," I told Alan, and put that phone down. I put a cushion over it, hoping to dampen the sound. I answered mine.

"Are you all right?" Vanessa asked.

"Oh, so far so good. Want to know what Alan did right after you spoke with him?"

"Alan? Who? What's going on?" she asked, becoming more agitated.

"Well, just a moment ago, Patricia's phone rang, Alan calling. The same Alan who was with you in Chicago the evening we first met. I'd hazard a guess that you just spoke with him, and the first thing he did after your call was to call Patricia."

"Shit; the bastard," she said.

"At least. Let me pick up the other phone. I don't know if you could conference him in or not."

"That bastard!"

"Seems to be par for the group, dear."

I dug up the other phone. "Still there, Alan?" I queried.

"Yes, I'm here," he said, more composure in his voice.

"Oh, good. I've Vanessa on my phone. I mentioned I was speaking with you."

Silence.

"So Alan, I have a question for you, and Patricia, and your associates. I'm a little peeved with you right now. If I let her live, are you going to leave me alone?"

He said, "If you..." and paused. A long pause.

I held the phones so both could hear me. "I'm quite serious. It's far too late for the bunch up in Oregon, but Steven, Patricia, and her thrall are still recoverable. Or not."

"Doctor Harris, Paul," Alan started out. "We meant you no harm. We've clearly..."

"That's bullshit, Alan, and you know it," I interrupted. "I've been wading through mental sewers this evening, and I know exactly what Steven and Patricia intended for me, and what those vermin in Oregon had planned for Betty. Did you know that Patricia thought I'd make a good weapon? Not sure against whom, exactly. Oh, and Vanessa may want a word with you as well."

Vanessa said, "That bastard!" again.

"So here's my dilemma, Alan. I have no rational basis to believe anything you or Patricia say. And at this point I'd have to take Vanessa with a grain of salt as well, sorry to say. And given what you bastards have done in the past, letting them live would seem to be an incredibly stupid thing to do."

"We're talking about human lives," he started out.

"Cut the crap," I interrupted. "She and Steven think differently. Barely sentient, remember? Sheeple, remember? And I'll give you a clue, Alan, that's how both of them think about some of your cabal. Right now I'm more concerned about the mess and having to clean it up. I think it was an old Dilbert comic strip -- Dilbert saying that the only thing keeping him from being a serial killer was his distaste for manual labor. Maybe it was Dogbert. Doesn't matter. The only lives you care about are your own."

"Paul? Paul?" Vanessa said.

"I'm listening," I said to both phones.

"Paul, please don't harm them," Vanessa pleaded. "Enough have been harmed already."

"Like Betty," I said. Another innocent slaughtered. Why?

Interesting -- Patricia was crying. Interesting, because I'd paralyzed her voluntary muscles.

I took a chance -- I released her vocal chords, breathing, neck, and head.

She took a deep breath, her head falling back. She lifted it again, and I pointed a finger at her, warning. She nodded.

"Paul," Patricia said, "I am sorry. I give you my word, no harm will come to you. We will not interfere with you or anyone around you. We should have treated you as an equal."

That was a kick in the gut. Now I felt dirty, sick. Equal?

Vanessa said, "Paul, that's encouraging. We have agreements among us."

"You say you have agreements -- have Alan and Patricia upheld those agreements so far, in the past?" I asked her, knowing Alan and Patricia could hear the question. "Was their attack on Betty in accord with those agreements? Their past attempts on Betty and me?"

"No, not at all," Vanessa agreed. "Tell Alan I'm quite upset with him."

"Alan, Vanessa is *quite* upset with you. Is she someone you *like* to have upset with you?"

"No, she is not," he admitted. "Paul, we've seriously underestimated you, and we have paid the price. I would like the disagreement between and among us to stop, now. I give you my word you will be unhindered. Not only that, but I will personally guarantee your safety and security."

"I suggest you have a talk with Vanessa," I told him.

"I expect we will be having a conversation soon," he admitted with little enthusiasm.

Patricia twitched a bit. I still had a tendril in her; Alan was making contact, checking her. So they could work over a distance. I did something, not sure what, but I felt like I'd be able to reach out and whack him whenever I wanted. Yes, I was sure of it. He and Patricia agreed silently -- I was to be left alone. Interesting -- it took a lot of effort for him to do that. Felt pretty easy for me.

"Doctor Harris, do we have your word as well?" Alan asked.

"You and others in your pack have suggested that the best way to deal with me, and with others you dislike, is with a bullet from a distance," I told him flatly. "Don't bother denying it, I took that memory from Steven's mind, and the confirmation from Patricia."

"I won't deny it," Alan said. "We misunderstood and underestimated you. Things have changed. As I said, I give you my word. You will not be harmed or hindered. As an equal,"

"That makes me *sick*," I interrupted. "Your equal? And when will things change again? When will someone be looking at me through a rifle sight?"

"Paul, I ask that you give us the chance, trust us," he practically pleaded.

"Like Vanessa has trusted *you*?" I accused.

I could hear him sigh over the phone. "Paul... I agree, I understand -- you have no reason to trust us, to believe us, and we have given you none. Still..." He paused and sighed. "Do what you will. In the end, that is what we all must do. No matter what you decide, I will not harm or hinder you, or those around you, and I will tell others to do the same."

I frowned. "If I so much as get a paper cut," I told him. "Or Vanessa gets a zit on her face..."

Vanessa chuckled. "Good for you. If anything happened to you, well..."

"I'm trying to determine the difference between open-minded and gullible," I told the group, present and connected through various channels. "And it seems to be difficult to do in real-time."

I tossed Patricia's phone back to her, and tweaked her so her paralysis would wear off over the next few hours, giving her a limited ability to move right away.

"I'm turning them loose," I told Vanessa. "They need to clean up the mess in Oregon."

She sighed. "I'm coming out. I'll see you as soon as I can. Paul, thank..."

I closed the phone, hanging up on her.

Patricia was crying, holding her phone. Alan was in mental contact with her. Good.

"I took your thrall away from you," I told her. "But you can have him back. I thought... I thought of showing him all you've done to him, what you really think of him, but what good would that do?" I shook my head, disgusted -- with myself, as much as with them. "Get out of here!" I yelled.

She stood, slowly, shakily, picked up her bag, and headed for the door.

I cued her thrall to come pick her up. He pulled up in front of the house as she got to the front door; they met on the path, and she broke into sobbing tears. I closed the door and locked it.

The living room was dark and quiet save for the ticking of the old clock on the mantle. It had been my grandfather's. It had belonged to the man I knew as grandfather.

I sat on the floor, on my knees, in meditation, facing the door and the windows, closing my eyes.

I felt them driving away. Patricia had taken her thrall again; he was so happy to be near her, so confused as to why she was crying so much, blaming himself. Steven would recover.

I reached for Alan, so far away. Vanessa was screaming at him over the phone. How nice.

Focus on the breath, return to the breath.

Never to hold Betty again, never in her arms again. Or Wendy.

Focus on the breath, return to the breath.

Even as the razor cuts so deep, glinting, flashing.

A memory? Something about glinting, flashing -- an old memory, very old, very solid, with

surprisingly few similar memories. Why? Using newly learned skills, looking with a part that the razor had split off, I saw -- a memory protected because it had been bypassed, circumvented. Memories were almost impossible to remove; at best they could be bypassed, but even then, traces remained -- little bumps, twigs sticking out.

Peeling back the cover, releasing the memory held back for so long...

That uncle, the one with the glowing eyes, holding my head, putting drops in my eyes, stinging, crying, someone holding me, keeping me from rubbing my eyes, a pain in my thigh, seeing him holding a syringe, a thing of glass and metal, as things faded.

I blinked, back sitting in my living room again. It was a memory, the memory of a child. If it hadn't been buried, covered up in that way, it would have been lost by now!

And what the fuck did it mean?

All I'd learned from them told me such memories couldn't be implanted, falsified, without leaving traces, traces I did not detect. It would appear that the memory was accurate, possibly even "real."

Taking it at face value, then... As a child, I'd been able to see those glowing eyes. At an early age, something was done to me to blunt that ability, to turn it off, or at least mask it.

And my lab accident reawakened it? Something certainly had. Multiple steps -- the lab accident opening up my vision, contact with Vanessa providing the spark for the rest?

I looked inside for signs of alterations, as I'd seen in Betty, in thralls. Other than that one, I couldn't spot any. Didn't mean there wasn't anything there, just that I couldn't spot any.

Why?

The fable of the tiger cub raised by goats?

Why? To hide me, to protect me? To save me for later, when I could be awakened -- and used?

I closed my eyes once more, moving inside. I'd learned a lot from Steven, and Patricia. There were many things I could do to protect myself. I set about to do just that.

I learned a lot as I did. I picked up their techniques and refined them, extended them. I also saw huge gaps in their understanding. I probed Patricia from a distance; she didn't understand how I'd paralyzed her! I convinced her it wasn't important. Such gaps in their own understanding, such flaming misconceptions! So sporadic, haphazard! Doesn't matter. I worked systematically, methodically.

I showered shortly after the sun came up, and felt a little cleaner. Still, the thought of being their "equal" sickened me.

I met Vanessa at the San Jose Airport after yoga. The “new” terminal serving Ameri-cant and South-worst connects to the parking structure and baggage claim area via an enclosed bridge over the road running between the two buildings. Thanks to security theatre, sheeple congregate along the bridge, and that’s where we met.

Her look was pensive, troubled. Good.

She was towing a small wheeled carry-on bag. As we walked, she said, “We’ve verification of the issue you mentioned. A mess, cleaned up. What else can you share with me?”

Share? I took her hand as we walked. I took her hand and poured it into her. She gasped and her gait faltered. I poured it into her all at once -- what I’d seen in the remains of Betty’s mind. What I’d seen in Wendy’s. What I’d dredged from that man in the mall, the thrall in the car, Steven, Patricia. And along with it came my feelings, my responses, what I’d done, the love and the rage. All of it, all at once. And from Betty’s mind, sets of images, of feelings in contrast -- the feeling of deep contentment from suckling your lover in the afterglow of orgasm, the feeling of a fingernail tearing as you pull a man’s eye out of its socket, the impact of a bullet hitting your shoulder. All of it.

Vanessa vomited violently into a waste bin at the edge of the ramp going up to the parking area.

I pulled her hair back, holding it out of the way, and scooted her bag between my legs.

As she got ready for another round, an obese mouth-breathing security woman waddled up and asked, “You okay?” I gave her a far more charitable look than her question deserved, and replied loudly, “American Airlines breakfast special,” hoping to spread the meme.

Another woman walked up, a younger woman, looking concerned. She dug in her shoulderbag and pulled out some paper napkins. “I’m a nurse,” she said, putting one hand on Vanessa’s back as she handed her the paper towels. Vanessa took them and bent over for another round, not as productive.

“You think it’s food poisoning?” the nurse asked me.

I shook my head. “Emotional shock -- too much information too fast,” I said softly. Vanessa nodded her head and wiped her face with one of the paper towels, saving the others, breathing deeply but unevenly through her mouth, clutching the rim of the wastebasket.

“There’s a ladies’ room at the top of the ramp,” the nurse suggested. “Do you need help? You can rinse your mouth and sit down.”

“That sounds good,” Vanessa whispered. She clutched my arm. I got her bag, and the three of us headed up the ramp.

A nasty thought -- I probed the nurse, quickly. Just a concerned person. “Thank you for your help,” I told her.

She spent a few minutes in the loo with Vanessa, helping her rinse her mouth and clean up. She

questioned Vanessa -- was that man hurting her? She could get help. No, Vanessa replied, she'd come here to help him, and had learned a lot of things she really hadn't wanted to know, and learned them suddenly, too suddenly.

They came out, Vanessa looking shaken and pale. Vanessa held on to me; her hands were cold. Vanessa and I thanked the woman, assuring her the worst of it was over. She was uncertain, but headed off on her own life anyway.

I led Vanessa up to where I was parked, up on the roof.

Standing by the car after putting her bag in the back, she was breathing deep and slow, centering.

I put a hand on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "You bastard," she whispered, eyes glowing, flaring.

I nodded. "Probably true." I smiled, and shook my head. "The story they told me in Chicago wasn't quite accurate. You are a daughter of Jarl," I said.

She nodded.

"Rig still walks among us -- I am a son of Jarl, or more likely, a son of Rig," I told her.

She frowned. "What? How?"

I opened the passenger door for her. "Let's get the hell out of here. We can talk on the way." I looked around. "I quit. My old life ended last night."

I closed the door for her, walked around the car, and got in.

"What, how, did you learn?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I learned from them -- and I used what I learned. It doesn't matter, really, but the best I can figure is that I was born with this ability. When I was little, around four or so, someone, one of you, did something to blunt or mask it or at least part of it. The traumatic memory of that event was hidden, in a way that preserved it. One way or the other, my talents were reawakened." I glanced to her, and dug out my wallet to pay for parking.

She sighed. "Makes as much sense as anything else. But why the other? Rig?"

I chuckled. "You should read Hamilton, Armstrong, and Jung -- the encoding in myths."

"What?" she asked.

I reached around to the pocket behind the passenger seat and got her a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” she said, opening it and taking a sip.

“The myth I was given in Chicago speaks of the god Rig walking among us, fathering three children from whom the races of the world descend. Take that myth as an encoding of what we know now as genetics. Just as we’ve seen the separation of the one species, *homo sap*, along divisions such as skin color, epicanthal folds, dry or wet ear wax, earlobes, *ad nauseum*, the myth teaches three divisions - thralls, freemen, and self-named overlords, the children of Jarl. But why should evolution stop there? Why can’t there be further evolution, further genetic variations, new children of Rig?”

She gave me a raised-eyebrow look as she swigged more water.

I laughed, flicking a thought at a nearby driver, causing him to slow so I could pass him as we accelerated onto southbound highway 17. “Oh, it could be just a manic thought -- glub knows, after what I’ve been through. But look at the pieces. I can see things you, and they, the freemen, can’t. Patricia and Steven treated that as a rumor, one they were concerned with, even though, and I find this interesting, even though they didn’t believe such a thing was possible. That tells me this ability is new, or at least very, very rare. So it’s either something I did, which I doubt from the memory I uncovered, or another step genetically, a further mutation. Who do you have doing genotyping studies among Freeman, and us?”

She shook her head. “I’ve got to admit, it makes sense, in a weird way.”

I chuckled. “It’s a psychosis that’s internally self-consistent. Genotyping? How did we evolve, and continue to evolve?”

She shook her head again. “I need something to eat. Paul, you overestimate us. As far as I know, there are less than two hundred of us world-wide. Freeman, maybe ten thousand? Of course, that is for the discovered and trained population. Our abilities tend to take familial paths, and usually arise with puberty.” A big sigh. “And I think you can appreciate the paths that can take.”

I nodded. “Saints, prophets, witches, and just plain old crazy people.”

“Too true... We don’t know how many we lose.”

I was hungry. “Omelet for breakfast?” I suggested. A good place on Saratoga near Williams.

“That sounds good,” she agreed with a nod. “They cleaned up the mess in Oregon; there shouldn’t be any repercussions. I had a chat with Alan last night as well.”

“Shifting allegiances?” I suggested, sensing seething anger in her, anger directed at Alan.

She shrugged. “Allegiances? We’re thinly enough spread that we seldom bump into each other -- more like separate domains, kingdoms. We gather occasionally, when something unusual happens.”

“Dat’s me!” I said overly enthusiastically.

“Indeed,” she confirmed. “In that moment in Chicago, I saw ... something. A spark.” She shook her head. “Maybe I should have dug deeper. Could have saved us all a lot of...”

“No dear, that’s not what happened,” I told her, placing a hand on hers. “But will I be left alone?” I asked, not vocalizing the alternative.

“The word has gone out, in more ways than one. Nobody will mess with you! In a sense, they had it coming. Oh Paul, it’s so hard, for some of us. They, some of them, they treat others like ...”

“Sheeple was the term I saw,” I told her, holding her hand. “But what they don’t realize, is if others are sheep, then...”

“We are the shepherds,” she said softly.

I squeezed her hand. “Yes, exactly, with the accompanying responsibilities.”

She sighed again. “Paul, you don’t know how good it feels to hear you say that.”

“So who the hell let shrub get loose and cause so many problems?” I challenged, deliberately changing the subject.

She laughed. “Not enough of us, I’m afraid...”

We had a good breakfast. I probed around the edges of things, gathering, correlating.

As we got in the car again afterwards, I asked her, “Why are you here?”

She raised an eyebrow. “To serve as a warning to others?”

I laughed. “Thank you, dear.” I held out a hand. “I’m sorry for being rough this morning.”

She took my hand. “Don’t be. I had it coming. We’re lucky.”

“Lucky?” I sure as hell didn’t feel that way.

She nodded. “That we didn’t end up with bigger messes.”

After a big sigh, she said, “If you’re ready, I’m here to help you start your new life.”

I looked around, shaking my head. “A new day.”

End of Part 2
Rev 2007/04/02

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