

Ground Cover

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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.

Ground Cover
Parts 1 - 6
Last Rev 2011/09/15

Challenge

Standing up at the end of class, letting the crowd mill to the table at the front of the room to pick up the essay we turned in last week. Groans as folks found their work slashed and dripping with red.

"Mister Iacobino, if you would remain for a moment," Professor Marsh called from near her podium.

I nodded as I picked up my book bag. Been expecting it; this was our third week, and our third essay. "Surv French Lit Adv" was the class listing in the on-line catalog. Fuck that, it was a writing class, an assignment every week, a reputation for being a grind. And I loved it.

Let's see if we can get over this small hurdle... I found my paper, "97" in red on the front. She didn't like something? I stepped over to the podium and our gray-haired professor. Scanning my paper, no other marks, just the grade.

"Yes, Professor?" I asked with a smile. She had to be in her late fifties, silver-gray hair, sharp as a tack.

"*Monsieur Iacobino*," she started out, pronouncing my last name correctly, which is a challenge for non-Europeans. The leading "Ia" is something between a "Y" and a "J."

She gave me a most curious look. She mused, in French that reeked of Toronto, that I'd done another fine paper, quite different in terms of style than the previous ones for the class.

I asked if she found it inappropriate, sticking to the Provence dialect of the work we'd read.

No, no, it was just so different from the others I'd written.

I nodded. I had shit to do, so I cut the dance short. I switched to brassy Parisian and asked if she

wasn't sure who had written it.

She backed off, offering that she'd spoken to others in the department who'd had me as a student, and...

I interrupted again and told her to pick the place and time; we could talk about such topics, or I'd write an essay, her choice. That caught her by surprise; it's what I've done in the past, and it's worked. Two out of three profs I'd made that offer to called me on it; I bet...

She recovered quickly, suggesting three tomorrow afternoon at her office.

Three for four... I curtly agreed to be there.

She smiled and nodded, then turned to a different student waiting with a question, probably on why her paper was dripping with red, from the look on her face.

Walking out of the classroom, thought I heard a, "Goddamn wop," comment tossed my way, as well as similar remarks in at least two other languages. I didn't turn to see who; I don't give a shit.

I'm short, about five foot six, Mediterranean complexion with short curly brown hair but blue eyes. And I'm not Italian; I'm Roma -- that's Roma pronounced with a spit in the face at the end. I was adopted in Italy, brought to the States, and run through a series of foster homes. Oh, I'm a U.S. citizen, if that matters. Still have my Italian passport, just in case.

Thinking about the class -- what with budget cuts and a lot of classes not being offered as often, a lot of kids were taking it only because nothing else was offered. To them it's a total drag, because it involves work! Nasty surprise, particularly to the French Canadian crowd anticipating an easy ride. I guessed there were a few of us getting the high grades, but I saw a sea of red when I looked at the return pile. Made mine easier to find...

Work for them, easy for me, but still work, and I've got plenty of work to do, so let's get to it.

Lucky -- good weather and it's only a few minutes walk across campus to where I live.

My luck -- accepted to state college with some scholarships, but not enough. More luck -- my foster father's brother-in-law owns a bunch of self-storage yards. Hell, his family takes better care of me than all the damn foster families in this country have! Each storage yard needs a resident caretaker - - that's me! The good news, I have a rent-free studio apartment bordering campus and a meager income. The bad news is that it's a studio apartment in a self-storage yard. I have the use of a car, one of Uncle Baz's beaters. I don't have to handle any business deals about the yard; I'm there because the insurance says there needs to be someone. *C'est moi.*

Uncle Baz also owns some restaurants. One of his daughters, Elia, keeps the downstairs refrigerator stocked with leftovers. She won't stay in the same room with me, but she makes sure I've got food to eat. About half Uncle Baz's family claims they're allergic to me. "Allergic" to Roma, if you ask my opinion.

Don't care; doesn't matter. I've got homework, and paying work to do. Upstairs in my little room I set up my laptop and looked at the yellow and orange post-its on the whiteboard; each yellow post-it representing a (paying) translation assignment. Don't know what my schedule is going to be tomorrow, so let's get ahead, shall we? I worked until about one in the morning, completing everything scheduled for the next three days. I work through a loosely-organized online translation Guild. After their cut, I should clear about \$250. Too bad I don't get paid for (my) homework. Clean up and bed.

Three the following day I'm looking for B108 and Marsh's office.

Found the door; no light on inside. Knock and try and turn the knob, it's locked. Dropped the next essay into her in-box, even though it's not due for a few days. Guess I'll hang out for a bit and call it screwed again.

"Anthony?" a voice called out.

"Yeah?" I replied, turning. Oh my... A tall beautiful woman walked up and extended her hand.

"I'm Gina, Professor Marsh's reader. Have time to talk?"

She had to be six feet tall at least, wearing denim pants and a bulky school sweatshirt that couldn't hide tits to die for. Shoulder length brown hair, green eyes, perfect teeth... "My office is upstairs in the cheap seats -- let's go."

I nodded and followed. Damn, she's pretty! Sigh... My life is simple in some respects, complex in others. Not much time for girlfriends. Time, and other aspects made it complicated, like living in a not-too-romantic location. Two years, right?

She had one of the small grad-student offices, but it had an outside window at least. Narrow with a desk and an old wooden work table. We sat at a corner of the wooden table

We started out speaking French, modern colloquial French. I couldn't quite place it -- I can tell if someone is a native speaker. With her, I wasn't sure; weird. Then she switched to Period French, the French of Voltaire, and I matched her. After a couple of minutes she switched to *Schweizerdeutsch*, Swiss-German, and we talked like Baslers at Fasnacht.

She paused and smiled, then put her hands on top of mine; leaning closer she started speaking Romani.

The freak part of me locked on to her -- looking into her, drinking it in. It's something I do when exposed to a new language, or one I don't completely have. Give me a couple of hours with a native speaker, and I understand. Give me a couple of days and you won't be able to tell me from a native. I had some Romani, but not a lot, and not the Old Romani she was speaking. It was different with her than with anyone else. I picked up Norwegian last year from a chick visiting here for a semester. We touched and it seeped into me as she spoke. With Gina, Romani was pouring into me! And I was locked into her! I couldn't take my eyes off her, and her voice was doing strange things, some times

being close and some times sounding so far away, and I was drinking it in, huge gulps.

After I don't know how long, I could speak, responding to her. She repeated some phrases and I felt that thing kick in refining my hearing as well as pronunciation. She moved closer and pulled me closer; I could feel the warmth radiating off her and see better how her lips and tongue moved.

She switched again, to a language I didn't know. I was so locked in to her -- it flowed into me. A language? Commands? So weird -- it felt artificial, yet that thing inside me told me *this* was her native language. What she said was doing things to me... I was getting light headed. She moved her hands from on top of mine, going up my arms sending chills and tingles through me. She held my head, smiling and looking into my eyes as she spoke. She slid a hand behind my head, touching the back of my neck and sending electricity through me. This wasn't learning, this was downloading!

She paused, smiling. I couldn't move; I was panting, my head buzzing. She pulled my head between her breasts, engulfing me in softness, holding me there, blanking my mind with bliss, once again talking in that language, pouring it into me...

Sitting with her in my lap, looking up into her face as she held my head with her hands. "Is there somewhere we can go?" she asked quietly, in English.

"Not that's good enough for you," I replied, pained.

"It will do," she said, tipping my head forward and pressing her lips to my forehead, closing my eyes and filling me with warmth again.

Sitting in a car; we were stopped at the gate of the storage complex. "2501" I told her. She rolled down her window and entered the code. The gate creaked open slowly and noisily; I should lubricate it again as Uncle Baz never does. "Park next to the white Camry," I told her, pointing to the covered spaces next to the office.

We got out of the car and got our bags from the back seat. The sign in the office window said, "Office Hours 10AM - 12PM M-F or by Appointment." I think Baz comes here mainly to get away from nagging women and to smoke his fucking cigars. The door next to the office door is the one to my apartment. A small room downstairs has a refrigerator, washer, drier, stove and oven, sink and microwave. I have to keep it spotless or vermin take over. Metal stairs go up to my room. I secured the door and lead Gina upstairs.

Big tinted window looking out over the entrance to the storage complex and the college campus. Door to the bathroom off to the side. One table has an LCD displaying multiple security cameras and another LCD with a switch box to let me select any single camera. The switch box also has buttons to open or close the vehicle gate and control the exterior lights including very bright emergency lights. Old pushbutton phone for calling cops, fire, or both.

Then there's my table, with LCDs for the computer, separate keyboard and magic tablet. Small printer on a riser holding paper and supplies. Folders and books. Whiteboard festooned with post-its, my scheduled workload. Behind a dividing curtain, a queen sized mattress on a low platform with

drawers. Well built but still home-made storage for clothes including rods for hanging clothes.

“It’s so neat, clean, and compact,” Gina said, looking around.

I nodded -- motivation supplied by vermin, once again. I felt... “I need to use the loo,” I told her, turning to the bathroom.

Shower-tub combination, toilet, sink, mirror, and a frosted window to the outside. The window was frosted polycarbonate, and would stop small caliber rounds. Would and had. The big window in front was polycarbonate as well. I used the loo, then washed my hands and face.

Pausing to look out the big window -- I’d been here fourteen months? In my second year at school. So quiet. The only people who came up here were so-called “family,” and the pest control folks. My refuge? Compared to years before of foster hell, God yes!

A flicker of light from behind me?

I parted the curtain, stopping in my tracks.

Gina was naked, standing on my bed. Floating? Her left toes were barely touching the blanket. She was holding something in her right hand, about the size of a hockey puck. She was surrounded by a blue glow extending from floor to ceiling and to the edges of the bed. She did something to the puck and let it go. It drifted slowly down to the bed! She extended her arms to me. It looked like she was surrounded by a pinkish glow.

I undressed, not taking my eyes off her beautiful body. Pants folded on the chair, shirt hanging over the back of the chair, shoes, socks, undies underneath.

I stepped into the blue glow.

Like passing through some kind of barrier, my skin tingling as I went through, and I felt lighter? She smiled more, arms out to me.

I reached for her, my hands going into the pink bubble surrounding her, pulling us together.

I gasped; entering that pink bubble was like being dipped in pleasure. Our bodies, our lips met.

Waking with a gasp; alone. Almost six in the morning! On my back, naked, I could smell her still. Closing my eyes, enjoying the remnants of that scent, remnants of memories kissing, suckling, making love so many times, floating and drifting in her. Falling into her glowing eyes as something held us, rocking us and rhythmically squeezing us together, bringing us to orgasm yet again.

Opening my eyes with another gasp, I rolled out of bed and went to the bathroom. A bracelet on my right wrist? Flexible metal, no obvious clasp, some designs on it. Pretty. I washed up, shaved, brushed my teeth.

Getting dressed -- damn, that had been intense! But what happened? If I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose slowly, I could still detect her incredible scent over the toothpaste.

That was last night. Let's get to work. Checking e-mail, what? Supposedly sent at seven last night? Gina sent a note to Prof Marsh -- that Marsh should be using me as a reader for her classes! But weren't we making love then? I sure thought so!

Checking my Guild inbox -- glad I did -- a panic request to translate a short article on a website. I smiled; easy money. That took me twenty minutes. Got it sent off, looked through my incoming pile on the Guild website. Accepted some, declined some. No, I won't write your fucking paper!

Almost eight and no classes until ten. I was starving, and didn't feel like going through the refrigerator downstairs. I wanted eggs, bacon, toast, and juice, and I wanted someone else to fix it and clean up after! Sounds like a trip to the dining hall -- after that last deal, I can afford a breakfast or two. Maybe even three, but not four or five -- I still have to pinch every fucking penny if I'm going to make it, and I am. I can sit and read for class after. Works for me! Clean up, pack up, and head out.

Cool and a little gray out. Looking down one of the rows, I saw a couple of small cats run across between units. I snarled. We have a constant problem with ferals in the complex. More work for me. Damn, I hate cats, especially this latest batch -- when they start yowling, I can almost understand them, that language thing kicking in, crazy as it sounds.

Walked across the street to campus and in through a pedestrian gap in a chain link fence. It's not the scenic part of the campus that's shown in the brochures; it faces a storage yard, after all.

Going across the back of the campus, looking out over one of the fields, another damn cat sitting out on one of the rocks, looking out away from me. I saw some of the big black birds that hang around campus. I smiled -- wouldn't it be great if they went after all the damn cats? To my amazement, as I was thinking that, a large black bird did a stoop dive from one of the high trees, clobbering the cat! As the cat scrambled, another bird made a noisy dive at it! Hey, this is a good start!

Walked across campus and went into the commons through one of the back doors. Loaded up my tray at food services. What the hell, the panic deal this morning cleared me over a hundred bucks. I still don't have enough money for health insurance, and it's Uncle Baz's car; I just pay for gas. But I figure I've almost got enough now to get me through the end of the school year and through the summer as long as Baz lets me stay where I am. Damn, a good breakfast shouldn't be splurging!

Sitting down eating when my phone rang. Didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Tony? This is Gina!"

I tried not to gasp. "Ah, God -- what can I do for you?" How did she get my number?

"Tony, are you wearing the bracelet still?"

"Yeah, w..."

She interrupted, "On the bracelet is a symbol with three concentric circles. Put your index finger on that symbol and hold it there, pressing. Do it now! Now!"

I did it. After a few seconds, I had that feeling, like when I went into the blue glow, like passing through something. I held the phone up to my ear again. "I did it, and I felt it, like last night when..."

"Good! You're safe now -- their sensors can't spot you. But their sentries can. We..."

"Sentries? What sentries?"

"Oh, they look like cats," she said.

"I hate cats," I growled.

Why did she laugh?

"Oh, we're so lucky... Stay away from sentries; something is happening with them and..."

"This morning, when I came on to campus, I saw a cat sitting on a rock, and some of the big black birds attacked it. Pretty cool," I told her.

"Tony, did you do that? Send the birds after the sentry? Did you?" she sounded awful serious.

Somehow... "Ah, I think I might? I saw the cat, and then the birds, and though how cool it would be if they went after cats, and they did. Did I do that? How?"

She sighed. "Most likely -- Tony, nine o'clock at Professor Marsh's office! Don't tell me where you are now! Get to her office. The bracelet will protect you from the sensors, but if you get too close to a sentry, I guess they're taken care of, or the search teams, they can still spot you. If you're with other people, that helps, physical contact helps. We'll be watching, Tony -- lots are watching."

It sounded like she muffled the phone or held it away for a moment, then her voice came back.

"Yes -- I think so. That's great, it gives us more time! Tony, Marsh's office at nine, okay?"

"Okay, Marsh's office at nine. What the hell is going on?"

“I’ll explain later, Tony -- keep your head down, and get to Marsh’s office!”

Click. End of call. I looked at my phone and stored the number. Back to breakfast.

Heard chatter around me about the birds acting up, diving at some people as well as cats. Cool.

“Oh hi, can I sit with you?”

I looked up to see a girl with a tray standing next to me. Had I seen her before? She looked cute, but after Gina... “Sure -- are we in a class together?”

She sat down and held out a hand. I touched hers and a spark went between us.

“Oh -- I’m Judy -- you’re in Marsh’s Period French Lit class from hell?”

I laughed. “Yes, I am. Call me Tony.”

She had a few bites of her breakfast then launched into a tirade about Marsh’s class, particularly how much writing was required, the tight assed markup, and how it was totally fucking her GPA.

I had a weird feeling, like someone was looking at me... I moved a hand closer and touched her again; the feeling went away. I told her to not take it personally; the only way to improve at writing is to write, write, edit, and edit some more. She rolled her eyes. I held her hand. I understood there were a bunch of people in the class mainly because nothing else was offered. She nodded. I smiled and agreed it was a nasty surprise. If she’d like, I could help, reviewing her writing before she turned it in, but she’d have to have things ready a few days before they were supposed to be turned in for that to work.

That got more rolling eyes and a challenge of what did I get on the last one?

Two people standing in one of the side doors to the area we were in, one of them holding a gadget of some kind and sweeping it over the crowd. I bent down to my backpack, still holding Judy’s hand, opening my backpack and pulling out the folder with the class assignments. When I put it on top of the table, the two in the doorway were gone.

Judy flopped the folder open with one hand, and looked at me with an astonished frown. “Fu... Yeah, I can use all the help I can get. I guess I could do it tonight and e-mail it to you? Could we get together tomorrow some time?”

I dug out a post-it and wrote the e-mail address I used for school on it. “Send it to me tonight -- I’ll mark it up and send it back to you. We should get together and talk about it, the earlier the better. Then you need to rewrite, and I look at it again. Okay? I’m going to make you cry, or scream, or both.”

She held my hand in both of hers and sighed. “Yeah... Like how much time did you spend writing the last one?”

I smiled. "Sure you want to know?"

She gave me a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I do -- I'll guess less than three hours."

I nodded. "Good guess." Wasn't going to tell her it was more like half that, including two editing passes. "I do a *lot* of writing, and a *lot* of editing."

She frowned, squirming her shoulders. "Some times it's so hard to get started..."

"Being a writer means you write anyway, or do editing."

"Easy for you to say," she pouted.

I smiled a little. "No, not easy -- it's hard for me some times, too, but I do it."

She nodded, smiling a little more. "Oh, I gotta go in a few minutes." She went back to shoveling her breakfast, leaving one hand on mine.

"Me too -- where are you headed?"

"Bannon to meet with another prof," she said between bites.

"So am I -- we can head over together."

She nodded, her mouth full.

I finished the last few bites of my breakfast. Kind of nice -- I'm left handed, and was holding her left hand in my right. We cleared our trays, separating momentarily. She started for the main entrance and I headed for the back. She stopped and gave me an inquisitive look. "Secret passage -- short cut," I told her conspiratorially. She grinned and turned to go with me.

She stopped us when we were alone in a hallway near the end of the building.

"After you've made me cry, will you hold me?" she asked, standing nose to nose.

Almost said something else, but told her simply, "Yes."

She started tilting her head to one side, eyes closing halfway.

I accepted her invitation, kissing. She was my height and nicely put together.

We held hands as we walked, out a side door, across a walkway, and in another side door, pausing for another kiss. Walking through whatever building adjoins and connects with Bannon, pausing for more kisses and hugs.

"The main door would have been quicker," she groused, still holding me.

I smiled. "But wouldn't have given us the opportunity..." I whispered in her ear.

"You're pretty smart, for a guy," she whispered back, then kissed my neck.

I gave her a squeeze and said, "See you in class in an hour."

She rolled her eyes... "Yeah, what fun!"

This time a light was on in Marsh's office. I knocked. "Come in!"

Marsh and Gina were there. Gina was wearing about the same thing as yesterday, a different top, long-sleeved and bulky. God how I wanted to grab her! But I nodded to both of them and took a seat.

"*Monsieur Iacobino*," Marsh started out, with a smile this time.

"Please call me Tony," I interrupted.

She nodded. "In a moment -- apologies should be more formal. Mister Iacobino, I apologize for doubting you. You've demonstrated your talents once again," she picked up the essay I'd dropped off yesterday, "both this and as Gina confirms."

I looked to Gina, who gave me a smirk.

"She says that I should use you as a reader, for this or for other classes. What do you think of that, Tony?"

I shook my head slowly. "I'm not sure. Oh, I could do the work, that's not the issue. I'd like to find an approach that helps students improve their writing, without me dying in the process."

Marsh steepled her hands in front of her face, nodding, looking serious. "Explain? We're giving them detailed feedback now."

I shrugged. "Sort of. The pace of the class is such... Most of them grind these things out at the last minute, toss them in, get them back slashed and bleeding, put them in a pile, and start over again. I doubt many have taken detailed looks at the comments, painstakingly made, after the first or second paper." I turned to Gina. "Thank you for your hard work."

She gave me a lopsided smile.

Marsh sat back a bit. "How would you do it differently?"

I sat back as well. "That's the hard part, particularly the 'not dying' aspect... Ideally, a student would submit a draft, have it marked up and returned, then revise and resubmit. Much briefer review and markup for a grade. The issues are how many would revise and resubmit, particularly doing a conscientious revision, and figuring a class size like this, over eighty papers to review a week, I'd die!

But the current process..." I turned to Gina. "Do you see any changes in writing? A decrease in recurring errors, as an example, or do you even have the time to try and track such?"

Gina just smiled.

Turned back to Marsh. "Possibly offer it to those who are interested -- I ran into a student in the commons this morning who may send me a draft to go over. We'll see."

Marsh smiled. "How many do you think you could work with?"

"In how many hours per week, is the question... Just the current process... Figure 15 minutes each, am I close?" I shook my head. "Nah, got to cut it to more like an average of five minutes per to stay sane -- stop flagging certain errors after the second page, shortcuts like that..." I looked to Gina.

She nodded grimly. "Too damn close."

I turned back to Marsh. "One thing I don't understand -- why don't you use thrice-damned Turnitin? Others in the department use it and ..."

My vision suddenly flashed blue; Marsh gurgled and crumpled forward limply to her desk as Gina threw me to the floor, diving down herself! I started to lift my head but Gina pushed my face down to the cold floor with a hand and hissed, "Down! Don't move!"

I was about to speak when the whole place was intersected by an orange plane of light maybe three inches above my head. I watched it out of the corner of my eye as it slowly swept upwards, making a raspy buzzing sound as it went.

When it was about six feet off the floor, Gina sat up and pulled me to sitting. There was still like a light blue glow around each of us, extending out an inch or so.

"Shit!" she exclaimed eloquently. "We have to get to the roof -- we'll have to follow it up. Come on." She got up and pulled me along.

I reached for my backpack, but she grabbed me and hissed. "Leave it! Come on!"

We stood and went to the door, but waited until the orange thing went above the top frame, Gina watching it intently. "It senses motion," she told me quietly, opening the door and pulling me outside.

The hallway was littered with crumpled bodies! "Are they..." I started to ask.

"Doesn't matter," Gina interrupted, pulling me down the hall, quickly stepping over people.

We headed up one of the interior staircases, catching up to the orange thing.

The building had five floors. We followed it up past the first and second floors. As it got to the third, it stopped suddenly! Gina pulled us back to the previous landing, down half a floor or so. And

just in time -- the orange thing flicked down about five or six feet and did a slower rescan up, buzzing louder.

“If they find motion, they’ll send in a team to check it out -- I hope,” she whispered.

I didn’t like the implied alternative in that, not one bit. We started moving again, cautiously, leaving eight feet or so between us and the scanning field.

The normal stairway turned into the service stairs to the roof. We continued up and stopped, as had the orange scanning field -- it was stopped a few inches from the ceiling, barely humming now.

Gina sighed and summarized, “If they sweep down, we’re screwed. If we go through it, we’re screwed. What? What?” She turned her head slightly, concentrating. A short sigh and a short nod. She turned to me, face to face and close.

“Tony, listen. We have to go through. The ... exit will appear shortly, and will trigger their sensors. We’ll time things as best and as close as we can. I’ll lead, opening the door at the top. The exit will appear about twenty feet to the left of the door -- look for the blue target. You want to hit the blue target. No matter what happens to me, go for the blue target, got it?”

I nodded, still terrified. “About twenty feet to the left, the blue target. But what...”

She shook her head. “Nothing else matters -- go for the blue target. We’re trying to time it, and...”

Loud noises and sirens from outside, and louder noises from the base of the stairwell!

Gina’s eyes widened a bit and with a nod she told me, “Time to go!”

She pulled me up, running up the stairs, not bothering to be quiet about it. As we cut through the orange thing, it flashed much brighter, and I noticed how the intersection of the blue glow around us and the orange flared bright yellow, making an angry buzzing sound.

A crash as Gina kicked the opening bar for the door and it flung open. More noise from the base of the stairs, people coming up?

I followed her out and turned left out the door, running behind her...

Freezing to a halt at the edge of the building! Looking over the edge, I saw a shimmering blue square, about six feet down in mid fucking air, maybe ten feet on a side, a couple of feet from the building! And the ground, five floors below! People running around, some pointing at us, looked like a fight over by ...

I started to say something when Gina punched me in the stomach, grabbed me, and pulled me over the side with her! It looked like we were going to miss, but the blue square moved!

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We fell into a blue glow, floating. The glow pulled in around us becoming a rapidly shrinking sphere, becoming solid blue as it closed in around us. As it approached opacity I thought I saw the yellow thing flare around us and the building recede to that buzzing noise again? We were moving?

Then it was hard opaque blue. We could see in that blue glow. I was still trying to breathe, to recover from having the wind knocked out of me. Trying to move in the bubble, to straighten up at least my torso so I could try and breathe, the bubble got a little bigger.

Gina grabbed me; I grabbed her as well. My head went between her breasts as her arms went around me. I held her waist. "Damn -- we made it!" she whispered, squeezing me. When I wasn't as dizzy from her holding me, I realized I was breathing again.

The bubble rocked, and another blue layer appeared, quite tight around us, but we were curled up so it wasn't as bad. Until Gina said, "They're actually firing on us! The bastards!"

We rocked again, things flickering momentarily around us, images of metal, fire, and explosions breaking into darkness through transparent blue, then solid blue again.

"They put a ship in our path -- trying to stop us -- and we broke through. That ... Confirmation, they've broken off attacks and are... We did it!" She gave me an enthusiastic squeeze, kissing my head.

I held on, eyes still closed. "What the hell is going on?"

Holding me more gently. "We rendezvous in about sixteen minutes, and you'll find out. I'll be at your side. Some parts are going to be messy. But you are worth it. We've won -- you've won. We, I, will help, but you... Rest, rest for a few minutes. Once we dock, it will be a while before we'll have that opportunity again." She pulled me back to where I wanted to be and I let go, fading fast.

End of Part 1
Rev 2011/09/01

L2

Floating again, naked and intertwined with Gina, more correctly, with a GN. I looked out through the viewport in the hull of the craft, looked out on the blue marble of my homeworld.

I couldn't decide whether to laugh or to cry -- I'd done both -- it was so far beyond absurd, or comical, beyond anything I'd known. An incredible shaggy dog story, intergalactic in scope and eons in the making, and the punch line? I see him in the mirror in the morning.

I pulled on GN-143's hips, enjoying being semi-erect inside her still. She smiled and made a soft sighing sound, pulsing her internal muscles, pulling me closer and altering our slow precession in my temporary quarters. She stimulated our arousal, starting slowly but working us up until I was hugging her leg to me, eyes closed as she held one of my legs, manipulating the fields that brought us together and apart, taking us to yet another shattering climax.

Floating there, precessing in a different direction, I gave the mental command to dampen our motion and orient us so I could look out the port, down to *my* world again...

One part of the shaggy dog story starts not too long ago, oh eighty thousand years or so. The Architect wandered by and took a look at the place: an out-of-the-way solar system off in a spiral arm, but with possibilities. Interesting; a tweak here, a tweak there, and let things develop. On the way out, put up signs clearly saying, "Experiment in Progress -- No Trespassing -- Do Not Disturb."

The signs should be the give-away for the next part. Recently, about seven or eight hundred years ago, the S'thod wander by. While the S'thod are called many things, law-abiding isn't one of them. To them the signs said, "Good stuff! Help yourself, you won't be bothered!"

So the S'thod drop in to take advantage of anything they could take advantage of. They're not picky. They're not neat, either, not noted for cleaning up their own messes. When they've fucked up a planet beyond the point where even *they* can't stand it anymore, they move on.

Let's switch analogies.

Consider please: The Garden. The Architect sketches out his design and starts things along. Does his design reach fruition overnight? Not at all; it takes time. Roses, tulips, and the like take time to develop; a field designed to show a pattern in colored flowers takes planning and time. Framing the scene in a backdrop of majestic redwoods or even hedges may take many decades.

So does the Architect start these long-term designs and just walk away? If things aren't watered enough, or are watered too much, not the right amount of sun, weeded and thinned, so many different things, those designs will be for naught.

While the Architect's designs focus on the roses, the tulips, and so on, something else is needed.

Simple ground cover, simple indicators -- Johnny-jump-ups. They're not central to the design,

not the end-point of the design. They are indicators, providing short-term feedback on conditions.

While the grand design matures slowly, coming closer to the day when all the colors will blossom at once, the Johnny-jump-ups provide day-to-day short term feedback. Not the right amount of water or sun, bugs or other invaders eating things, those indicators will show it.

That's what happened. When they'd taken plenty of damage (from the S'thod), an automated system let The Architect know that his Johnny-jump-ups were not doing at all well.

The Architect received this message and arranged for a favorite and trusted Gardener to drop by, check on things, and do what was needed. *Carte Blanche* -- they had worked together before.

The Gardener arrives, and damn, it's a S'thod infestation!

Let's supply more particulars. The Architect's great designs? I'd never realized the importance of monotheism, but the idea that there is a single source for natural phenomena is a fundamental and necessary building block of the Scientific Revolution. And so many other ideas and people -- Descartes coupling geometry and algebra. Newton and the Calculus. The music of Bach. So many roses and tulips -- Galileo, Newton, Bach, Gauss, Mozart, Riemann, Mendeleev, Einstein, Salk, so many more. Soaring intellects and pivotal contributions changing the course of a species, of a world.

And the punch line? Those Johnny-jump-ups? The lowly indicators? The Roma: me. We are the ground cover, the indicators. It's so funny I cried, again.

A little more on the S'thod; to say they show indifference to the concerns of others is an understatement. If the S'thod learn something is dear to you, they will go out of their way to rubbish it! And the S'thod are not completely stupid; they do have starships after all (how they got them is another story).

A primary fault of the S'thod is that they *always* overstay their welcome. You think they would have learned, as a society if not individually -- find a place, trash it for a while, and leave. Nope. They stick around until they are discovered and forcibly evicted, or have rendered a world uninhabitable.

The Gardener shows up and discovers the infestation. Notices right off that the indicators (us, the Roma) are getting beaten up. The Gardener moved to protect the remaining Roma, by identifying key Roma and assigning guardians to each. They did this as they were rooting out the S'thod as efficiently as they could, trying to minimize collateral damage and repair the damage already done.

Those guardians -- Gina is one. GN series. Artificial life forms. Depending on the situation, assigning GNs or GTs to guard Roma. More later, but the "T" stands for tactical.

The S'thod's jig was up! All of a sudden they were scrambling to nick the last of what they could and escape with their booty and hides intact. Initially they didn't know about the Roma, that we were so important -- the S'thod initially didn't have a direct way of locating Roma, that hadn't been important to them. But they could identify the guardians; those artificial life forms are easy to locate against the primitive native background -- that's us, by the way, the primitive natives.

Unfortunately for the Roma... The S'thod wonder why the hell are all these guardians being deployed? They must be important, so let's fuck with them! One of the S'thod notices that when they find a GN or a GT, they find a certain genotype. The S'thod guess that the members of that genetic family must be what the GNs and GTs are protecting, which makes them something to destroy, along with the guardians, in an effort to distract both guardians and Gardener.

I never knew my birth parents. I learned later that they were both pure-blooded Roma, seventh-son and seventh-daughter kind of pure.. That makes me full, pure-blooded Roma, one of a few dozen left. That makes me a prize, valuable to the Gardener, and therefore even more enticing to the S'thod, the bastards, since I was the only one on the West Coast of North America.

Enough analogy, let's get close and personal: the Gardener had been here about four years, and found me shortly after I started State College. Close monitoring because of my genetic importance; they assigned two GNs and two GTs. Observe, protect, no direct contact -- yet. When the S'thod found four guardians assigned to the same place, they were all over it -- big cities like Belgrade, London, Paris only had one! Must be something hot going on! They flooded the area with sentries -- they look like cats. They almost found me six months ago; a sentry spotted me and tried to get a DNA sample for verification -- by biting me. Unfortunately for that sentry, I was looking for where the little furry fuckers were getting into the buildings. I was wearing a light on my head and carrying one of Baz's cricket bats. The furry shit lunged for me and I whacked him for six. I walked away. Sentry didn't.

A few weeks ago as the S'thod are getting their butts kicked planetwide, they decide to make diversionary pushes against guardians and Roma in Paris, Athens, and find the Roma here. They get close, as Gina contacts me and verifies my status. Wow, what contact! She also linked me to guardian systems, good news and bad news. The guardians hadn't figured out *they* were leading the S'thod to us. They learned, with me. The next morning, I made it past the sentries and a scan team. But they picked up Gina and me in Marsh's office, and decided to knock out everybody in the building and pick through the unconscious until they found the ones they wanted.

Gina and I were protected -- Marsh wasn't, and went down. Gina took us both to the floor so the S'thod's scan didn't show any motion, or us. They may be bastards, but occasionally they're cautious... They wouldn't send crews into the building until they'd completed their scan. With the building surrounded we made our run for the roof as they scanned. Our exit was projected from an orbiting ship; they got it as close to the building as they could. The exit set off S'thod alarms; our making a run for it set off more. That's when twelve GTs finally arrived, and attacked the S'thod.

The S'thod responded by attacking Gina and me as we were on our way to the orbiting Gardner ship, losing one of their ships in the process. Think of trying to stop a rifle bullet by putting a melon in its path. Not going to work.

Once aboard the Gardner ship, I received a brief and intense lesson in history. After learning about the past, I was resting and recovering before being told about my future.

Language -- a funny thing, intertwined with so much. Language really does define and limit what you can think. And language shows a great deal about the society it cohabits.

I figured out years ago that the polyglot thing I have, being able to suck up a language, isn't "normal." Yeah, we all want to feel we're special... Not "short bus" special, but something more -- going back to the garden analogy, we all want to think that we're the roses, the tulips of the garden. I know better -- I'm ground cover. But hey, that's better than some, the ragweed in the garden of life...

I'm ground cover, a Johnny-jump-up, but I *am* a special one. Not "King of the Roma" special; not even "Prince of the Roma" special. More like prize breeding stock of the Roma. Still, I'll take it...

Humor patterns in language show so much. One of the GTs came in to where I was relaxing with a GN and told her, transliterated into English, "Stabilize his orbit, he's in for a big delta-V." That was funny! A more vernacular translation might be, "Hold on to him, he's in for a wild ride." The GT's utterance shows how much space travel, and the particulars of an aspect called orbital mechanics, have permeated their society and language. I'm told in orbital mechanics, a mass in orbit stays in that orbit until and unless something imparts a change to it. That change is the delta-V, literally a change in velocity. Calm him down, he's in for a big kick in the pants that's going to put him in a different orbit!

Not that I haven't had a few good kicks already... Gina gave me the language the guardians use. It's an artificial language -- no irregular verbs -- none! I also had what amounted to links to their systems, like a giant (and accurate) wiki. Still learning how to use that; it was like a fire hose. Barely touch something and I'm flooded with information, my head spinning. The guardians with me helped, adjusting systems to feed me at adaptive rates I could handle, and train me to use those systems better.

That language thing, the ability to soak up languages, that's one of the markers of the pure Roma. The Gardener had seen it in action, as I'd been given languages by the guardians; Roma at first, and then the guardian's command language. They'd not seen the ability to assimilate language that quickly before.

Oh, they'd developed similar processes, as had those who did the guardians themselves.

Guardians -- artificial life forms, (sold, marketed) by a particular (company, guild, species). Overall, a common enough idea, with many different ones available from different suppliers.

This particular (style, group) though, was highly favored by the Gardener; they not only had guardians with the requisite skills, they imparted all their guardians with a sense of grace and artistry. So when you got a GT, a tactical unit tuned as a warrior - bodyguard - assassin, not only could that GT take on and wipe out a much larger force, they would do it with grace and artistry. Oh, they generally use a small number of shells (bodies) and potentiate these shells along (skills, talents) required. So you may not be able to tell the difference between a GN and a GT until it's too late... The GNs are generalists, part warrior, part tactician/strategist, part healer/lover. GTs are tactical, much less healer/lover, much higher on warrior, tactician/strategist, and so on. I hadn't yet met a GC, a lover/healer/companion.

Since they need to adapt the guardians to the specifics of planetary ecology, which includes fine tuning shells (bodies) to pass among locals, and the ability to use local languages, when they ran into my language thing, they were interested, as it was far more efficient than the process they had been using. It

also tickled their interest in grace and artistry.

They wanted to buy that ability from me! Study it, understand it, and build it into their guardians! The Gardener assigned a representative, along with a GT, to negotiate a deal for me. A very good deal!

Testing -- they can identify and potentiate these talents. During those tests I learned a number of communications forms, hard to call some of them languages. They also potentiated my own abilities. The good news is that I should be able to take a language from someone in a matter of minutes. The bad news is the subject may be “damaged.” Everything is a tradeoff; I still have the “lower gears” to use. They also potentiated other (abilities, skills) in me.

This deal meant I’m the richest Johnny-jump-up on Earth. Of course that wealth can’t be directly converted to Earth currency, but I’m not worried about those issues. One thing that wealth and my talents have given me is the equivalent of an interstellar rail pass. Unlimited. There are strings attached; I have to pass tests, and those are going to take a few years of (study, apprenticeship) with a crew provided by the Gardener and the guardians. But when I want, I can go Traveling! Can you say, “AMF!”

Return of the King

Gina and I vanished Wednesday morning around nine twenty. We jumped off the top of a building into a glowing blue blob and vanished, leaving a building full of unconscious people with two groups outside the building engaged in violent armed combat and the residents of the area wondering what the fuck was going down.

No, no -- there was a gas leak in the building, combined with improperly stored chemicals that resulted in the building being sealed off for a while. Luckily the event happened when there were few people in the building. Five were taken to hospital, released the same day or after overnight observation.

What a difference a few guardian “adjusters” can make...

Those hospitalized -- injuries from falls, as losing consciousness while on a flight of stairs isn't good for you, right?

Except Prof. Marsh had been sitting down. So had Judy. Both had been picked up by the S'thod -- they had traces of my aura, so they'd been picked up for further investigation. I had also been hospitalized. I had? The other two were actually on stairways in the building when the S'thod rendered everyone unconscious.

Judy and Marsh had been injured when the GTs attacked the S'thod raiding parties. But by the time they arrived at the hospital, they only had visible injuries associated with a fall.

One of the GRs, a strategy/tactics specialist, decided I should be hospitalized. But I was gone, right? Safe aboard a ship half way out in orbit. Easy for them -- they quickly matched a male GT to my shell. When I queried more about that “match” I learned that it was a *very good* match -- as in a DNA-level match. And the GT had a quick copy of my “pattern” so it (he) could respond to events in ways which were similar to what I (the real me) would have done.

Which for me once I/he regained consciousness in the hospital was to complain bitterly that I was being held against my will and I had no insurance and no way to pay for this crap. I even had vivid memories of explaining to an administrator that I was living in a studio apartment in a storage yard and living off restaurant leftovers; I didn't have money to buy books for all my classes, for any kind of insurance, or even to get my teeth fixed. My clothes, some of which had been cut off me, came from Good Will or campus lost and found piles. When I left the poor woman was in tears, and so was I.

Except at the time I was wrapped up in Gina (a GN), drifting down to the surface from orbit.

There was a brief flash before the blue bubble transporting us vanished and we were standing in the storage yard next to the door to my apartment. I had a plastic hospital ID bracelet around my right wrist and a set of memories. Wild.

My damn backpack was still in Marsh's office. The GN (do I still call her Gina, because it isn't the same one but looks like her?) told me Marsh would be holding regular office hours. We should go to the commons and have lunch.

That's what we did. Walking back across campus, I had a weird feeling... I stopped and explored it for a moment. I smiled. Some of the big black birds were sentries, *our* sentries, *my* sentries now. I'd commanded them to attack the cats, as Gina had set up those links, just not given me conscious knowledge and control of them. Now they were watching, and I knew it. I felt a lot better!

We had lunch. I read the writeup in the student newspaper about the incident the previous day, unnamed faculty and students being hospitalized but all expected to recover, and harping on the importance of proper storage for all chemicals.

Headed to Marsh's office, going out the front door this time. Almost didn't go into her office, as there were two other people there at the time, but Marsh invited us in. Marsh introduced us to her department head and one of the assistant deans for the University, heaping praise on me for my hard work and creativity. She spotted my wrist band and wanted to know when I'd gotten out; she'd been released around eight last night.

It was like I was standing there watching as my body responded, holding out the wristband for all to see and once again bitterly decrying how this could end my college education, as I didn't have money for insurance, or for books or clothes or a meal plan, let alone hospital bills. In response to questioning from the assistant dean I explained that I had an almost-uncle who owned the self-storage yard on the South side of campus; I lived there as the caretaker, and that gave me enough money to cover fees and some books but nothing else. My clothes came from the lost and found piles. I lived on leftovers from his restaurants and the occasional meal at the commons. But I was here to pick up my backpack so I could catch up on work. I was going to do my best in classes as long as I could.

Marsh told me that was okay -- since yesterday's class had been canceled, she was going to extend that assignment, and was thinking of changing the remaining assignments based in part on what we'd discussed before being so rudely interrupted yesterday. Possibly we could get together to discuss it tomorrow after class? Could Gina and I join her at the faculty lounge for lunch? I thanked her and told her that would be good. Got my backpack, apologized briefly and ducked out.

"What the hell was that?" I hissed to Gina when we were outside the building.

"All part of the plan," she told me, "taking care of all of those problems."

"So I'll be able to get my teeth looked at?" I'd been told I had some cavities a while back.

She smiled. "We took care of that -- check when you get home."

I guess I frowned. "You're not coming?"

She smiled more. "No, someone is waiting for you..."

Ah... "Thank you... See you tomorrow then."

A brief hug and we separated. I headed back.

Checking -- like I was remembering/reading it. I was healthy. Anything that needed fixing was being fixed. I seldom got sick, another of those genetic things, and that was being tuned up more.

Back at the storage yard -- hadn't I been here just a while ago? This time I opened the door and went upstairs. I saw that light blue glow in the area around my bed... I visited the loo before parting the curtain to look.

I call her Andrea. She's a GC, a lover, a healer, a goddess. She's been shaped particularly for my needs and desires. She took me, body and soul. I gave myself to her, body and soul. Floating in her embrace after making love and leaving me drained in more ways than one, she comforted me. She fed me. She fed me information as well as from her breasts. Some muscle toning could be done while I slept, but other parts of the program would be handled by GNs and GTs. Looking forward, one of my duties would be to help rebuild the stock of pure Roma. Some of that could be done from the West Coast. I would be spending next year studying abroad, in Paris, and would be quite busy...

I hadn't understood how much we are shaped and driven by conflicting desires; how those deep internal conflicts drive us and hinder us at the same time. That's one of the things we would work through. But for now being able to relax, to feel safe and comforted was more important. Passion and peace in her embrace.

Friday, walking to class after such a night and morning with her! Not fully awake, being held and suckled, then taken to such passion, then back to such peace and comfort...

As I walked to class, I headed automatically to one end of an admin building, but corrected my course; Friday morning was my usual check of lost and found piles. I don't have to do that any more!

Going in to Marsh's class -- Judy jumped me, quite literally, slamming into me and holding me. I held her and got her to settle down. We sat together for the class.

Marsh talked (in French) about changing the class, cutting down on written assignments but having us revise and turn them in again; revised papers could only improve our grade. She also wasn't going to put as much weight on the early assignments. You could see the tension in the class go down a few notches!

Lunch at the faculty lounge, Marsh, Gina, me, and two others. One was a guy from the Languages part of the department, and a gal from Admin -- both of them spoke Italian. We talked mainly about the class. The admin gal asked (in Italian) if my financial situation was so precarious; had I applied for... I kept my voice to a low volume, but let her have it. Their financial aid system looked at incomes, ignoring the complete unwillingness of foster parents to provide any support. The only reason I hadn't been emancipated was because my current foster family got money for me. Not that I saw a stinking dime from them. I was lucky Uncle Baz, who was actually a complete stranger but treated me better than *any* of my foster families had, needed a caretaker for the storage yard, and owned restaurants; I was lucky I liked lamb, as I got a lot of leftover lamb. If I received a bill from the hospital, I didn't know what the best approach would be, to flat out tell them I couldn't pay, or just ignore it; in any event, I couldn't pay. With the extra money I got from Baz, I'd just be able to pay tuition and fees for next

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semester when that came around, assuming they didn't go up more than 8%. That's leaving nothing for incidentals such as books, supplies, food, or clothing. A voice in my head told me the Admin gal knew they were going up a little over 9%. The guy looked at her then told me to focus on my classes; they would get something worked out.

Two weeks -- that's what it took. And damn what a lot I learned in those two weeks! One thing I learned was that things took time; in this case, two weeks! Another was attention to detail; so many details needed to be handled, and were handled in those two weeks. Like not leaving Baz in a pickle; we found a guy who was a good fit for the caretaker job.

On the face of it, I received a no-strings grant from an Italian-American association for my education. Other things fell into place and I just "happened" to find a room in a condo on the other side of school. I moved in with the folks who were already there -- who just happened to be my GC, my GN, and a GT. Andrea is tall and voluptuous, my GC. Gina lives with us; that caused some interest in Marsh's class until it became clear that Gina and I were the ones marking up papers and helping others with rewrites. Our GT is Deb, who is tall, slender, and tremendous. She runs me ragged, drills me on hand-to-hand, and screws me senseless if I'm good -- what motivation!

I've changed so much in such a short time -- my major is now foreign policy and economics. I tell people I want to travel after I graduate...

So much has changed. I don't worry about where the next dime is going to come from; I still do translation work, but I don't depend on the money. I eat right. I exercise (like it or not). Andrea is healing me on so many levels. I'm healthier and more productive than I've ever been in my life.

The semester and the school year end mid-May. June first I'll be in Paris, and will be there through the following July, returning in August. Oh, I'll study; my program is packed and already set out. I'll also be rebuilding the Roma genetic pool in my free time.

I think the Johnny-Jump-Ups are doing just fine.

End of Part 2
Rev 2011/09/15

The Path

Seven years -- is that what it's been? I stood on the balcony of our suite overlooking the harbor at Cannes in the South of France. Andrea asleep in the bedroom; the latest incarnation of Deb, our GT, is out prowling, identifying trouble before it finds us.

I touched my left cheek, touched the scar I wore there and would wear willingly for the rest of my life as a reminder of the price of inattention. Inattention and the ferocity with which some people object to simple logical analysis when it invalidates their cherished beliefs. Some of my papers have led to revolutions, some peaceful and some less so, and improvements in the human condition. My Ph.D. thesis -- the University had to accept it, but it didn't matter if they awarded me the degree or not. It was published in eight languages (we did the translations). The conference I was attending dealt with a paper I'd recently published which expanded on one of the issues I addressed in the thesis. As usual, the arguments against were emotional at their core, even if couched in other terms. Our responses were the same -- please demonstrate the error in fact, logic, or reasoning of the argument. Feeling my cheek again, remembering a response in the form of a slash with a broken glass.

Remembering sitting in an anonymous suite in a Geneva hotel sipping sweetened tea, a Most Senior Minister and member of the Ruling Family gesturing to a copy of the paper I'd published and telling me, "What you suggest we simply cannot do." I nodded. "I understand, Your Excellency. But others, your competitors, can and will adopt these approaches." And the models showed clearly who had the advantage in that situation. We both understood the challenge. In quiet tones I discussed with him some aspects of the paper which were not so apparent. After a few minutes, I could tell the junior to the Economics Minister got it. Of course he had worked to set up this meeting; we had been corresponding for a good while... I smiled and asked him a question to confirm his understanding. He answered correctly. His boss gave him a narrow-eyed look, and stroked his chin for a few moments. I made a couple more remarks and asked another leading question. The junior gasped and turned pale. His boss was about twenty seconds behind him, his eyes narrowing and a thin wry smile forming.

I nodded and turned to the senior, addressing him in the dialect of his youth, "Your Excellency, I humbly request, I suggest, just the four of us."

He raised an eyebrow and looked to his Economics Minister, who nodded in agreement.

With a gesture of his hand, the senior gave his order, shooing out the others. He didn't have to give it twice.

When it was just the four of us, I made a few more remarks and asked another leading question. The younger one laughed out loud, just for a moment. The Minister smiled and nodded. He turned to his senior and gesturing to my paper, said, "This is but one domino -- he is talking about knocking down the whole pile!"

I opened the paper to Fig. 3, took out my pen, and drew two arrows. The younger looked and gasped. The minister looked at and went pale.

The Economics Minister turned to his senior and in a shaky voice said, "We talk about knocking

over dominoes as he sets fire to the entire village!”

I nodded; an apt summary.

He looked to his senior and in a quiet but shaky voice described the trap unfolding.

Junior gasped once more and interjected, “There are only two...”

We all looked at him; I smiled and replied, “Yes.” There were only two countries who were in the position to pull this off. Theirs was one.

The senior is a very sharp old bird -- that’s why he was here. He contemplated for a while, stroking a neatly trimmed chin. His contemplation closed with a look to his Minister with a raised eyebrow, and then turning to me, “Why do you place this burden at my family’s feet?”

I extended a hand to him; he took mine. “Uncle,” I addressed him using the honorific, “I need your help. *We* need your help. For hundreds of years, your family has acted as stewards of the land. I hope and I pray that you will accept this burden and your family will continue that stewardship for the benefit of our grandchildren, and their grandchildren.”

He pondered mightily but briefly, giving me a squeeze of my hand. More pondering, looking to his cousin, and his junior, then back to me. “It must be this way,” he decided, he realized.

I nodded. “I see that as the best hope for us all.”

He looked to his cousin. “We must start immediately.”

The Minister nodded and turned to his junior advisor. “This is your burden as well.”

A much more somber look from him. “It must be this way.” Then to me, “How can I reach you?”

I offered, “I will be at Oxford for the next few years.” I felt safer there than in the States.

He smiled and nodded.

The senior was no slouch. “This will take what, six to eight years?”

I smiled and suggested, “Twenty four to twenty seven months.”

Narrow looks from the seniors, another gasp from the junior, but he recovered first, adding, “Yes, it will be that quick -- and most won’t know what is happening until it is too late!”

“Correct, I hope!” I confirmed. “In your spare time read about the American John Boyd; no, read about him in the next few days.”

The senior shook his head, then looked to me with a slight smile. “And what do you ask of my family, my young friend?”

I smiled as well. “I ask but two small favors, Your Excellency.”

A broader smile, inviting. His Minister chuckled.

I outlined the first, in about six months time. Understandable and agreed. The second, in about two years time, was quite audacious, and seemingly unrelated.

To his questioning look, I was almost in tears, still holding his hand. “It must be this way, Uncle -- I cannot do it without your help.”

He nodded and replied, placing his other hand over mine, “We will do as you request. We will do what we can to help you carry *your* burden.”

Looking into each others eyes, committing to the unknown... “Uncle, it is as if I am carrying a smoky torch, only letting me see a few steps ahead,” I whispered, “and the way is not easy...”

We spoke softly for a while longer. I exited the way I’d entered, taking a service elevator to the basement and through a side door along a path that just happened to have faulty cameras.

*

And now two years later in Cannes, that junior was Minister of Economics, the former Minister having moved to the U.N. At a conference session tomorrow after the initial presentations I will be the target of a barbed, slanted, and bitter denouncement thinly veiled as a question. In response, I will make a suggestion which will receive very puzzled looks. Then the Minister of Economics will announce that his country was announcing the following immediate steps in support. People will realize that a trap they haven’t even seen has been sprung. Don’t know if we’re going to have people peeing their seats or not. We were doing it on a weekend when major financial markets were closed, to let the reverberations dampen out a little. Still, a lot of money was going to change hands Monday. But this would just be financial realignment and shearing of speculators; regimes weren’t going to fall on this one. I hope.

So it went, the man who stood to denounce me still standing after hearing the shocking supporting announcement, shaking his head and realizing that without him this latest flower in the design would not, could not have blossomed. He turned to me and with a smile he bowed. Only a few could see his right hand as he held the lapel of his suit coat, giving me the finger.

I sought him out at the private reception later that day. He gave me a steely gaze but accepted my hand. “Well played,” he admitted, “Very well played.”

I offered him the chairmanship of an organization we were setting up. “Mister Hertzog, we need your help,” I told him honestly.

He glanced around, seeing the Minister of Economics, and two other personages who he quickly

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deduced to be members of the cabal, standing next to us. His smile changed. “I would be honored.”

We spent a few minutes speaking softly. We separated with a handshake and mingled with others.

The press had been held back from the reception. What were they expecting? Blood? They got what they didn't expect, the two of us shaking hands and walking back to the hotel together.

One of the paramedics wiped blood from my face, inspecting small lacerations; scalp wounds bleed like crazy. My vision was a little blurred, and I knew the blast had damaged my right eardrum. But other than that, I was intact and alive. So was Andrea. I knew that, but I asked anyway.

“Where is Andrea, my wife? How is she?”

“She is uninjured, Sir -- please turn your head this way?” Irrigating a scalp wound.

Andrea timed it well, knocking me down at the last moment and pulling the lectern on top of us for more protection.

The preparation, the fanaticism! Andrea’s sensor scan showed that the bastard’s right lung had been removed and replaced with a housing which held two liters of high explosive! We didn’t know how many died instantly; triage was still ongoing.

A few hours later we had a better idea. At least thirty dead; they were still reviewing video of the event. Structural damage to the building! Wherever I go, wherever I speak, cameras are on me, and the crowd. There had been four super-high-def cameras going for this one. We’d watched a sequence from one of them, individual frames playing out slowly, showing Andrea knocking me down, with the two of us and the podium not yet hitting the floor as fire erupts from the right side of the bastard’s chest.

So polite -- he’d waited through my statement queued up for the center mic to ask a question. While analysts point to him making the sign for the Holy Order with his right hand, one camera angle clearly shows Andrea already moving as he raises his hand to make the sign, his left hand slipping inside his coat to trigger the detonator in his chest.

And what will it gain them? Nothing, at best! Further ostracism, particularly from groups which had partially supported them. They say all they want is peaceful co-existence -- hah! They have isolated themselves in two small countries, countries which cannot function efficiently in the modern world economy. They don’t want co-existence, they want a return to structures that do not work! They have made their choices, and the results are clear!

“Have the others been warned?” I asked one of the security people. I knew they had, through *our* channels, but I wanted to be sure broader systems were also on notice.

The pattern had become so much clearer in the three years since Cannes conference -- the emergence of a group, around the world. Me, in economics. Patricia Yang in psychology. Edwin Carnes, mathematics. Joyce Koenig, sociology. Gopal Ramakrishnan, physics. Elena Sanchez, medicine. A small group of individuals making contributions that changed the world. While I was the only Roma in the bunch, all of us had guardians at our sides. I’d met Patricia in Singapore last year. She knew the story. She’d met Joyce, and she knew as well. We’re not sure of the hard science types. We’d been planning a get-together, possibly Geneva later in the year, but that might not be wise. I checked with Andrea; Joyce and Patricia knew we’d survived intact. Both wanted to talk.

“Yes, Sir -- you received a call from Doctor Koenig who would like you to call at your convenience.”

Maybe we could visit her for a while; a short hop from London.

A young woman approached; she'd been crying. She identified herself as from the Prime Minister's office; he was on his way back from Brussels and sent his sincere apologies.

I took one of her hands; Andrea took the other. She'd lost close friends in that conference room. We pulled her closer. "Please give the Prime Minister our apologies for bringing this upon you and your country. We are truly sorry."

We held her and let her cry.

Two weeks later, sitting around a fireplace in a resort outside Stockholm, a private resort now even more private, guarded by military and more.

“You’re fucking nuts!” Edwin cried out, looking at me in disbelief.

I glanced around the room. Joyce had organized the gathering. I joined locally, Patricia and Edwin flying in from the States with their retinues. Gopal and Elena couldn’t make it, but Elena was trying to line up a location and security for a meeting near her in Rio.

I looked to Linda, Edwin’s GC. She smiled, almost a smirk. “Linda, how would you explain it?” I asked.

Edwin swung around quickly, giving her quite the accusing look.

She draped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, leaning him back on her, getting him to relax a bit. “That’s a good summary,” she agreed.

I’d left out the bit about the Roma; those details weren’t important to him.

Edwin leaned back into his GC more and sighed, his brow still furrowed. “Damn... And what is this Architect’s Grand Design? The other-other white meat?”

“He gets lonely -- he wants more people to talk to,” I suggested.

That really furrowed his brow.

Joyce offered, “*Sic itur Ad Astra* -- development of peaceful sentient races traveling to the stars.”

“I like that better,” I agreed.

Edwin smiled again, nodding. “I can go for that. Okay, so why are we here, I mean this meeting?”

Joyce spoke up. “I need better tools for modeling groups and group interactions -- your work in dynamical systems.”

He smiled. “Yeah, I’m working on...” He suddenly sat straight up, like he’d been stuck with a pin. He looked to Linda, then to the others in the room. “Hey! All these pieces coming together -- are they...”

Linda and Andrea spoke at the same time, “No!”

Andrea continued, “We are NOT feeding you ideas, let alone solutions! We don’t *have* solutions to your problems -- we don’t even know the problems -- you are doing the analysis, identifying the problems, and finding the solutions which work for *you*. What we *are* doing is keeping you healthy and at the peak of your abilities.”

I put a hand on her knee and added, "Keeping us alive. Thank you, love."

A thought -- "Would the language thing I have, the comparative part, be of use? Could you develop that? It might help Joyce and Edwin work together better?"

We could see the gathered GCs and GTs pondering that one.

One of Joyce's, Alex, spoke first. "That is a *very* good idea! It would also allow us to give you a common language, one not used nearby, such as Erub, to allow you to communicate freely, particularly when we are not available to mediate."

A glance around checking in; "Edwin, this is a prime example -- we did not think of this, and we should have!" A smile and a chuckle, "You stand to gain the most, as you are the only monolingual in the group."

Linda pulled him back to leaning on her. "We'll start tonight, darling..."

I looked to Patricia. "What about the Holy Order? I'm beginning to take this personally."

She shook her head, looking to Joyce. "Over time, they will die out..."

I frowned. "It's the transitions that are a bitch..."

Joyce nodded, getting that far-away smile. "Indeed. The transition, the seed, has to come from within -- within the person, within the group. If we could place the proper seed, it could be done fairly quickly..."

"Isn't that likely to be messy, blowing up an already unstable situation?" Edwin asked.

Joyce smiled and shook her head. "That's not the way; it could be quite peaceful."

Patricia nodded. "Mass therapy -- leading each individual to seemingly independently develop the realization that there is a better way -- and they will abandon the flawed way -- they will quietly and peacefully walk away from it."

We discussed it intensely for a couple of hours, all participating. It was Albert, one of Patricia's, that called time, having us go off to bed and (eventually) get some rest.

Getting into bed with Andrea a short while later, my head still spinning, I eased into her embrace and whispered, "Do your best, Love -- I need you." She sighed and pulled me closer...

The following morning over breakfast we continued discussing not the downfall, but the cure of the Holy Order. By dinner, we had a high level outline. Where we needed Edwin's help, and his tools - I had the feeling it would take around a dozen seeds. Joyce agreed. Edwin's gut agreed; he gave us a list of computer kit to get, starting with top-of-the-line Apple tablets and eggs, and a commercial

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package called Mathematica. He'd send us his tools, and we'd talk about how to use them.

It was fascinating, watching and feeling how we worked together and grew together, supporting each other. While we had to disperse, we agreed it was an exercise we should repeat.

Potentiating the language skill and imparting the new languages to the others took about two months, and gave us a new and powerful set of tools. Not only did we have a much improved ability to communicate with each other, new languages provide new ways of looking at things. We decided that the others needed these, but it had to be done in person, with at least a small group.

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Action

GTs were our seeds in the Holy Order. The initial stages went well. Of course, no plan survives initial contact with the enemy, and this one was no different. We had to adapt, refine, respond. We did.

A problem with our models and tools, advanced as they were, is that they track the cohort and not the outliers. Yes, we can get estimates of population sizes, centroids and dispersals, but those measures can support a few wild ones out six or seven sigma. One analysis practically demands them.

One of those wild ones decided Elena Sanchez was worth taking out almost a full block in Rio. As one commentator noted, the breakthroughs she'd developed had saved so many lives that some thought it was worth sacrificing over eight hundred so that she wouldn't save more.

Another group burned down the townhouse complex in Chicago where Patricia lived -- she'd been whisked out just in time, and only a dozen died. Only...

Edwin told us he and Gopal were the lucky ones -- those people are too stupid to follow math and physics.

Joyce was looking for a place which could hold us all, quietly, securely. An offer came in -- the use of an estate outside Geneva, on the lake. It was an area full of old money, private money. Quiet and secure. Two GTs and a GR went to check it out.

Patricia and I, and our guardians, were together in Oxford. Patricia was excited about everyone being together. I wasn't sure -- I had a Roma feeling, the feeling of a dog who knows he's about to be kicked, but doesn't know from where.

We went for a walk. We agreed we needed a place for all of us. We had the parameters. We called in our GR. The GTs and the GR hadn't found anything on site. Yeah, we know that, and I still had the feeling we were being set up for a ratfuck! We all had sufficient training to understand the difference between not finding anything and nothing being there... I described a backup plan I thought would be useful, and Patricia added some superb suggestions. The GR agreed; they'd get started. Estimated time to completion five or six weeks.

I couldn't help it -- I had a really bad feeling about the whole deal. I know it's not logical! The property had been scanned. Each of us had a protective bubble which would protect us against anything up to and including a thermonuclear bomb. I know that -- I still don't feel comfortable!

Patricia and our guardians talked about it. They didn't try and talk me out of it. What would help? Well, the work on our bolthole helped. One of the few concrete suggestions I had was that we only speak Erub on-site; no other spoken language to be used. That's what the four of us (and our retinues) used to speak to each other. We felt fairly secure with Erub as there probably weren't many others who understood it within a few hundred lightyears. That and it is truly fucking alien in terms of syntax, semantics, grammar.

Everyone agreed, and our GR even thought that was a very good idea. What about Gopal and

Elena, Patricia wanted to know -- they didn't have Erub yet. Well, they need to get it before they set foot in the place. Patricia started to say something, but stopped and nodded her head, agreeing.

Joyce and her crew, dealing through intermediaries, handled the sub-rosa agreements with the owners. We weren't there, we never were there, and we never would be. To the local community, we were just another super-rich family wanting privacy, and that was enough.

Those negotiations took a little over a week, which provided the time to bring Gopal and Elena up to speed on Erub and so much else.

A nasty storm moving over the Lake, visibility zero if you were stupid enough to go out in it. The bubbles which brought us in during the night don't have radar or optical reflections.

We came in with a bag or two each, but I think most of us were used to such. The local delivery services knew how to find us, and there were other guardians on the Continent and in the States who could send us things by means other than the usual delivery services. Ram soon had quite the lab going, with Edwin helping him. The rest of us continued to cause trouble through our writing and publishing.

We relied on our guardians for a lot; we never left the core of the building, never answering the door, and only went out to look on the lake after scans told us it was safe.

I was still skittish, looking over my shoulder, waiting for that boot in the side.

At dinner, about four and a half weeks after we'd moved in, and a little over six weeks since a particular discussion, Patricia gave me a very nice drawing of a sleeping dog, one eye partially open. She's quite the artist. I told her I wanted, "*Cave Canem*," on the top. She agreed.

Our GR, who I'd named Athena, had given Patricia and me the news that our bolt-hole was ready should we need it. When she showed us images of it, I laughed; we'd given them *carte blanche*, telling them to just do it. They'd replicated the place we were living in, at least for layout and functionality. Very nice. We thanked her, and I told her I'd sleep better at night.

We relied on our guardians for a couple of technology tricks as well. Each of us had computers. We all had top of the line Apple tablets, and Apple eggs for additional processing and memory. We used the wired cradles for the eggs, with optical fiber going to our networking gear, and the high bandwidth silverline interconnect between egg and tablet. As much as the rest of the stuff had advanced, keyboards and magic tablets were still the input devices of choice. In spite of the layout of the place, spread out on one floor, we did everything with wired connections; our guardians convinced us that we couldn't use wireless in a secure enough manner without drawing attention. Edwin understood the gadget we connected to -- part of it was standard networking stuff, but the other part was guardian technology, essentially routing our Internet connections through different parts of the world. My connection still went through Oxford. Patricia's went through Chicago, Elena's through Rio, and so on. It drove some folks up the wall, trying to trace us. We responded to queries, signing things with our privacy keys, and told people we were safe, and that's all.

We kept doing our thing. We had one flareup with the Holy Order; their higher-ups decided a

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group trying to leave shouldn't be allowed to "Renounce the Will of God." It took some tricky work, but we managed to avoid major violence, and the event had the effect of hastening their dissolution.

We felt good; we'd eliminated a major instability, taking the race one step closer to the Stars.

We were safe for another seven weeks.

Saturday night - Sunday morning about two, I woke up surrounded by a blue bubble! I'm suddenly incredibly alert; we are under attack! Our bubbles protected us, and let us talk to each other while not letting any sound register outside.

Fucking setup! The rooms have little plastic tubes running off through the foundation and underground to buildings a few hundred meters away! They'd been listening to us through fucking acoustic tubes, and now they were pumping an anesthetic gas back in through those tubes!

We were all unharmed -- internal sensors in the GTs went off. We gathered our computers; all our records were electronic. I was yelling at Athena, our GR -- nothing left, not a fucking molecule! Let them know someone was here! As I was yelling at Athena, Patricia was cluing the rest of the gang in on our bolthole, ready and waiting. The first bubble was ready to go, one team per bubble. An optical field blocked any sign of departure, first group away, up to about thirty kilometers, and from there suborbital to our new home.

I was in the last bubble, with our GR, Athena, goddess of war. We hovered at a few kilometers. From that altitude we could see vehicles gathered at the perimeter, ready to move in. We could see the small recon drones they had circling the area. We'd identified and tagged the people in command. The guardians would track the whole chain and shake them down for any intelligence.

"Fuck you," I said, and we did it.

We brought the entire building, contents and all, to around 1400 degrees Celsius. Oh, we cordoned off the property so the neighbors didn't get warm. But we reduced the place to ash and slag, melting it into a hole a few meters deep. When we cut the retaining fields and the cordon, it was still glowing red-orange, cooling quickly.

We accelerated up and out. Analyze that, you bastards!

I was so pissed! Yet Andrea, my wonderful Andrea, had her arms around me. I understood -- my skittishness had given us an out when we needed it. But we'd needed it! And who were the bastards, and what had they learned?

Around half an hour to our new home under an uninhabited island in the Caribbean. No optical or radar track of our arrival. The surface of the island was untouched. Our new abode was underground, underwater, made of molecularly aligned fused silica at least a meter thick and far stronger than steel. Yet it matched the interior of our old abode on the lake -- the humor of our guardians showed, as they made the new place as close to where we'd been as possible.

Our bubbles came in through an underwater tunnel. Where before we'd had a wall of glass looking out over the Lake, we now had a wall of transparent material looking into the Caribbean, about six meters underwater.

I was the last to arrive; the others congratulated me on my paranoia and planning.

Athena took command -- she apologized for not identifying the threat far earlier. They were still working up the situation; she would give us a report when they had more information.

For now, we were safe. We had food, water, electricity, everything we needed. If we needed something else, we could get it. Our abode wasn't undetectable; a high-powered ground-penetrating radar would detect something strange. We had sensor nets spread out that would alert us to any such probing, or anything coming near.

We didn't do anything to hide our individual online presences; we hadn't in the past. Edwin told us that within minutes of arrival in our new home, someone started pinging the snot out of our computers -- all of them. When I asked for an explanation, he said others were poking us to see if we were still around. Our eggs and tablets were safe, he added, protected by an army of penguins and alpacas. He thought that was funny.

I was tired. I got hugs and thanks from everyone for being paranoid. In bed in our little room, waiting for Andrea, my head was still buzzing. Linking in, I knew the nominal "outside" wall next to me was over a meter thick of incredibly strong material, and that was embedded in the rock outcropping of the island. If that wasn't enough, the defensive fields we had would protect us against any destructive device on the planet.

I was still waiting for the boot...

"Hold me, please," I whispered to Andrea as she slid into bed and next to me. It took her a while to get me to unwind.

She woke me the next morning early and passionately. We showered together, dressed, and joined the others for breakfast.

Most of the time, meals are the six of us, the principals, our GCs, and possibly a GR -- twelve to fourteen, some times eight or ten if not all the GCs attend. This morning, it was the whole mob, which is twenty three. Big buffet breakfast and we sat around the main room, looking at fish swimming by -- quite the view!

Athena had enough for an initial briefing. The group that tried to nab us? A group of plutocrats, basically. Very smart and with access to substantial capabilities. She was still picking up information -- we had electronic copies of most of their reports already, and more were coming in. They'd built the place we'd been in specifically to observe people; they'd used it quite successfully for decades.

They had positively identified the six of us, the principals, as being on site.

Athena stood there, smiling, waiting.

"For shit's sake, how?" Edwin finally yelled out, to laughter from the rest of us.

Athena nodded and said, "Exactly."

When she started explaining, we'd been living in a fucking lab cage! The place was set up to monitor everything possible -- electricity and water going in, and the sewer going out! They literally analyzed our shit! That's how they got "solid" ID's on the six principals -- DNA matches! But the rest? They weren't sure how many people were there total. DNA so far said eleven or twelve? But heat and CO2 measurements put it at twenty one to twenty three? So did voice recordings, correcting as best they could for distortion induced by the acoustic tubes. There were strain gauges in the shower pans and different spots in the floor to measure weights! They fucking took air samples from the bedrooms overnight, and watched the thermostats as another estimate of how many people were in each room!

Athena explained. The guardians had them confused -- of the seventeen guardians present, there were only six genotypes. The food numbers didn't add up either -- they'd been monitoring our purchases and deliveries. What they couldn't tell, Athena said, was that after the first few days almost all our fresh meat, seafood, and fruit came in from other guardians overnight, rather than from local, monitored deliveries. One of the breads we liked was sourdough fresh from San Francisco daily!

The group doing the analysis, Swiss-German, was greatly troubled by these anomalies; they were used to having their analyses spot-on, cross-checked, and consistent. The big one besides the number of people was Internet use. We weren't using the provided high-speed connection. We weren't using wireless that they could detect, not Wi-Fi, not even Bluetooth (Athena insisted we turn that off, too). They'd flown drones over the property to try and detect satellite use!

They tried and repeated an experiment; sending us instant messages or tweets. On a number of occasions they recorded audio confirmation when our computers announced messages arriving, yet analysis of ping times and routes to those computers showed times and routes consistent with locations in Rio, Oxford, or Chicago, and not Geneva. They did not understand how this could happen.

Language was another -- the recordings they had couldn't be matched to any known language. They knew I was Roma (from my DNA as well as my history), and that I was a polyglot. They scoured Roma dialects and the Caucasus with no results. They turned to Elena, looking for a possible connection with tribes along the Amazon, with no results. Very troublesome. Linguists trying to break down the language were breaking down instead.

All interesting, I guess, but I still had some simple questions. Why? Why were they interested in us? Why were they tracking and analyzing us so closely? Why had they attacked, and why had they attacked when they did? What did they expect to gain, by tracking us, or by attacking us?

Four days later, looking at the fish as they swam by, I was starting to recognize individuals -- a larger fish who listed to one side going by, another with a chunk out of one dorsal fin. Our analysis, our guardian's analysis, said their motivation was economic -- it's always about the money. Particularly interested in me, for the upheavals I'd caused in so many markets, industries, economies, nations, but also the interactions with Patricia and Joyce -- their analysts insisted we were responsible for the dissolution of the Holy Order.

That scared the piss out of them -- we'd somehow taken down the Holy Order without firing a shot, or even setting foot in the area. Their analyst called it "meme warfare" -- we'd crafted and

released memes that not only undermined the Holy Order's belief system, but inoculated people against a slew of similar issues. The only "defense" against these memes was isolation -- the language barrier. But as the memes spread to multilingual individuals, they were being translated and passed on; one way to measure their spread was to monitor the popularity (the abandonment) of belief structures such as astrology. A footnote noted out that while Page 3 would probably be forever, many newspapers had quietly dropped their astrology columns.

Patricia and Joyce liked that analyst, Grinwald. They thought he was correct most of the time, but off base in some areas. We talked about it, and decided they should give him feedback.

To their credit, other than sending out a short note that everyone should assume we were reading everything they did, the group didn't change their systems. Oh, they'd already been using hand delivery on certain classes of documents, not having them available in electronic form on anything connected to a network, a technique called airgapping. One of their analysts wagered that didn't slow us down a whit. One of his colleagues agreed and mentioned she'd like a certain kind of chocolate if we were listening. I have to say a couple of us were tempted, until we were shown the reply where the first analyst said that if he was responsible for our security he'd be personally threatening each and every one of us with a very personal and very severe beating if we dared...

But as to why they decided to attack us? No clue.

I had, we had, copies of their reports in both electronic and bound form. We'd gotten the latest along with everyone else on the distribution list yesterday. Oh, that one had been prepared on a system that was airgapped and in a shielded room, printed, and distributed by hand. It didn't add much to what we'd learned, but did provide a comprehensive roll-up with everything in one tabbed binder. Gave us more insight into their analytical methods, and that definitely begins with "anal" in many senses of the word, starting with that Swiss-German fixation for detail.

Oh well... I picked up my iPhone. I'd been told it would show my location as Oxford. I dialed a number in Geneva, mid afternoon there.

A polite woman answered.

"Good afternoon. This is Anthony Iacobino calling for Mister John Abernathy. I'd like to speak to him about the report he received yesterday, DM-2501."

"Ah, thank you Doctor Iacobino, let me see if I can find him. One moment please..."

From her tone of voice, you'd think I called all the time... I think she'll find him... I smirked -- she'd called me "Doctor" yet I'd not used any title... A sharp cookie...

"Is this Anthony Iacobino?" a man's voice asked a while later.

"Yes, it is. Mister Abernathy?"

"Ah, how may I ask did you get this number?"

“Much in the same way I obtained the report, Sir. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

He managed to laugh a bit. Good for him -- this might work.

“You say you have of the report?” he queried.

“Yes, with appendices. If you care to open yours and select a page, I can verify from my copy.”

“Oh, I believe you. We have some questions as well, as you are aware. What can I do for you?”

“What did you want from us? Do you want? Why did you attack? I don’t understand.”

“Are you responsible for the destruction of the Holy Order?” he asked bluntly.

I sighed. “Let’s say you have an ingrown toenail on your great toe. Do you chop off the toe? The foot? Of course not! You carefully, if painfully, trim the nail and treat the inflamed area. In time the nail grows out once more. We did not ‘destroy’ the Holy Order. Grinwald’s report was spot on, as we told him. We brought about conditions which allowed individuals associated with the Order to re-evaluate and make choices. We showed them they had options with more favorable consequences.”

“As simple as that,” he offered.

“Not simple at all, as you appreciate. It was a very difficult operation, but successful. And we learned from it. Why did you attack us?”

His turn to sigh. “We ... some in our group felt you were about to leave.”

I gave him a while to continue, and concluded that was going to be the extent of it. “Those members of your group were quite wrong -- we were quite happy where we were. If you wanted to talk, you could have picked up the phone, for Christ’s sake. My apologies -- I get testy in such situations.”

He managed a chuckle. “You should have heard me... Still, those same people correctly predicted you had substantial resources to draw upon.”

“Yes, and you have pushed us into quite a pickle -- we would have much rather not taken those steps. I expected and hoped we’d go to ground for a while, and as things settled out, we’d be able to move more freely, starting out in the local area, expanding in both space and time. That has become quite a bit more complicated.”

“Yes, I agree... We might be able to ... But what is your next step? Your next conquest? What are your goals?”

“Our goals? We do not have a fixed plan, a set of goals. We’re trying to heal or fix things. I think my work is about done; I haven’t caused much mischief in the last year or more. Would you agree that economically at least, the world is on a much better footing than it was a decade ago?”

“Oh God yes!” he quickly agreed. “But what other ah, enlightened changes are you going to make to society, to the world? Who’s next after the Holy Order?”

“The Order is an exception -- we take attempts on our lives personally, particularly when they also take the lives of hundreds of innocent bystanders. They were causing increasing instability -- while they were dying out, it is true, I think it was apparent to most that they weren’t going to go quietly.”

“Oh, we’re in complete agreement on that! But ... look at it this way -- you and your associates have become quite a force to be reckoned with, an unknown force, with unknown goals and ambitions. Some, rightfully or not, fear that.”

I sighed. “I’ll tell you one of my highest goals -- and I think it is one the two of us share, I hope it is one more of your fellows share...”

“And that is?” he asked.

“I want to be left alone. I want to be able to walk down the street and be ignored.”

A sigh on the other end. “But the work we do...”

“Oh, when I walk into a conference, I expect to be greeted with all manner of bouquets and brickbats! Verbal, please... But wouldn’t it be nice to be able to walk into a bakery, point to a cinnamon bun, plunk down your cash, and walk out, without the fawning, the cursing, all the rest? Or for you and I to see each other in an airport and quietly acknowledge each other, or not, without worry? Or even sit together in the lounge and talk while an engineer tries to figure out why a damn light won’t go off in the cockpit of the plane we want to get on?”

He laughed softly. “Sir, I apologize for not picking up the phone and calling. The thought had occurred to a number of us along the way. I think that could have saved us all a great deal of trouble.”

“So where do we go from here, to prevent further misunderstandings, and to try, even if vainly, to rehabilitate ourselves in the eyes of others?” I asked symmetrically.

He laughed louder, more freely, then stopped abruptly. “If I invited you to meet me for dinner, would you do it?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see that. “While I dislike the implications, and please do not take offense, I feel I have to say it -- I will, but you understand what we both risk?”

“Yes, I do understand,” he said with a sigh. “But still,” his voice picked up again. “And I understand the risk is from one of our louts doing something stupid, but still, I’m game -- dinner in three hours? Could you make it to Geneva?”

Athena was standing beside me. She raised an eyebrow, but nodded.

“Yes. Where would you like to meet?”

He gave me the name of a square; I knew it. Surprisingly, he asked if he should send me a picture so I could recognize him. Yes, please -- I expected he would recognize me? Oh yes.

He let me know my phone was currently showing my location as about a hundred meters off the ground in Oxford. I thanked him and told him I'd pass that along. See you in the square in about three hours; the weather should still be quite pleasant. End of call.

Andrea, Patricia, and Edwin came in.

“Anyone want to call me nuts?” I asked. I pointed to Patricia, “You’re qualified to...”

She shook her head, smiling slightly. “What does your gut say?”

“This is the right thing to do,” I told everyone.

“He knows how ugly it will be if anything happens?” Edwin asked.

“Oh yeah,” I confirmed. “And he’s more concerned about his own doing something stupid.”

“You think he’s another Hertzog,” Joyce challenged,

That surprised me. “I didn’t realize you followed that one.” Hertzog was the one who attacked me openly at Cannes years ago, enabling us to make an incredibly audacious move. I made him head of that cabal, and he’d done very well for himself, and for us all. He was still a good friend and advisor. “It had crossed my mind,” I admitted. “Better to have the powerful on your side, or at least close so you can watch ‘em... That was at least part of their analysis as well...”

END of Part 4
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Re-Entry

Two hours later I was riding alone in a blue bubble. Getting close, the bubble turned into a cylinder, straightening me up. Made for easier entry, I was told.

Standing on a garden path on the top of a few storey high building -- I took the stairs down. The square was two blocks over and three up.

I was looking at something that I supposed was art when he walked up. I offered my hand and he shook it.

He looked at the thing and said, "I don't understand it either," with a shrug.

We walked a few blocks to an old restaurant. Inside, a waiter quickly showed us to a small room upstairs. We started with a bottle of red wine and two nondescript glasses. I liked the place; we were surrounded by old dark wood bearing the patina of time. The next time the waiter appeared, John asked him if they had the lamb. When the waiter nodded, John looked to me. "Sounds good." "Medium rare?" he queried. I nodded. "For both of us," he told the waiter, who departed.

Wide-ranging conversation through dinner. We agreed, that in terms of economics, a lot of problems that had existed a decade or more ago were gone. The world was on a more sane and sound footing. Markets were efficient. The potential for abuse was still present, but such instances seemed to match up the greedy, and one market truism still held, that pigs get slaughtered.

Why had they been watching us?

He shrugged. The opportunity presented itself -- some of them were concerned we were a threat. We were certainly an unknown, and a powerful unknown at that. They wanted to know more. We had also brought much positive change to the world. They were also concerned with the attempts on our lives, so when the opportunity presented itself, to be able to observe us while providing for our safety, they took it. Why had we dug into them?

I offered that we took attacks against our lives personally, and were particularly concerned about not falling for the same thing twice. We screened the place by the lake as best we could before moving in, and hadn't had a clue; congratulations. I apologized for leaving the place as we did, but we were rushed and it was the best we could come up with given the time, to minimize further analysis.

He nodded and agreed we'd done a good job. As we'd undoubtedly seen, they were still wondering how we'd pulled that off; at least local Canton officials had stopped asking. They presumed Doctor Ramakrishnan had been making the same kind of advances in his field that the rest of us had shown.

I smiled and told him there was no one guiding force. We found that working together was incredibly beneficial and synergistic; solving the Holy Order problem had involved Patricia, Joyce, Edwin, and myself. But a lot of our work involved publishing, interacting with others face to face.

He looked me in the eye. We had no one guiding force, but do we have a goal, some overarching plan?

In a sense, but it's so far reaching... To start with, peace on Earth and good will to men. Is that so damn much to ask for? I was almost in tears again as I added, a universal right to be left the hell alone. What would happen if I gave the waiter my credit card to pay for this meal?

He smiled and told me it had already been taken care of, but he wouldn't let me do that, as he liked the place.

I thanked him, and told him I liked it as well; I wouldn't do that to them. I might buy a train ticket, though, and my phone was turned off...

He laughed and suggested a station he didn't frequent and could use renovation...

I sighed and shook my head -- all of us had conferences, events we were scheduled to attend, the first one coming up in six weeks. One of his people probably knew our schedules as well as we did. None of us were sure of what level of risk we wanted to take, not merely from the whackos, but also from governments and/or NGOs.

He nodded and offered that perhaps they could help. Certainly his group could help with transportation, getting us from place to place around the globe, and providing secure places to stay. If we could develop the trust, of course.

We're starting, I agreed. I'll talk to the others. I can do most of my mischief with words on a page, but Elena especially, she needs to work closely with others.

We wrapped up; while we had seen a slew of reports, those were heaps of words. We still didn't know their group, and their interests. Perhaps we could work together on some fronts. I'd be interested in exploring this more.

He agreed. Perhaps we could get together again, say in Paris in a few days?

I nodded; Paris would be easy, anything on the Western side of the Continent.

We exchanged handshakes and hugs. We thanked the waiter and the owner downstairs.

I went to a train station and used a machine to buy a ticket to Paris for Thursday. It actually gave me my credit card back!

I was walking back to my arrival location when a link alerted me; I followed a cue to duck down a dark alleyway and was quickly surrounded by a blue cylinder and on my way.

I checked e-mail when I arrived home; I had an amused note from my host with links to newsclips about a portion of town near a train station being suddenly cordoned off... Could I make Thursday in Paris for dinner and discussion with a group, five or six of them?

I thanked him for his hospitality. Yes, I could make dinner in Paris; possibly one of the others, or at least my wonderful wife Andrea would join me, I wasn't sure about that, but I would be available. I suggested holding off finalizing dinner details until Thursday afternoon so as not to make things too easy on other possible observers; I'd have my phone turned on after 1600 Paris local time.

He humorously agreed; we'd see each other again in Paris.

Back in our secret hideout, we talked about it, as a group as well as privately. We couldn't flat vanish just yet; we had things to do still. I felt I was the right one to be the cat's paw, and didn't get any disagreement.

Wednesday morning, Paris time, I used my phone (showing me in Oxford, but at an appropriate altitude) to make a two night reservation at a nice little hotel in the Latin quarter. I gave them the number from one of my credit cards, and my phone number. I'd stayed there before, just not for a few years. Then I called a economist colleague at the University close by, telling him I'd be in the area Thursday around lunch time, if I could share his usual table for lunch. But of course! We agreed to meet at his office at half past eleven, talk a while, and go to lunch with some colleagues.

As set as we could get -- I'd lead, and if I managed to get into the hotel unscathed, at least Andrea would join me for dinner. If we were successful, Joyce and her Alex would join us the following day. If not, oh well...

It was good to be back in Paris. I'd spent fifteen months there, my junior year as an undergrad, studying Economics. Yeah, studying Economics and propagating Roma genes... I hoped parts of the Latin quarter would look the same in another few decades. Guardians and guardian systems were watching over me. We'd been shown what an emergency extraction looked like -- a thunderclap and a blur. The problem is in the awkward questions that come afterwards... Hope it doesn't come to that.

Coming up on half past eleven, walking to an old building -- an indicator in my vision tags a plainclothes that's picked me up; he signaled his mates.

Nothing happened! This might work!

One more outside and walked by one in the building as I headed for the stairs to the third floor.

Eduard's office was at the end of the hallway from the stairs. His door was ajar; I could hear conversation from a ways down the hall. What a fine old building! I knew I was smiling as I walked down the hall.

Standing outside his office, peering in through the opening, I couldn't see Eduard, but I could hear him holding forth. I could see a few people. One guy stood out, young, the look on his face as he sipped from a cup of coffee showing he was near his limit in tolerating these fools... I think Eduard has neglected to tell them who's visiting for lunch... Should be fun!

I pushed the door open quietly, standing in the doorway.

Eduard smiled and welcomed me.

The one sipping coffee turned a bit and saw me -- coffee came out his nose. How nice.

Eduard got up and introduced me to the two young ladies, both doctoral candidates, and to Philip, a freshly minted lecturer. I had a seat and we chatted about various things. The shorter of the two women, Elisa, had some pointed questions for me about one of my recent papers. Good for her!

That helped Philip find his voice again.

What a wonderful afternoon! Talking in Eduard's office, in the dining area, eventually drawing more onlookers as I was recognized, moving back to Eduard's office.

The alarm on my phone sounded? I thought I'd turned the phone off? As I took it out of my pocket a link reminded me I needed to check in at the hotel. The phone was still off -- I was scheduled to turn it on. Once I did, I'd pop up on a lot of systems. Here goes...

I thanked Eduard for his hospitality, and the others for a stimulating afternoon, and yes, I'd be happy to take more questions!

Picked up a tail on the way to the hotel. Guardians told me of two in the hotel lobby.

Checking in, the woman at the front desk welcomed me back. Did I have bags? I told her my wife might be arriving in a while with our bags, depending on how things went. That got a curious and confused look. I turned and gave the eye to the two sitting in the lobby, a man and a woman in business attire. They stood and suggested we could sit in the bar area, not currently open, and talk. Fine.

They didn't offer identification and I didn't demand any. What was my reason for visiting Paris?

I was meeting some people for dinner, I told them. It was a test.

A test?

Yes, a test; we wanted to know if we could move around more or less openly and freely.

The man suggested they were concerned about our safety.

Oh, we were concerned as well -- and would try to keep a low profile whenever possible, not do anything stupid. We appreciated their concern, but the flip side of our question was would we be allowed to move about; our recent experiences in Geneva suggested not.

That brought smiles from both of them; the woman suggested some of their colleagues had questions.

I took out my phone and put it down in front of me. You have my phone number. Sitting like this, speaking in a civilized manner, was also good.

Did we have our own security, the man asked?

Not at this time -- should we be engaging such for every visit to the boulangerie?

The man and woman exchanged glances. Would we object to someone following us?

Not at all. We would begin inquiries on security services.

Ground Cover

That was about it -- enjoy your stay. We shook hands and I returned to the front desk. One of the staff showed me up to the room; Andrea was on her way and would arrive in half an hour or so.

While waiting for her to arrive, I got a call from Abernathy confirming dinner at eight and the location. We would be there.

Andrea arrived! Even though it had only been a few hours, I missed her. I pulled her on top of me on the bed, and we went from there, taking a nap together afterwards. We got up, showered together, dressed, and headed out for dinner, a short Metro ride and a few minute walk away.

End of Part 5
Rev 2011/09/12

Sitting on a bench looking at Sydney harbor, finishing my Pepsi. Elbows on my knees, leaning forward, breathing, trying not to think. What time is it? Doesn't fucking matter -- my watch is still on Paris time. Think I've been here a couple of hours. Still early morning, not that much foot traffic yet.

I fucked up, again! And I don't think I care. They can all go to hell. I looked up, sat up, leaning back against the back of the bench. Dammit, that's the problem! I fucking care! Goddamn Holy Order -- did they care? Blow up sixty two people, plus the bomber, tens of millions in damage to the hotel and surrounding buildings to try and get me? What's their calculus? That a specific life may have value, but random lives were worthless? So the number of others that died in trying to snuff my life didn't matter. Fucking matters to me. That's the problem, my problem.

City waking up in the morning, pedestrian activity increasing, the business day starting anew. How many of these people would recognize my name, and what I'd done to the economies of their nation, the region? A half-smile; I was getting my wish, being ignored.

That kind of felt better, more people going by, ignoring the guy sitting on the bench. He was wearing business attire, not unusual in the area. I saw more than a few examples of current European business attire go by.

People walking by, one sat down next to me on the bench -- Patricia.

"Tell me about it?" she asked.

I frowned. "The recordings weren't clear?" The guardians essentially recorded everything.

She shook her head. "They wouldn't even tell me where you were. They won't give us a clue. I finally got them to agree to take me to you. Please. I want to help."

I sighed. I held out my hand and she took it. "I fucked up, again."

"I know it's bad form, but you can't be sure of that yet. What happened?"

Sighed again and leaned back against the bench. She sat back and moved closer. Somehow I knew the guardians were insuring our privacy, but continued in Erub anyway. "We were on our way to dinner with Abernathy and a bunch of his cronies. Where is my GC?"

She gave me a shocked look. "GC? You mean Andrea? The one you've called your wife for over a decade? She's back at the hotel, quite shaken up, and quite worried about you."

"We were meeting them for dinner. We were walking to the restaurant. Guardians told me about the French security, and then Abernathy's. But walking up to the restaurant..."

I looked at her, shaking my head. "It's another of those full blood Roma things -- I haven't experienced it for seven or eight years. I get close to a full blood Roma female -- twenty, thirty meters or less -- and I can feel her. I can feel her and see, feel inside her. Oh, she can feel me as well, but unless I do something, she can't read me like I can read her. Not an intellectual thing -- emotional or

deeper, almost a primitive, visceral level.”

“It was another fucking setup -- they’d figured out the Roma polyglot thing, that a full blood Roma can like suck a language out of someone by touching them. They found a girl, a seventeen year old girl, oh God is she full blood! It’s part of what we missed at Geneva -- they had her back then, and had her trained, they’d tested her! One of the things they were going to do in Geneva while we were sedated was to bring her in, and take her to us, the principals, to try and suck out Erub. Well, we fucking got away. Nobody spotted her because she was lightly sedated at the time, to be awakened at the last minute.”

“So they were going to try again -- she was dressed as a server, and at some time would come in and touch me, and take it, at least take some, take enough for them to get a toehold. That was the plan anyway.”

I looked at Patricia and smiled, shaking my head. “Didn’t go down that way... The girl -- they hunted her down in Croatia about seven months ago. When they found her, she was essentially a savage, living wild on the edge of a Roma camp, as the other Roma didn’t trust her; they don’t trust the full bloods, they’re scared of them and their abilities, so much superstition. These people took her and ... domesticated her. Understand, I could feel all this, feel it coming through her at a very deep emotional level. One of the things they did, they conditioned her. She has two ... trainers, two older women, around thirty. For the first week or two, they kept her drugged, and these two held her and suckled her. Holding, protecting, suckling. Holding her -- after what she’d been through, you can’t imagine what that was like! To be held, comforted, kept warm, held and suckled! After a few days, they added sexual satisfaction. Oh, drugs and hypnosis. Imagine, waking from a nightmare in the middle of the night, being held and suckled, comforted, taken through multiple orgasms, and to sleep again held between two big, beautiful, voluptuous women? Spending so much of those first few weeks skin against skin, being held, being comforted, fed and bathed? From the environment she’d been in, could this be distinguishable from heaven? That’s what she experienced -- and that’s what I experienced when I fell into her.”

I loosened my grip on her hand. “They were getting her ready, resting and rehearsing, in a small room two doors down from the private room we were to use. They were in bed with her, one of them suckling her while they reinforced her in trance...”

“When I walked up, when our ... souls touched, she felt a full blood Roma male for the first time. I remember the first time it happened to me, my Junior undergrad year in Paris. The two of us went from like five meters apart to ripping our clothes off in nothing flat. And we went at it for a day and a half! Oh, this was new to the Guardians, too! But walking up to the restaurant, our spirits touching, you can imagine what happened, even though she wasn’t ovulating. Ovulation makes it so much more intense. Her trainers just thought it was arousal, and started getting her off, thinking they could get her to come quick and hard, then take her deeper and get on with it. Oh, she got off all right, but all that did was intensify things!”

“And we were walking up to the restaurant. We went in. Andrea I think stumbled to distract the Maître’d and security, and I headed upstairs. As I got to the door, things were getting wild, with the trainers realizing she was out of control. I was pushing the door open as one of them hit her with a fast-

acting sedative. I got a few feet from her, full eye contact, almost full soul contact, before she was out. So pretty -- she's short, shorter than me, victim of poor nutrition during those formative years, carried through by Roma genes. The other trainer had half a brain still and lunged at me with her hypo. I'm pretty sure I at least dislocated her arm in the process of sticking the thing into her lower abdomen, thanks to Deb and her training. I turned and ran out, down the hall, down the stairs, out the back into the alley, telling them to pull me out *now*. This was about as close to the opposite side of the fucking planet as I could figure at the time."

I looked at her. "I fucking believed him. He said they wanted to talk. And I believed him! After the setup in Geneva, and what they tried in Geneva!"

Patricia moved closer to me on the bench, putting an arm around me. "What do you need?" she whispered.

I leaned forward, closer, my eyes filling, my breath catching. "I want it all to go away -- I just want to be held, to feel... I just want to be held..." Her memories, floating in their embrace, sandwiched between those soft warm bodies, being held and comforted, moved from breast to breast. "I don't want this," I whispered. "Let them all go to hell. I don't care anymore."

Patricia held me while I cried.

Getting up and walking, not sure where we were going until we turned to a pretty empty side street or alley, went down a ways, and Patricia opened a tall gate, letting us into a narrow space between two buildings.

Then it was like we were on an escalator, rising, faster and faster. We sat down? We had an opaque seat, and our feet were on an opaque surface, but the area in front and above us was crystal clear!

"Is this okay?" Patricia asked.

"It's great! I love it!" I told her. "Slow us a bit so I can see?"

We slowed. Looked like we were heading Northeast.

Patricia sighed. "You know, they're really not very smart."

"Who? What?" I'd been looking around. I turned to her.

She shook her head. "The guardians. Oh, they've got incredible technology, at least in comparison, and lots of history to go with it. But have you ever seen anything from them that you would consider creative?"

I leaned back, putting an arm around her. The sky was darkening, and I could see the beginnings of curvature -- so pretty! But thinking about it, "No."

She snickered. "Remember that first time the bunch of us were together, Edwin wondering if

they were feeding us this stuff, and their denial?”

I nodded. “And how something as simple as giving each of us the language thing, giving us a common language, was a novel concept.”

“Exactly -- and your minor issues initially -- they didn’t catch on that they were leading those vermin to you, to Roma, until one of the S’thod told them so! Or figuring out you were walking into a fucking trap last night!”

I shook my head. “That was weird -- I felt it a few seconds before we even walked in the door. By the time we did, I knew what was going on. Why didn’t Andrea do anything? The others? I thought we were being monitored constantly?”

She nodded, a serious smile. “We are, and that was the problem -- for them. What did you step into? What did you feel at first?”

I sighed, remembering. “God, it was so strong -- being held, being suckled, skin against skin and more... Her hunger for more, not wanting it to ever stop... That’s what I want...”

“Intense?” she said, rubbing my back.

I sighed again, shaking my head. “I don’t know how to describe it.”

She nodded. “The rest? Figuring out it was a trap?”

Shaking my head still. “It’s like stuff along the fringes, background or a back story. I caught feelings and flashes of her past, and her present, that’s how I found it. By that time I was at the bottom of the stairs, and she sensed me, a full blood Roma male. THAT was strong!”

“Guardians can’t handle strong, basic emotions like that! Andrea has a very strong empathic bond with you. It’s grown so much over the years; it has with all of us. If she stumbled in the lobby it was because she was overwhelmed by the emotions you’d picked up! They can’t take it! I’m convinced our pairs, our GCs, couldn’t survive without us. That initial contact with the girl overwhelmed her, and any others linked to her. I’ve been working with their GRs to understand it, help them understand it and how to deal with it. It was like a tar baby, anyone associating with them got caught as well. We were lucky they sedated her! That’s what broke it off. We’re also lucky that each of us has limited command authority; by the time they were with it again, you were in the upper stratosphere.”

About where we were now... “Something about feet of clay,” I muttered.

“Indeed. Oh, one interesting aspect... There were two sets of stairs going up in the restaurant, one set right by the entrance, yet you used the ones in the back, service stairs. Why?”

I shrugged. “My destination was closer to the back of the building? Oh, I remember -- that’s where the stairs going down to the loo were; figured anybody seeing me headed back would assume I was going to the loo.”

She nodded. "Yet you commanded guardian systems to open doors going up the stairs?"

Shrugged again. "If you say so."

She smiled, more of a smirk. "Don't you think it's a little odd that the floor above the main dining salon of a restaurant has not only private dining rooms, but along the same hallway, separated by a door, a series of bedrooms?"

I gave her a strange look.

She smirked more. "That's one of the things that confused the guardians -- when they scanned the building, the top two floors and half of that next are part of one of the most respected, exclusive, and discreet brothels in Paris... Originally, a century or more ago, the kitchen was a sideline..."

I smirked as well. "So three ladies sharing a bed wouldn't be out of the ordinary."

"Not at all. Going forward, when you are involved, I think guardian scans will also look for pureblood Roma."

"Good idea. How's Andrea. I'm sorry I ran off on her."

"She's back at the hotel and very concerned. I think it's best you return there. The ruckus upstairs caused quite the fire drill as you can imagine; Andrea recovered quickly though, and security escorted her back to the hotel. One of the vaunted GTs had his pockets picked during the chaos!"

"How sad," I observed, then reconsidered, "Anything compromising?"

She smiled. "No, thank God. Some of the higher end GTs and GRs have implants, as do we, and our individual GCs. The six of us could still take a trip through the Mayo Clinic without too much difficulty. It's going to take them a while to clean up the emotional trauma."

I shook my head. "Sorry for dragging you out of bed. I fucked up -- again. What's..."

"You did not! Dammit, when will you get it through your thick head! You walked into a trap set by a very creative and very intelligent, well, in a warped sort of way, but still a very smart individual backed by pretty much unlimited assets. And it didn't work! I'd say that's pretty damn good! And your earlier paranoia paid off pretty damn well, and don't call that another fuckup, because it wasn't! You gave us an out when we needed it! You made sure that all of us used a language that isn't spoken by anyone else on this planet, so even though they were listening for weeks, they didn't learn a thing! If you feel queasy about something and DO NOT tell us about it, THAT will be a fuckup! Understand?"

I managed a slight smile. "Yes dear. What next? What do you recommend?"

She smiled a bit more. "That's better. Help Andrea recover -- she loves you very much, and is feeling like she completely failed you."

That sobered me up, and fast.

“I know,” she continued, “right now you want to be held and comforted -- asking her to do just that will help. Both of you need some time unwinding. Fuck, we all do. You need to decide what to do with Abernathy and crew.”

I nodded. “I suppose flipping a coin to decide between utterly ignoring them and squashing them like bugs would seem callous to some.”

She responded with a low laugh. “Oh, Abernathy didn’t have a clue; it was one guy, Dieter, East German. He’s ... he’s interesting. Borderline pathology, severely blunted affect, limited coping skills, highly repressed emotions -- a real study. If ever there was somebody who needed to be held and cuddled, he’s it!”

I sat back a bit more, a smile developing. “What’s our ETA Paris? Make it an hour? What would you think about...”

Walking alone by Notre Dame, stopping to look at the Point Central, officially the center of Paris. Two in the morning or so, still some foot traffic.

Sitting and thinking, so many things whizzing through my head again... We'd make it. I'd make it. Abernathy and company? We'll see.

A pair of Gendarmes approached. We spoke; I think they were surprised I was sober. Eventually they asked for identification and I handed them my passport. One of them stepped away with it, pulling up his handset and hand scanner.

Returning after a moment to huddle with his compatriot. Returned my passport with thanks. A car was on the way, if I would like, to transport me back to my hotel?

That would be nice.

They stayed quite close until a car arrived, not slowing down at the nominal end of the roadway and continuing up on to the sidewalk. A gent (no uniform) got out of the passenger side and opened the rear door. I stood and thanked the Gendarmes, shaking their hands, and wishing them a boring night. I got in the car and was given a brief if silent ride to the hotel. As we pulled up, I told them I didn't know of any plans for later in the day, but if we were to go out, I would check with whoever they had in the lobby and let them know beforehand. I bid them adieu.

Soon after, crawling into bed with Andrea, telling her I was sorry for running off, that I loved her and needed her very much, and to please, please hold me. She did, wonderfully. We talked in bed in the morning (in Erub, just in case) and held each other. But eventually hunger won out.

Easy to spot the plainclothes guy in the lobby. I walked over and asked if he'd join us at a local brasserie for lunch, if that was allowed. *Oui* to both. Let's go, pick one you like, I'm buying.

We had a good lunch, sitting with our backs to a wall. When we were done, I committed the sin of turning my iPhone on. I figured it would take ten minutes or so for someone to be told I'd popped up on the network again, and muttered that to our compatriot. He gave a brief nod of agreement.

Nine and a half minutes later, it rang. I looked at the number -- Abernathy -- and excused myself, stepping outside. Our companion stepped out with me.

I answered the call and said in a clear voice, "You fucking betrayed me." I looked to our companion, who leaned back against the building and smiled.

A sigh on the other end; he was waiting for the other barrel.

"Well?" I asked.

"Where could we talk?" he asked.

I looked at the front of the brasserie, thinking of giving him that address... "We could use the bar

in the hotel; they don't open for a couple of hours."

"Thank you. Half an hour?"

"Half an hour." Click. Put the phone back in my pocket and returned to our table. Andrea had taken care of the check.

"Thank you, love -- half an hour, back at the hotel," I told her. She nodded and stood up. We had a nice walk back. Still no standardization on the sound an electric scooter should make, other than the cursing of those nearby.

At the hotel, I conferred briefly for use of the bar for a short while. Not a problem. Andrea went up to our room. I waited in the lobby.

Abernathy was prompt, the door opened for him by a young man who took one look at my shadow and practically did a pivot in mid-air. Quick colloquy with Abernathy who smiled and told him, "Yes, wait with the car, that's fine."

I quietly offered my hand and shook Abernathy's, and gestured to the bar area. My shadow pulled up a chair and sat blocking the entrance with the subtlety of a very ill-tempered Rottweiler.

"Well?" I reiterated when we were sitting.

Abernathy was both apoplectic and apologetic. He'd gone to great pains to explain to all who attended that this was their opportunity to demonstrate they were trustworthy, and to try and build a working relationship, one which, if history was any predictor, could be very useful if not very profitable. He thought he'd had agreement. He sighed and shook his head. Afterwards, the individual in question...

"Dieter," I supplied helpfully.

Abernathy frowned. Yes, Dieter, was completely unrepentant, more concerned as to understanding how his scheme had failed, and not if he had upset someone who had significant resources to draw upon.

I asked about the girl and her status.

He wasn't sure.

I let him know in a quiet and polite voice that if she was harmed, abandoned, or mistreated there would be hell to pay. I fully expected them to civilize, educate, and protect her for at least the next four years. By the following Friday I expected to have a written plan for how they were going to do this.

Abernathy nodded, then said, "I understand."

I smiled a bit. "Your group may wish to discuss whether Dieter is the correct person to oversee this effort; while his determination and efficiency in many matters are laudable, someone with a more,

ah, humanitarian bent may be more appropriate here.”

Lopsided smile and he said, “Quite.”

I mused on another area in which they might be able to help. This incident, among others pointed to the need for us to have personal security when we traveled. We’re academics, researchers for Christ’s sake! We don’t know anything about such issues, when they are really necessary, and so on. Until we can find an environment where we can work closely with each other, and also with colleagues, travel is in our future. We look for advice and assistance. I also mused that those who we tended to ally ourselves with were those who took the outlook of the caretaker, looking at the long term. And there’s nothing wrong with taking a little bit off the top, for a very long time.

That got a more relaxed smile, so I mentioned a developing area where shepherding for the long term might be beneficial. I was tossing him a bone, and he knew it.

We spoke a bit more. What were our plans now? I sighed; return to Oxford in the next few days, probably by train as I disliked the process of commercial air travel. I didn’t have a problem with the flights, but with the crap on both ends. He smiled and suggested he might be able to help; give him a few hours to check. We could do that.

He thanked me for my time and my patience. We shook hands and he departed. I headed upstairs.

The six of us had a speaking conference: voices in Erub coming out of empty air. General agreement that we needed to be seen in public. Patricia and her crew would appear back at my place in Oxford; Andrea and I would return there as well. Others to their homes, and the GTs would maintain a crew at our bolthole, keeping it ready. We’d keep working on papers and with others, and make plans for the next round of conferences.

Call from Abernathy after another hour. They would be happy to provide our transport gratis. Would we prefer to be picked up at ten in the morning, or one in the afternoon? We’d fly on a private jet to Kidlington where a car would meet us and take us to our door. I suggested ten, so we could get in a round of laundry before Evensong at Magdalen. He laughed at that; ten it would be. Did we have dinner plans?

I paused at that. No, what was he proposing? He thanked me for my patience. we could meet him, and the woman who we would be flying with. Seven, a bit early? We could do that. He gave me the address. See you at seven.

It was a good meal, a good evening. We were sitting at a corner table in the restaurant, with some extra space cleared around us, in full view but still with some privacy. Emily was an arbitrageur, and hadn’t been directly involved in the Lake debacle. The first time Dieter’s name came up, she shuddered, providing a great character reference... She also had contacts in the Mideast, and knew a number of people we still worked with. She thought what we’d done at Cannes, and then a year later at Davos, had been masterful. She pried gently for background details. I admitted it had been the work of many years involving a number of groups, some of which were surprised to find they had been working

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in concert with each other! And then again, we'd gotten lucky at certain points in the process and because of our preparation and the trust that had developed, we were able to adapt quickly. She mentioned a particular incident, and I admitted it had not been in our plans, but we'll take being lucky.

She met us the following morning. The flight was short and uneventful; she was headed back to her home in Bergen; we were welcome to visit any time.

Walking back into the house, familiar scents and sounds. A big hug from Patricia, who wanted to know how I was doing. I sat down with a sigh. Better, still breathing.

End of Part 6
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By silli_artie@hotmail.com
<http://www.asstr.org/~artie/>