

Sometimes, Brian reflected, fantasies simply don't measure up to reality.

For example, when he was thirteen, on his paper route, he had a fantasy about one of his customers. She was the mother of a couple of toddlers in an apartment complex, a woman of Indian ancestry with the kind of golden brown skin that he would later associate with the curves of gently sloping asses and breasts. She had lustrous dark hair down to her waist, kept bound by one simple green band about two inches wide with a subtle patterned brocade in it.

This nod towards her heritage only added to her exoticism, in his eyes, in spite of the jeans and sweatshirts that she always wore to the door as he would collect the money for the newspapers. Her eyes had the gentle almond shape and dark coffee color with lashes that seemed to send her gaze right through Brian's young stammering self. He didn't see the children clinging to her, or the barely-livable conditions of the tenement she lived in. Her hair, skin, and eyes served to fuel an already active imagination, fueled by a lifetime of fantasy books and starting to take on a decidedly adolescent twist as his hormones began to shift into gear.

His fantasy about her really gained focus, however, when he began to discover references to a work known as the Kama Sutra, an Indian text of secret and exotic sexual delights which he couldn't dare actually track down, for fear that his parents would find out that his sexuality was developing. But he knew that it was Indian, and that it had something to do with what women and men did together. He'd only recently found out about that, as well, thanks to a "Love & Sex & Growing Up," a book in his library that had answered the questions that his school couldn't and his parents wouldn't.

The fantasy was relatively simple: he would be at her door, and as sometimes happened, she would ask him to step inside while she fetched the money. This time her children would not be clinging to her leg, pulling the fabric of the jeans taut around her thighs. This time, when she returned, it would not be with money, it would be with some gauzy silk wrapping her body, and she would smile—that brief curve of the chocolate pink lips punctuated by bright teeth—and she would reach out and touch him.

He was never specific, in the fantasy, about exactly where she would touch him. It didn't really matter in his mind, because all the fantasy required was that she know where

to touch, and at that gentle stroke of a finger, say, on the hollow just above his collarbone, his penis would instantaneously engorge with a solid and undeniable erection.

He would just stand there, in his fantasy, staring into her eyes, unable to move and not wanting to anyway. She would smile and tell him about her membership in an ancient family of Indian mystics, the Kama Sutrans, perhaps, and their knowledge of all the mysterious ways of pleasure. With a touch, she would explain, she could make him hard and ready. With another touch, she would tell him, she could make him explode.

In his fantasy, as late at night in his bed or in the bathroom before a shower he masturbated, eyes shut tight, he would never quite see where her hand would touch him next. It didn't matter. It wasn't her touch that he saw. It was the intensity of her eyes, the half-smile of her mouth, kind and amused, as she reached towards him, and that was the image he held as his sticky ejaculate filled his lotion-covered hand.

Twenty-some years later, he found, that smile wasn't nearly as amusing. Perhaps he had been too young to see it at the time, but the smile was not amused and kind, it was cruel and dismissive. At least, that was what was on the face of the Indian woman who stood before him now in the candlelight.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Man?” The tone with which she spat the word was in stark contrast to the murmured endearments she'd layered the evening with earlier, when they'd met at the bar. There she had danced in a low-centered sinuous way that had caught his attention amidst the bouncing and stomping crowd, and had attracted him. He moved out into the dance floor and caught her eye at the same time that his body began reflecting her dance, moving in a complementary motion to her. She had smiled, that flash of white teeth in the darkness of her face that had triggered that memory. Her eyes had found his, and their gazes drew their bodies closer, brushing each other, first with arms, then the brush of her ass against his thigh, his shoulder against her back as she turned, their dance moving from complementary motion to a more definite flirtation, finally with her legs completely interlocked around his thigh, he in a grounded stance that held her pumping hips with ease, his hands locked around her hips allowing her arms to fly up in an semblance of mudras too fast in the dim flickering club light to see.

Through it all, their eyes had never left each other. When the music changed again into a less friendly beat, they had slowly disengaged, and she turned, indicating with her

eyes, again, that she'd like him to follow the sweep of her black hair shimmering down her back. Tied, of course, with a green swatch of cloth, an embossed pattern flickering in and out of site as the lights and lasers swept over it.

She'd been soft and flirtatious in the parking lot, calling him "Dancer." "Dancer, you and I, we need to do more. You do more, do you not?" Her voice was touched with English intonations, lending a shape to her words that added to the exoticism of her mouth.

He spoke without thinking, always best when trying not to spoil a good thing. "I do much more. As I'm sure you could tell. Where shall we do it?" Part of his mind cheered ("Assume the sale! Way to go!") but he managed to shut it out of his face as he smiled back.

Perhaps he should have realized then that the widening smile she returned had been more predatory and feral than eager, but at the time he had been concentrating on not losing that connection they'd established during the dance.

He wondered, as he hung there in the door frame, if she'd given other signals that she was a psychopath before they'd made it to her door. He couldn't think of any. She had murmured soft blandishments at his dancing skills, her hand on his thigh as he drove, stroking the spot still warm from her crotch as she'd rode him, complimenting the muscles (a part of him winced at falling for that particular cliché) of his legs, expressing delight at the way his hands had held her, hinting that her hips would enjoy that touch again with fewer clothes in the way.

When she'd suggested, in the dim candlelight of her apartment, with half-seen sculptures and a mandala blurred by the flickering flame on her wall, that he let her use her new frame ("You don't mind being a little kinky, do you?" she'd said, her hands fluttering across the small of his back as she pressed into him) he'd actually chuckled. Actually let out a smug, confident laugh, at the idea that he, Brian Stanford, would be averse to something kinky. He'd assented, of course, planning to use it as a quid for his pro quo later on, when he would be able to unwrap those curves, revealing her "all-over-tan" as he'd used to call it when his ex-wife would undress, and then he would wrap her up again in something much more revealing, restrictive, and, he hoped, to their mutual tastes.

Now, however, hanging there with his shirt in ribbons, a thin trickle of blood sliding down from his left clavicle to pool in the hair over his nipple, with the woman's soft lips sneering in a (no doubt about it now) feral grimace as she lifted the knife again, he suspected that their tastes were not so mutual after all.

He licked his lips, and tried to keep his voice as reasoned and calm as he could. "Actually, I've never been into blood play. Nothing wrong with it, when you're keeping things sanitary" *Please, God, let that knife be sterile* "but it's just really not been my thing. In fact," he tried to let a chuckle, a confident tone belying his growing unease, "I'm not all that into being a bottom at all. Personally I'm pretty much entirely of the dominant persuasion." He hoped that the use of the terminology common to the kink scene would remind her that the two of them had not negotiated at all, really, beyond his willingness to have his wrists taken up in the dark leather straps attached to the wood frame. *Dark?* That annoying voice in his psyche piped up again. *Dark with what fluids, exactly, do you think?*

She didn't react as he'd hoped, with some sort of acknowledgement of the need for rules of engagement before they went into this sort of edge play (*literally, now, isn't that funny?*) . In fact, she didn't seem to be possessed of any of the three mainstays of kinky play, being insane, unsafe, and increasingly non-consensual.

Problem was, no negotiation beforehand meant they'd had no safeword, no phrase that would let the Top know that the Bottom was in a place that was not good, that things needed to stop now. "Red?" he tried, as she drew the knife closer to his right clavicle. It was a peculiar double-bladed shape, as if two daggers had been merged with their blades edges perpendicular to each other, with a large ball on the end of the hilt, protruding from her clenched fist.

"Red! RED!" The common safeword had no effect on her as she drew a thin and wavy line just under the line of his bone. It didn't hurt very much, but unvarying invasion of his body by the blade and the person who wielded was beginning to fray his calm. *This, buddy-boy, is headed nowhere you want to go.*

"Red?" she softly chuckled, looking with satisfaction at the lines of blood slowly wending their way down his pectoral. "Red is the only color left to you, Man. You are in Kali's hands now, and" she drew a quick, slightly deeper line down his sternum,

punctuating her statement with a small puncture wound just under the small bone where his ribs met, “Kali has no *safewords*.” She hissed the last with the same contemptuous tone she’d used when she first addressed him, and through his gritted teeth Brian wondered how he’d ever thought her attractive. As if she could read that in the look on his face, she laughed again, an ugly percussive brassy sound. “You, Man, are ruled by your *lingam*, and will go wherever it leads. Sniffing around anyone whose *yoni* you catch a whiff of...and in this case, your *lingam* has led you into the arms of Kali. Enjoy it while you can, Man, for your sacrifice will be the final joy you ever have.”

The hell of it was, his body *did* seem to enjoy it. Before she had begun slicing his shirt off of his chest, she had stroked him, once, just behind his ear, a caress stroking along the back curve of his skull with a nail suddenly biting into his neck just where it met the skull. Brian’s head had seemed to flash, somehow, and as he shook his head to clear his vision, he had realized that his cock was pushing out the fabric of his slacks in rampant erection.

That had been two hours ago. Now his shirt was in tatters, his arms were burning from the strain of holding them up, and he was realizing that she wasn’t going to stop with the slicing of his shirt. *Hell, she might not stop with the slicing of your skin, buddy boy* . But his cock was still visibly excited, and was in fact starting to ache from the strain of being hard for so long. There was no sexual pleasure in it, it simply was there, oblivious to the increasing pain and tension in the rest of his body.

“Look,” he tried again to put a reasonable, calm, and authoritative tone to his voice. “I’ve got to give you lots of credit for edge play. You’ve pushed every limit I have and then some. But regardless of what my body is showing, I’m *telling* you no. This has to stop, now. I am not consenting to any further play of any kind with you. If you let me loose now, I will not press charges, or even mention it again.”

He drew a breath. “But if you continue, I will tell you that not only me, but the full wrath of the law will come down on your beautiful head with a fury that you will *not* believe. See, I may be kinky, but I’m also the son of a sheriff, and if I turn up” *missing* he did not say “hurt, they will come after you. And you know how many people saw us at the club...”

Brian's voice trailed off as he saw her predatory smile get wider, and he realized that she was not intimidated. In fact, she was enjoying watching his struggle with his control. As he watched her face, that had seemed so erotically exotic in the club, it became something other than human—less or more he could not say. His arms shook a little from muscle fatigue of having them up that long, and his legs were long past discomfort and into the burning sensation of lactic acid buildup. She drank it all in as she wove the knife in strange patterns in the air, occasionally flicking close enough to his skin for him to feel the air move as the blade passed by his skin. His head fell forward for a moment, and as he looked down his torso he saw the pattern of decorative pattern of small cuts each ornamented with a line of his blood, and realized that the blade was not actually missing him at all. It was simply so sharp that his skin did not have time to register the pain before it sliced his skin open. He let out a low moan.

She laughed, and brought the blade suddenly up to his face, causing him to desperately jerk his head back to avoid losing a piece of his face. She held the blade vertically before him, and drew her own face to within inches of the blade, staring into his eyes around the edges. She was so close that her eyes seemed to merge into a weird cyclopean blur, but Brian didn't misunderstand the cruel patience there. It was a calm sadism he recognized. He'd felt it himself while playing with others, but always tempered with a clear recognition of his play partners as humans, as people, as at least friends and usually much more.

In her eyes, there was none of that. He was simply Man, to her, and that seemed to be little more than a slab of meat to be prepared. *Ah, so you're a FLAY partner, then* the little voice contributed, and then gibbered off into his silent subconscious, and he couldn't help it. He giggled.

That surprised her, and the predatory look faltered for just a moment, and in that moment, Brian saved his life.

He felt the tangible weight of her gaze slip, somehow, in much the same way as the balance of *ukemi* sparring partner in aikido will begin to falter during the beginning of a throw. The *nage* learns to recognize that moment, that precious moment *between* when the will of the opponent is suddenly not a factor in the position and destination of their body.

Once recognized, it merely requires a gentle push to help them along to lose their balance. And just as Brian had felt her gaze grip him, he felt his laugh send her and her grip somehow off kilter, just for a moment, and he went with that moment, not really understanding how or why or even what it was he pushed with, but all the same...he pushed.

She stumbled back for a moment, still holding the knife up, and shook her head, as if to clear it. "Man..." she hissed again, but less sure than she had been a moment before. She raised the knife again, beginning to draw patterns in the air in front of him, taking a step closer. The step did not have the graceful aggressiveness of a moment before, however, because she looked again at the Man. And the Man was grinning at her.

Brian felt fantastic. More than fantastic, in fact. In that slight shift where his laughter had thrown his tormentor's momentum off, he had felt the power she'd been wielding somehow flow into him, like a cold wash of water down his spine, enervating his entire body with a rush of strength and sensation that washed the pain away and replaced it with a calm radiant readiness. Suddenly he was standing balanced and strong, his arms in the wrist restraints seeming to hold the rack up rather than being restrained by them. His eyes were bright and fastened on hers, and while his mouth was turned up in a smile, they burned with anger.

His cock was still hard. But it felt as good now as the rest of his body.

This time it was she who was trying to break the gaze, and could not. The patterns of the blade in the air faltered once, twice, and then her hand fell to her side, as she saw his entire body drink in more of the power that had filled the room, her power, seeming to grow somehow bigger. "You can't..." she whispered, disbelieving. "The power is Kali's...you are Man..."

"I am Man," he agreed, his voice resonating low and cold. He looked down again at the cuts on his chest, and she gasped as she saw the cuts she'd inflicted close themselves, all at once, leaving tiny white scars like the brocade pattern of her headband across his white skin. He looked up at her again, and she felt his gaze meet hers again, pushing deeper this time, and with an involuntary wail she dropped the knife and lifted her arms out to either side in a Y-shape, her hands writhing, fingers forming shapes seeming of their own accord, tips meeting and pulling each other in various directions.

“I see.” His hands in the restraints mirrored hers, and both of the straps holding his wrists loosened and his arms came down, flowing into a relaxed curve on either side of his hips. Her arms fell as well, and she gave a little shudder backwards as he stepped towards her, a bubble of force like a self-contained shockwave pushing into her. The candles didn’t so much as flicker as he moved, but it felt to her as if she were being buffeted by a hurricane wind.

If Brian had been conscious of what he was doing, he would have lost. But while conscious, he was also focused; on her, on the conduit of power she’d opened with her ritual, which now filled him. If he could have wondered how it flowed into him, or where it came from, it would have broken and tossed him aside.

But there was no room for wonder in him at that moment. He took another step towards her, and she let out another small scream as her body went limp. She would have fallen, except that he did not want that to happen—and so she hung there, suspended in the air, as the power between them grew more tangible. Brian felt as though the coursing strength and flow through him would explode out of the top of his heads and hands and cock all at the same time, and it felt *great*; there was nothing he could not do, and this woman who had been in power over him a moment before was now barely conscious and moaning as she slowly bobbed in the air in front of him.

He took another step closer, and lifted his hands to reach for her.

Brian never would have been able to say what he would have done if he’d reached her. He liked to think that he would have simply shaken her, or at most torn her shift off in return for her violation of his clothes.

The fact was, though, that down deep he knew that the power that had been flowing through him then was far beyond his control at that time. She had opened up a gateway to an energy that wanted to do more than teach a lesson, it wanted to conquer, possess, and ravish. And he knew, deep down, that no matter how much he hated thinking of himself as a rapist, he would have taken her forcefully and without hesitation.

If he had reached her.

Instead, he got hugged by a bear.

The crash of the window breaking open did not distract him, nor did it wake her. He distantly heard the voice, but it was not until much later that he would remember that

it said “Oh, Vash, that is a *fine* mess you’ve gotten yourself in this time, isn’t it?” in a jovial baritone. His eyes never left her face, now slack with exhausted resignation as she hung in the air before him.

It wasn’t until the hairy arms circled his body that he suddenly became aware of the man standing in front of him, merry eyes glowing behind tiny red glasses looking at him with friendly speculation. The man’s arms were bare, muscles disappearing into the sleeveless shirt he wore, tribal pattern tattoos seeming to glow along the curves and sinews as the arms pulled Brian tight against the man, and the power seemed to all suddenly drain out through the arms and into and out of the man, going...somewhere.

But it was no longer in Brian, or in the woman, who now did collapse with a sullen thud into the carpet. Suddenly the candles were just candles, the air was thick with only incense, and Brian’s legs returned to their state of exhaustion with a vengeance. If not for the arms of the man holding him up, he would have joined the woman on the floor in a sudden collapse.

Instead the man lowered him gently to the floor, muttering something on the way down. It took Brian a while to find enough reserves to be able to actually vocalize as he lay on the floor, and so the man had his back to him, re-arranging the woman into a more comfortable position on the floor, when the word finally came: “Who...”

The man finished putting a pillow under the woman’s head, and turned with a sigh to sit crosslegged next to Brian.

“Who am I? I’m Sullivan. The woman behind you is Vashne, and she really should know better. You, on the other hand, are the mystery boy of the moment. But that’s ok. It’s the mystery that makes us all alive, after all.” He sighed, and looked past Brian’s body at the wall with the mandala on it. “But one thing’s for sure. Whoever you are, you just made things a helluva lot more complicated.” He looked down again at Brian. “That’ll keep for later, though.” He drew his hand through the air, swiftly gathering a fistful of nothing. He unfolded the clenched hand before his mouth, and blew a puff of air towards Brian’s head. “Sleep now.”

And Brian did.

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There is a line between waking and sleep. It is a fuzzy grayness of the conscious, a place of waiting and accepting where the rational has no reign. Sounds and even half-seen visions do not intrude on the serenity of the mind in this state; they are simply registered, accepted, and let loose. This state of enlightenment is a pleasant place to be, usually, except for its proximity to the land of dreams. It is a suggestible state, a place where a stray sound of a dog barking can lead to wolves chasing in the woods, the scent of coffee brewing can become a feast with Alice, or a shadow of a tree on the wall can become the knife of Kali's acolyte reaching towards you to draw once again across your skin..

In Brian's case, it was the sound of fucking that broke the thin membrane between his induced sleep and a muzzy half-wakefulness. It was the unmistakable liquid sound of penis entering vagina rhythmically and regularly, the soft *thwap* of thighs meeting and separating, the slightly heavier and faster breathing of two people in aerobic congress. It caused a brief lucid dream, of the club the night before. But in this dream the goth boys and girls were not wildly dancing and gyrating; their clothes had been altered, revealing their genitalia, breasts, and asses, the pale globes and curves reflecting a sickly green or amber or fuschia glow in the lights. In the dream, Brian saw them begin to engage with each other, mechanically adjusting their bodies to spread cheeks or labia or lips, kneeling or perching as necessary, moving with a jerky, resigned motion, fingers and cocks and tongues sliding lackadaisically into and around the proffered orifices. The lights moved, and Brian could tell the music was still playing, but he could not hear it, could not even feel it.

As they moved in their slack orgy, he realized a strange thing: none of them were looking at their partner (or partners, in many cases). Their eyes showed no recognition of anyone outside of themselves, no realization or joy in the connection of their bodies, even as the pace of the unheard music increased, the tempo of their fucking speeding up gradually. Brian found it inutterably sad and a bit horrifying at the same time, and turned to try to find a way out—and almost tripped over the slender waif kneeling in front of him, her lips open in a blank hunger as they reached for his cock. He tried to push her away and found his hands tangled in leather straps, and heard the voice of the Indian woman from the night before suddenly loud in his ears...

“Dammit, Sullivan, he’s harshing the buzz. Fucker.”

Brian jerked his eyes open suddenly, still on the kilim rug where he’d been laid by the bear, Sullivan. He turned his head, an effort that seemed to shake loose his scalp due to a brain grown large and sodden with sleep, and his eyes slowly focused on the source of the voice and the sounds. The bear—Sullivan, he now remembered—was sitting nude and cross-legged, with the woman from last night (Vashti? Something like that) straddling him, legs wrapped around his waist. Her hair swung from side to side down her back, revealing the soft musculature of her back as it curved into her ass rising up and down, slowly and rhythmically. Brian could see the slight reflection of the pale condom on Sullivan’s cock as it disappeared and reappeared beneath her.

Her hands were placed on his chest, palms on either side of his sternum, and his decorated arms encircled her like a ballet dancer in second position, his palms flat and fingers spread over each shoulder blade. Neither of them were looking at him; in fact, they were the exact opposite of his dream, eyes locked into each other as they moved.

Sullivan didn’t blink, but his mouth opened in a wry grin. “Shut up and breathe in your healing, you careless bitch. You know he deserves this more than you do.” His fingers flexed on her shoulder blades, and Brian blinked as the tribal tattoos flowing down them seemed to glow, somehow, pulsing with the rhythm of their fucking.

Her breath deepened then, and after a few more beats on an inhalation her eyes widened slightly as suddenly on a downstroke she froze, her thighs trembling, the breath slowly coming out of her as she relaxed her body into him.

He continued to hold her for a moment, his hands softening from the formal posture on her shoulder blades to a more conventional hug, and he joined her in a deep, resigned sigh. Brian saw her murmur something into his ear before she began to disentangle her legs from his waist, and saw him shake his head, smiling at her for a moment, before he turned a more serious thoughtful gaze to meet Brian’s eyes.

“He’s the one you should be asking that of, Vash, and you know it.”

The woman sighed, and swivelled on her cross-legged seat to look at Brian on the floor. Her face looked slightly annoyed, and he had the distinct impression that he was something of an embarrassment for her. She wore her nudity with no self-consciousness

at all, though her nipples were still crinkled from her orgasm. “Yes. I suppose I should. Though in my defense—“

“You have no defense, Vash. Rule number one.”

She looked pained and embarrassed again, glancing up at Sullivan and this time unable to hold his gaze for more than a moment. She sighed again, and lifted her eyes to Brian’s. He still felt unable to move, seemingly disconnected from his body. His head seemed only partially attached to it, in fact, like a balloon that would disengage and flatulently zigzag around before collapsing in a corner in a scrap of skin.

“I am responsible for my selfish actions last night, and would make amends. How can I help you, Man?” There was a soft remonstrative noise from Sullivan at that, and she sighed again, repeating her question with a slight difference. “How can I help you, Brian?”

Brian realized that he was being offered: the same kind of treatment he’d woken to. He also realized that in spite of the completely overt sexuality she was exuding, skin still stippled around her neck from the rush of her orgasm, labia puffy and open at the same level as his head, in spite of that, he had no desire at all to come anywhere near this woman. In spite of her apparent penitent attitude, he could still sense an undercurrent of dislike in her for him, a measure of contempt that she could not quite hide in spite of her genuine apology.

“No...nothing...” he whispered, throat harsh, then swallowed once. “Th-thank you anyway.”

Sullivan chuckled. “Spoken like a true Man, eh, Vash?” She didn’t have to sniff, the look she flashed him at that point was anything but penitent. “Still, boy, we can’t have you in this condition. I understand your reluctance to accept her aid, though I have to tell you, when she’s of a mind to, she’s a far better healer than I. Maybe I can do somewhat to bring you back up to speed, though; she charged me with enough to jumpstart a horse.” He gracefully rolled up over his kneecaps, going from a cross-legged position to kneeling next to Brian’s chest.

Brian still couldn’t move anything but his head, and was mildly bemused by the fuzzy lack of control anywhere on his body. He had a moment of mild alarm, wondering if the larger man was going to heal him the same way he’d taken care of Vash (*wouldn’t*

THAT be an interesting way to explore bisexuality, eh?) but instead Sullivan’s hands came down briefly one after another on his forehead, throat, sternum, lower stomach, and finally his left hand cupped Brian’s flaccid cock and testes briefly, the warmth of his palm feeling strangely comforting.

“Ok, that’s bracketed the targets, now to fire for effect...” the man said matter-of-factly, and his hands came down again, fast and hard this time, with an exhalation of breath at each touch.

Brian’s body arched spastically and jerked at the first touch to his forehead, as his brain’s fuzzy semi-awake state seemed to be blasted away with a sudden force. Before he could recover, Sullivan’s right hand came down on his throat, and another exhaled blast of power—there was no other word for it—made Brian’s teeth feel loose and for a moment he was keenly aware of every cervical vertebrae stretching from his shoulders up into his skull.

As Sullivan continued placing his hands down the body, the power ripped through Brian’s fatigued muscles like a wind, searing them and leaving him shaking. The final cupping of his genitals left him hard again, which would have made him self conscious but for the clinical way Sullivan simply grunted in approval, like a Doctor completing a medical exam.

The big man sat back, looking at Brian. “So. How about some coffee? You should be good to go now. And you have some explanations coming your way.”

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“You, my friend, are up shit creek right now. I would feel sorry for you, but it’s really not worth it. You’ll either measure up or get killed really fast, so I’ll just save my pity and see what happens.” Sullivan delivered this matter-of-fact statement as he dumped sugar into his coffee, as if commenting on the aroma. They were heading towards the back room of Mimazu’s, a local coffee hangout frequented by students and leftover hippie types. Brian was familiar with the place from his time as a freelance writer...back when times were good. He forced his mind away from that, and tried to figure out what the big man meant.

He decided that the guy was trying to scare him, and mirrored his cavalier attitude with a shrug. “Eh, I’ve had worse dates.”

Sullivan looked up sharply, his eyes bright under raised eyebrows. “You aren’t taking this seriously, are you?” He shook his head, answering his own question. “No. I can see you’re not. You’ve already put it down to ‘psycho bitch from hell’ and are just remembering the physical bits.” He smiled for just a moment, but only in his eyes. “Admittedly, her physical bits are worth remembering. But it’s typical that you would just block out that firestorm of power she called up and you took over.” He shook his head again. “Jesus. Lit up the street for blocks in every direction. If I hadn’t’ve been on the way home...”

Brian thought for a moment, past the images of her naked body and the flames and tried to remember what had actually *happened*. Her hands flicking over his body with the knife, blood glittering down his body black in the candlelight, her eyes meeting his across the blade as she lifted it...and the strange way something in him had moved when her focus had slipped, stepping into that thick sense of power...

Focused inward on his memory, he suddenly felt the pattern of cuts, strangely healed, on his torso grow hot. He tried to relax, and the heat grew from a flush to a painful searing. He opened his mouth involuntarily, about to yell, his coffee cup spilling to the floor, when Sullivan’s hand wrapped firmly around his wrist and he again felt the draining sensation as the power flowed out of him. “Whoa, there, Tiger. You have even less control than I thought. Better that you stick to thinking about the physical bits for now, after all. Doesn’t she have great nipples? She used to name them, Perky and Crinkles. Before she got all ‘momma kali’ this and ‘evil Man’ that.” He made faces and said the words in a harsh falsetto like the witch in the Wizard of Oz.

Brian laughed in spite of himself, bending over to pick up the coffee cup. Sullivan had produced several napkins from the small table between them, and mopped up the coffee.. “Probably for the best. I don’t think caffeine would do this...whatever...much good.” He looked up at Sullivan suddenly, as a thought occurred to him. “Shit. We never actually had sex, but this is some kind of disease, isn’t it? I knew that knife wasn’t sterile...”

Sullivan grimaced, not in amusement, but more like a sour acknowledgement. “STDs are the least of your worries now, me bucko. Not that you can’t catch them—hell, ain’t no way around that—but you’ve got much bigger problems to deal with. You notice

how you suddenly went all glow-worm like just thinking about the connection between you and Vashte?" At Brian's thoughtful nod, Sullivan held up his hand "Don't go thinking about it too much again! Just listen."

"What you got a taste of there was power. That's my word for it, and it'll do for now. Call it prana, orgone, or happy tingles if you want, it's the same stuff. It's basically the force that causes us to want to mate—not the chemical reactions, in the brain, all the stuff that goes along with that. The actual *will* to do it, as opposed to simply the *need*." Sullivan sighed, and sipped his coffee. "I'm getting too esoteric on you, too soon. Fact is, you'll figure out your own idea as to the what of it sometime after you figure out the how of it. Or else, as I said, you'll be dead. Or so far gone as to not care anyway."

Brian couldn't help himself, and quipped, "Great, so if I live long enough, will I ever get to the why of it?"

Sullivan again gave him that sharp look, touched with a bit more anger. "Listen, do me a favor. Stop making jokes about it. I can make jokes, because I know what the fuck I'm talking about. I've held my friends as they screamed in their death, I've fed their catatonic bodies until they died, and I've watched women and men both who I loved destroyed by far less than what happened to you tonight. So when you have that much water under your particular bridge, you can joke, but until then, shut the fuck up and listen so that maybe I won't have to go through it again with you." He paused to see if Brian would try another joke, but the man just sat and looked at him, calmly. "Good. I know you're probably making all kinds of jokes inside right now, but at least you have the sense to actually keep them there."

"Alright. So there's this power, that everybody's got a touch of. And just like sex, some people are better at it than others. Genetics, upbringing, health, whatever, they simply *are*. These are the people who, when they walk into a room, cause folks of either gender to sit up a little straighter, breathe a little quicker. People like Marilyn Monroe, poor girl. And me, in fact." He motioned across the room to where a man seated at a table with a laptop was staring, not at the screen, but at Sullivan, whose sudden returning stare startled him. Blushing, he looked back down at his laptop and resumed furious typing. Sullivan gave a tired but wicked grin.

“Stupid git. Probably got no porn worth anything on that laptop, too. Talk about two wasted tools...anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah...and also just like sex, these people sometimes take the time to learn how to use that energy better. As it happens, the best way to manipulate it, store it, do things with it, is through directed sexual action.” He squinted for a moment at Brian, still seated and silent. “You getting any of this?”

“Power. Manipulated by the beautiful people. Controlled through good sex. I played a lot of D&D when I was a kid, I can figure out how a magical system works.” Brian paused. “I’m not joking, I understand what you’re telling me. It’s just really hard to believe. Even with...what happened.”

“Of course it is,” Sullivan agreed. “Because you and I, m’lad, we are a couple of North American good ol’ boys, raised on John Wayne and Clint Eastwood and Natassja Kinski and Kelly LeBrock.” He shook his head. “Hell, kids nowadays have it even worse, with the Cruise, Kid Rock, Pamela Anderson and such. Talk about unrealistic.” He sipped his coffee. “Tell me if I’m wrong. Your parents didn’t want to talk about sex with you. Your friends only occasionally would do it in giggles, or whispered conversations at night around a stroke book passed around at a sleepover. Your teachers wouldn’t talk to you about it for fear of being labeled pedophiles, and the only other authority figure left—the church you went to, what, Catholic?”

“Mormon.”

Sullivan made a face. “Gah. Even worse. The church managed to both convey the magic and mystery of sex while at the same time keeping you completely ignorant of it, with the presumption that when you finally met your own Holy Sperm Vessel and began to fruitpully multiply, you’d figure it all out. How’m I doing so far?”

“Pretty much spot on. But that’s the way it is for most people I know. Or meet. Sexually healthy or not.”

“Right, right, but here’s where I get good.” He held up one finger, laced with the same ink that swirled down the back of his hand and up his arms. “Somewhere early on, you had two things happen: one, you developed a tendency, a proclivity, an interest in some sort of sexual aberration. Whips, chains, goats, latex, beans, whatever...something outside the norm.” He held up a second finger. “And two, somehow, some way, you lucked into a sexual relationship that did not put the burden of shame on you.”

Brian sat back, looking intently at Sullivan. “OK. Yes. Into kink early on, starting with trying to figure out the sex scenes in my Dad’s copy of ‘The Anderson Tapes’. And then Melinda, in high school, a year older than me and with a mother who encouraged us to the bedroom after dinner with a ‘have fun kids, don’t bang the wall too hard.’” He paused, and looked down at his hands for a moment, for a moment reliving the same moment that always came to mind, leopard print panties, so exotic to a sixteen year old, glimpsed just before she blindfolded him, and bound his wrists and ankles to the bed, and then an eternal thirty seconds or so of nothing, broken by the sudden unmistakable feeling of the panties being hung from his left big toe, and the throaty chuckle of his girlfriend...he felt his scars starting to warm, and shook his head quickly.

Sullivan was leaning forward out of his chair, one hand halfway to Brian’s wrist again. He looked carefully at Brian’s eyes, and seemed to be trying to measure something with some sense other than the physical. After a moment he nodded to himself, satisfied. “Hmmp. Ok then. You have some control after all. That’s the first sign that you won’t, at least, shoot yourself in the head.” Again that sour smile returned. “You’ll just have to worry about others doing it for you.”

He sat back in his chair. “And here’s where I really get the Swami Merit Badge.” He held an imaginary envelope to his forehead. “Recently, within the last month or so, you discovered a new kink. Something that excited and interested you almost as much as sex did when you first discovered it, something that calls to you like nothing else.” He paused again, and rotated his arms, flexing them and causing the twining lines of his tat to pulse and writhe. “Something like ink. Or piercing. Or leather. Or—“

“Rope.” Brian said softly. “I’ve been working with my lovers and rope...shibari, it’s called.’

Sullivan sighed. “Fuck. Shoulda known. You couldn’t’ve picked something simple like spanking, could you? Had to pick something *meditative* and *focused*.” His voice again assumed the nasal wicked-witch tone. Then his face softened as he looked again at his arms. “Then again, I bet it wasn’t exactly a choice, was it?”

Brian nodded. “Yeah. It was weird—I’ve been kinky pretty much my whole sexual life, maybe earlier. Been bottom, been sub, been top, tried all sorts of things—well, as much as I could, life got in the way a lot.” *Ain’t that an understatement,*

buddy boy? “But yeah, a couple of months ago...I dunno, I was with my girlfriend at a fetish conference, and in the marketplace the only thing I could afford was this rope. Real bondage rope, not the stuff you get from the hardware store.” He looked down at his own hands. “Somehow, in my hands, it just felt...right. When I started using it with my lovers, it became both a means and an end, functional lingerie, whatever you want to call it...it just felt, well, right. For me and them.”

“It’s called a fetish, bucko. Not in the latex and Skin-Two sense—well, in that sense, too, sometimes, but I’m talking more about anthropology here. According to the Study of Man,” he grinned at Brian’s wincing as he twisted the word in the same way Vashte had, “a fetish is any object or action to which inordinate power is attached. On some people, having this ink,” he waved a palm over his opposite arm, shoulder to wrist, “would be nothing more than a decoration, like a necklace or earring. But it’s my fetish, and that means I can use it as a conduit for that power we were talking about...” He demonstrated by waving his hand in the air again, opening his palm and blowing out across it towards the man with the laptop.

Brian could almost see the turbulence in the air—no, scratch that, he actually *did* see it moving across the room to where the computer-bound man sat. When it struck him, his eyes widened, and he looked up again, suddenly, face flushed, to where Sullivan sat—but the instigator of the disturbance was feigning innocence, idly looking at his nails. *And in the process, showing off his hands and muscled forearms to Happy Boy over there...* Brian thought, and smiled. *Come to think of it, he’s showing it off to me, too.*

“I thought you weren’t supposed to play with it, if it’s so dangerous?” Brian wasn’t criticizing, he was curious.

Sullivan barked out a laugh. “Are you kidding? That’s what it’s *for*, boy, to be played with! Hell, it *is* play! Why do you think all the sex gods are tricksters, starting with Pan?” He glanced over at the man, and gave a very deliberate wink. The man licked his lips nervously...and dove back into his laptop, hands moving twice as fast as before. “There’s just one problem.”

“It’s no accident that your parents, your friends, and almost you, never found out more about sex than the plumbing. It’s no accident, my friend, that this entire civilization of ours is kept in the constant tension of being told sex is bad while at the same time

having it thrust in our faces at every turn.” His tone deepened, and his eyes grew hard. “There are people who see this power as a threat to their existence, as something that needs to be quelled and eliminated wherever possible. They are not nice people. In fact, they are ugly in so many ways...” His voice trailed off, and he looked sadly at the floor, seeming lost in some internal memories.

Brian tried to simply wait patiently, but as the silence grew longer, the need to break it with some bit of humor, some lighthearted remark (*Well, I'll bite...How ugly ARE they?*) grew within him. Finally his mouth opened, but Sullivan's head snapped up and the eyes that drilled into him were glistening with tears. Suddenly Brian was very glad he'd held his tongue.

“Look, bucko, I don't have time—we don't have time—to turn this into a metaphysical discussion. So I'll give you the cliff's notes. Those that have been controlling the have-nots for a helluva long time, ever since the men—and some women, chauvinism is not biological—threw Astarte out of her own temple. They figured out that a population ignorant about its own sexuality would be easy to scare, easy to corrupt with promises of forbidden pleasure, and best of all would continue to procreate and replenish the work force with wild abandon, reinforcing the cycle and keeping things in their place.”

Brian nodded. “Sure, I've read that sort of economic theory before. What does that have to do with this...power thing?”

Sullivan groaned. “Oh, you poor babe in the woods. It's not about economics, it's about Power. The Power you and Vash were fooling about with. The 'pressors don't want anyone mucking about with it except them, and they use it with great success to keep themselves in control of things.”

“'Pressors?”

Sullivan looked startled at the question. “Eh? Oh. 'Pressors, with an oh-are. Repressors. As in those who repress. Those who work to keep you 'ignant', as Dear Saint Cho would say. But again, I'm digressing, and it's going to get you killed and me annoyed. So listen.”

“They, like me, will have seen your firestorm of power tonight. And make no mistake, boy, you are one helluva Mage to have been able to wrest that kind of juice from

Vash. Pun intended. Problem is, you've got the power of a nuclear plant combined with the training and self-control of a rabid jackrabbit, which gives you the life expectancy of a horny mayfly in an electrical plant. They won't know where you are yet, since I got to you pretty quickly...but they'll be a-huntin' now, for sure."

"Hunting?" Brian was having no trouble understanding the words, it was the concept that gave him trouble. Sure, things were swinging a bit to the conservative side right now, but this talk about hunting and vast conspiracies was a little hard for him to accept. It's one thing to be a fan of fantasy, he'd been reading this kind of stuff forever. But trying to actually work it into reality...

Then he saw them.

Walking past the front window of the coffee shop, he saw two young men, looking like Mormon missionaries. In fact...he squinted, and saw that they had the typical rectangular black nametags. They *were* Mormons.

But something about them looked different. These two didn't have the gawky awkwardness that Brian associated with the eighteen year old proselytizers he'd known growing up. These two moved with sure athletic smoothness, their eyes alert as one peered into the coffeeshop, the other with his back to the window, taking in the street. *Covering all avenues of attack*, Brian realized. *Or flight..* Their haircuts went beyond Beaver Cleaver conservatism and into the shaved precision of the military. In fact, they reminded Brian disconcertingly of some Navy Seals he'd watched once back in his Marine days. Scary men.

"Yeah, I see them," Sullivan said quietly. Brian started and looked at the man nonchalantly sipping his coffee. "They're sniffing around. Don't worry about staring at them; this kind of place always has people staring at anyone who looks as out of place as they do, and for a change they won't take it as an invitation to ask you the Golden Questions." He put down his coffee and looked at them as they entered the building. He looked relaxed, but Brian noticed that his feet were flat on the floor, and could sense a readiness for some sort of action that belied the calm exterior.

The two men came into the coffee shop, looking over the patrons with eyes that seemed too small for their faces. As for the coffeehouse crowd, they were all suddenly studiously involved in whatever was in their hands, be it book, magazine, cup...or laptop.

The missionaries moved straight for the man Sullivan had been toying with earlier, who looked up in surprise at the quiet intense murmurs they began as they flanked the hapless grad student.

One of them continued to look around the room, and as his glance brushed over Brian, he he felt a wisp of sensation, like a slimy glove drawing fingers slowly over his cervical vertebrae. It lasted just a moment, and then was gone. Sullivan gently laid a hand on Brian's to keep him from reaching up to rub his neck. "You shouldn't be able to feel that, bucko, so just stay where you are, and smile at your big leather daddy here." Brian flushed, not so much out of embarrassment as from the fact that he was finding Sullivan's big hand on his more than a little exciting. Startled, he could feel his cock thickening in his jeans, pressing out the fabric. Sullivan glanced down, grinned. "Ah, fear does make for a great aphrodisiac, doesn't it?"

Brian suddenly thought *What am I scared of? These are just missionaries.* Indeed, the men had reverted to form, both of them seated and talking intently to the man with the laptop, who had a weird mix of confusion, annoyance, and titillation on his face.

"Good. They went for the scent. That's our cue. Let's go, loverboy." Sullivan continued to grip Brian's hand as they began to walk towards the side door of the coffeeshop. The man with the laptop was looking more and more flustered as the missionaries leaned closer to him, one of them resting a hand not-too-softly on his shoulder.

Suddenly it was all just too much. Brian pulled away from Sullivan.

"This is ridiculous." Brian said loudly. "They're just missionaries. My parents sic them on me all the time." Sullivan winced, and sighed, still facing the door, not turning to look at Brian, who felt suddenly, and for no particular reason, angry. "This is just part of some complicated pickup line, isn't it?"

Sullivan brought his head up, still not looking back.. "Suit yourself," he said amicably, and continued to walk towards the door. Brian was taken aback at how quickly the big man disappeared through the door, and he felt a little lost. The club, the evening with Vashte, the feeling of the Power *slipping*, the sex, the healing process, it all seemed very far away in the sunny warmth of the coffee shop...but a part of him knew it had all

happened, it was all real. And it knew that there was really no one to explain it except the man who had just walked out the door.

His thoughts were broken by the sudden harsh grasp on his shoulder. “You’re the one, aren’t you?” he heard one of the missionaries say, in a friendly bland tone. “You’re coming with us. Now.”

Brian was confused, now, and turned towards the man, whose hand shifted but tightened on his shoulder. “What? No, I’m not interested, guys, I was a Mormon but it’s really not...GAHHH!” His protests morphed into a painful gurgle as the hand on his shoulder tightened, fingers pressing into his trapezius with more force than he’d ever felt before.

“You’re coming with us. Now.” And before Brian’s indrawn breath, about to protest, could even be taken, the other man had grasped his wrist and twisted it outwards, locking his elbow flat out at the joint. The pain was incredible, and he lifted on his toes to try to alleviate what felt like his arm being broken in half at the elbow. A clinical part of his mind recognized the arm lock as something familiar from his occasional aikido classes, but those practices were with people working very, very hard not to damage each other. Brian found that when your sparring partner didn’t really care about the pain they caused, it was a very different feeling. All the pretty movements blew out of his mind in a haze of pain and the very real fear that his tendons and cartilage were creaking towards oblivion as the missionary adjusted his grip slightly. Brian’s other arm could only flop helplessly, as every time he tried to move it the missionary would increase the torque on his joint and flexed wrist, lifting Brian further on his toes as he tried to relieve the pressure. Caught between the grip on his shoulder and the agonizing burn of his elbow tendons, Brian was feeling very helpless.

But not scared. Not yet. Instead, he was getting pissed. Pain did that to him, sent him into rages that made him want to hit, strike out, do something, anything, the adrenaline driving the need to strike out to the forefront of his mind. It made him struggle, and missionary with his twisted arm would adjust his grip slightly and Brian would again be forced to stop as his elbow creaked in protest. He knew just how it would sound, like a chicken leg being popped out of its socket. He looked around the coffeeshop, but the other patrons seemed frozen—even the barista was simply watching,

making no move towards the phone. “Call the—“ Brian tried to urge her, his voice breaking off in a hiss as the pressure again shifted.

Both men were still calmly smiling with their small eyes looking intently at Brian as he struggled. The first released his grip on Brian’s trapezius, the relief unnoticed as Armlock Man twisted some more, just to keep his attention. His partner calmly drew a small black case out of the breastpocket of his black suit, unzipping it and laying it on the table next to Brian. He looked down and saw it contained, wrapped in neat little black bands of elastic, a small black vial and hypodermic needle. Brian watched the missionary—now dubbed Needle Man in the back of his mind—reach for it, a soft click made him turn his head, and he saw Armlock man matter-of-factly using a knife with a boxy handle to slice through his jacket and shirt all the way from his wrist to his shoulder. The leather and fabric put up no more resistance to the blade’s edge than water, and Brian wondered at exactly how sharp that meant the knife had to be. As he saw a line of red appear up his now-bare arm, he realized that it was even sharper than that, having sliced into his skin without his feeling it.

Now he began to be a bit scared. He could hear Needle Man tapping the side of the hypo, and realized that he was about to be injected with something that would, he suspected, remove even the quickly diminishing choices now available.

He groped for some memory of some counter, some pretty move from his aikido classes to get out of the arm lock. Nothing came to mind; his joint was bent further up than he’d ever believed it could be, and his vein in the hollow of his elbow was a plump target for Needle Man’s two finger tap-tap, preparing to inject.

There was nothing. So he just moved. In the only direction available to him: up.

Brian’s knee came up sharply to his chest, and he got the toe of his shoe up onto the edge of the table with just enough grip to let him push up fast enough and high enough to relieve the tension in his arm. Suddenly Armlock Man’s grip became another anchor point, and Brian used it to continue his motion up and forward, piking his body in a forward somersault, his legs folding over on either side of the missionary’s head, using the hand as a brace to keep him from falling to the floor as he desperately tucked his head and plunged forward.. It was a simple move that Brian had done many times in contact

improv dance, but always carefully, making sure that his partner was ready to take his weight.

Now he didn't care. He slammed his legs down as hard as he could, knowing that the man's body would cushion his as they fell to the floor.

Except that they didn't. The man didn't move. It was like slamming his legs down on a thick pipe. For a ridiculous moment, Brian hung there upside down, looking at the other missionary's face, looking down at him with an upside down and puzzled expression on his face. Craning his neck, he looked up and saw Armlock Man looking down at him with an ironic smile, and his hand was released as the hard-eyed man raised his fists, preparatory to to smashing them into Brian's groin.

Brian swung his arms behind the man's knees and poked his stiff fingers into the back of the man's knee joints, at the same time kipping his body out just a bit with an arch of the back.

Armlock man folded back like he'd been hit with a wrecking ball. The added push from Brian accelerated his fall to the point where he had no chance to bring his arms back, and as a result his head hit the ground with an audible crunch. Brian used the momentum to roll up to his feet, not allowing himself to think about the sticky liquid now pooling around his boots. He turned just in time to see Needle Man lunging at him with the hypo, no longer smiling, but his face in a savage grimace of rage.

Lunges Brian did remember from his aikido class, and without thinking he stepped out of the line of the thrust and towards Needle Man, one hand sweeping down to grab the wrist while the other went to the shoulder, black cloth of the suit feeling slick under his hand.

He wasn't trying to grab it, though, and simply put enough pressure to add to the missionary's forward momentum, swinging his hips in a *tenkan* swirl that brought the man's torso around in a spiral that ended abruptly with his head slamming into the counter under the startled gaze of the barista.

She looked at up at Brian from the two black-suited men lying on the floor. "Dude. I think you fucking killed him."

Brian turned to look where she pointed, and saw that there was a stain on the floor under the head of Armlock man, a growing dark liquid that spread viscously along the

floor. “Fuck...” Brian said, softly. He was just starting to become cognizant again, and most of coming back to rational thought seemed to involve the idea that he was really in a world of shit, now.

“Nah. Just drained him for a bit.” Both Brian and the barista turned at the voice from the door, where Sullivan was leaning against the jamb. “I’m surprised, bucko, I had you written off as another dead fucking idiot.”

Brian found himself furious. “Didn’t much feel like sticking around to find out, though, did you? Fucking coward...”

Sullivan gave him a coldly appraising stare. “Obviously I only had the first part wrong. You’re still a fucking idiot. I tried to get you out of here and you thought it was a ploy to get my lips into your package, you arrogant sumbitch. And I will not sacrifice myself, no, for a guy who isn’t all that cute to begin with.” He looked down at where Needle Man was beginning to stir, and pushed off from the door jamb. Walking over, he very carefully put the heel of his boot against the side of the man’s chin. Just as the man’s eyes snapped open, he snapped his foot down, hard, and there was another crunching sound as the man’s vertebrae were twisted apart.

“What...why did you...”

“You didn’t hear me, did you? Takes a helluva lot more than this to kill these things. But I gotta admit, you did slow them down some. What the hell kind of martial art was that?” As he talked, Sullivan pulled Brian towards the door, and this time he did not resist, until they got to the door. Suddenly he looked around the room, and realized that in spite of the fact that two men—*or whatever*—had been apparently killed in the room, no one was reacting. In fact, the guy with the laptop was back to typing, the barista was reading her book...as if they couldn’t even see the two men in the dark suits—

The dark suits that were moving. Slowly, but unmistakably, the limbs were beginning to rearrange themselves, to push up against the floor.

Brian decided to save the questions for later, and let Sullivan hustle him out the door.

“Are you a sinner, Brian?”

They were sitting at the kitchen table of Sullivan's house, a suburban tacky-tacky special indistinguishable from the hundreds of starter homes in the subdivision around them. Brian had seen. The inside was decorated in the flat planes of dark wood furniture in the prairie style, neat but with occasional personal touches like the crumpled magazine next to the couch or the dvd case casually tossed on the floor next to the television.

Brian had looked closer as they walked in, though, and realized a few subtle touches hinted at the proclivities of the owner. The candles on the end table were clear tallow, melted crenellations indicating their utility beyond decoration. The arms of the chairs had decorative holes in them, which just happened to be the right size to attach restraints, and the hanging plants were hanging on very large hooks,

Sullivan had laughed as he watched Brian assess the room. "yeah, yeah, I know, it's only subtle if you're vanilla." He had taken him to the kitchen, where a large and very sturdy table now held two Sierra Pale Ales on woven straw coasters, and the two of them had simply sat quietly for a while, letting the banal calm of the backyard calm the absurd violence of their morning.

The question that finally broke that silence didn't seem out of place, and Brian gave it some serious consideration. "Honestly? No, I don't think so. Not by my own moral standards."

"And what are they?"

"Stolen. From a sci-fi author named Heinlein." Brian watched the other man for the eye-rolling reaction he often got when he mentioned the writer, but Sullivan just grunted and took another drink of beer. "Not entirely, of course. But I liked his definition: the only sin lies in hurting someone else unnecessarily." He grinned for a moment. "I think he added something like 'hurting yourself unnecessarily isn't a sin, it's just stupid', but as moral codes go, I figure I could do worse."

Sullivan nodded. "You've got that right. Much worse. And most people do. It's a brilliantly rigged game. First you convince people that sex is bad. Since everybody can't help but want it, everybody feels guilty. Then after scaring the bejeezus out of them with hell, or AIDS, or the imminent threat of weapons of marital destruction, offer them a way out, salvation, if they only sign up with the status quo." He grimaced. "Fuckers. Information age was the worst thing that ever happened to us as a species. Gave them the

ability to control and censor what almost everyone sees or, more to the point, believes, and there's not much we can do." Sighing, he fiddled with his beer glass. "Except what we do. Fight a holding action, guerrilla warfare, try to keep the flame alive, all that happy horseshit."

Brian got a feeling of deep weariness from the man's voice. "Can we back up here a bit? Please? I'm still not sure what's going on, really. I mean, after those...whatever, terminissionaries, I guess, tried to grab me, I can tell something's going on, and I know I need your help. I mean..." He realized he was rambling, and decided to follow the advice of his favorite Spaniard. "No. It is too much. Let me sum up." He was gratified to see a half smile appear on the man's face. *Never fails, everybody loves the Princess Bride*, he thought. "I know something's going on. I know that I don't know what that something is, really, and most of all, I know that what I don't know is probably going to get me killed." He paused again. "And possibly not only me. First and most important question: are these people going to go after my family?"

Sullivan looked startled. "You have a family? You look too young to..." his voice trailed off as Brian waved a hand dismissively.

"I started early. Forget about it. Fact is, I have two daughters, one who lives with me and my wife—" he ignored Sullivan's raised eyebrow—"and one who lives with my ex."

"I'm not too worried about my wife—she's in Seattle for the weekend, visiting a lover—but right now both of my daughters are with my ex, it's her weekend, and I'm worried about a sudden visit from Men in Black Suits."

Sullivan nodded. "Ok, that's a fair approximation. But they rarely go after infants, so—"

"She's fifteen." Brian was annoyed now at that shocked expression that kept coming over his host's face. His voice got harsh. "Look, here it is: I got my girlfriend pregnant when I was 18. I joined the Marines, we got married, had another kid, I got out of the Marines, we got divorced. So I'm 36 now with a couple of teenage kids, my wife and I have a polyamorous marriage, and so on weekends I go out to play. And this weekend I seem to have picked the wrong woman to play with, and now I have a hairy guy telling me that my life as I know it is over because the missionaries are now trying to

stick me with needles and some sort of vast right-wing conspiracy is after my vital fluids.” He paused for breath and lowered his voice to a calm level. “Is that about it? Did I miss anything? Because I need to know if my kids are going to be in danger.”

Sullivan was openly grinning now, obviously enjoying the rant. “You know, you’re cute when you’re angry.” He chortled at Brian’s disgusted sigh. “Relax. Yeah, you pretty much got it. Right-wing is kind of limiting, though. And life isn’t over; it’s just that you have to become a responsible adult, instead of being that immature person you’ve been since, when was it? Eighteen?” Brian nodded, and Sullivan continued.

“OK. Well, then consider yourself lucky, because you’ve had eighteen years of frivolous youth. And you say you’re polyamorous?” Brian nodded, and Sullivan looked thoughtful. “That word means a lot of things to a lot of people. Mind telling me what that means to you and your wife,” he paused expectantly.

“Bec. Short for Rebecca. Never Becky.” Brian looked down at his beer and realized that he had, as usual, peeled most of the label off absent-mindedly. “It means that we are committed to each other, but not exclusively; we allow for the possibility of romantic relationships outside of our marriage.” He paused again, gathering his thoughts, and went on. “We’re not swingers, per se. We don’t go out trying to have sex with other people. Lots of our play never actually has any sexual contact, but it tends to be in a sexual context, if that makes sense.” He smiled a little. “But occasionally we meet someone who things just click with, and then, well, it’s great to be able to act on that without worrying about cheating, or jealousy, or the end of our marriage or anything like that.” He looked up suddenly, eyes narrowing. “You still haven’t told me if my daughters are safe.”

Sullivan nodded, thoughtful. “I know. That’s because I’m still not sure.” Brian was out of his chair and heading towards the door. “Wait, you idiot! Remember what happened the last time you stormed off?”

Brian paused with his hand at the doorknob. His shoulders slumped as he tried to get his emotions under control, and he realized, suddenly, that he was exhausted. The energy boost that Sullivan’s healing had given him early that morning had worn off, and the constant adrenaline flow since then was starting to take its toll.

Which may have saved his life, since he was relaxed when the door blew off its hinges directly into him, throwing him back and onto the floor. He lay on the floor, unable to breathe, looking up at the door which had fallen on top of him. The strange thudding of heavy feet running across the door vibrated against his cheek, more felt than heard as the ringing in his ears blended with the strange resonance of the door. Sullivan's shout of alarm was tinny and distant, as was the sharp firecracker snap of gunfire.

He wanted to get up. He wanted to push the door off. He wanted to rush to help Sullivan. He wanted to protect his daughters.

He wanted to breathe again.

Instead, his world grayed out into darkness.

Sometimes waking is a long slow and pleasant drift from the secure black wombness of sleep into the seeping glow of color as the world begins to occupy the conscious mind.

This time, however, it was the searing jump and scream as Brian became aware of the needles of pain shooting into his testes. He was brutally awake, eyes flashing wide as his body convulsed, and they rolled wildly before focusing on the man in front of him, holding a silver pom pom with a wire coming off of the end.

"Good. You're awake. We can begin." The man was chubby in a sallow kind of way, his body seeming to have given up any pretense at health long ago. His skin was sweating under the white shirt he wore, top button undone and red tie loosened so that it flopped over the gold tie bar at the top of his swollen belly. He gave another flick of the pom pom at Brian's genitals, and again the needle-like darts ripped into him, causing him to buck and pull against the ropes that held up his wrists.

Ropes?

He couldn't help himself, he looked up out of curiosity, just to see what it was they'd used to tie him up. The ropes were wrapped around his wrists three times and then cinched tightly in the middle, the rope tails then travelling up into a darkness above that was intensified by the single bulb light shining over his head. At first he was absurdly critical of whoever tied the knot (*that's way too tight! That'll cut off the circulation, could cause nerve damage, could--*). The train of thought abruptly derailed as he realized

these were his wrists in the ropes. And even worse, the reason it was taking him a while to realize it was because he could no longer feel his hands.

This is not good. Brian arched his back again as the strands of the electric pompoms from hell brushed up against his genitals again, the needles of agony combining into a more steady ache that seemed to push up directly from his crotch into his stomach.

“Mr. Shain. I trust I have your attention now.”

In spite of the sweat covering his body and face, Brian’s mouth was dry, and he had to moisten his tongue by licking his upper lip before he could reply. “Definitely. Complete. Total. What can I do for you?”

“That, Mr. Shain, remains to be seen. Our first concern is with what you have done already. With a...Rebecca Horst, I believe? And John Sullivan?” The man’s lip twisted in disgust. “Wicked, perverse things. You are in a great deal of trouble, Mr. Shain.”

Yeah, I kind of noticed. “Look, I just, um, followed her home from the bar, you know, trying to get some, any guy would—“ His attempt at good-ol-boy camaraderie broke into a yelling screech of pain as the man simply jabbed the metal pompom directly into his genitals, the thick flexible strands draping over the base of his penis and falling over either side of his testes. The pain was not subtle or random; with the direct contact Brian could feel the actual modulation of the current as it shot into his body, adding involuntary twitches to his efforts to twist away from the current.

The man held it there, watching dispassionately as Brian twisted and moaned, then finally lowered it, the metal brushing Brian’s inner thighs as it passed. “Now. As I said, you are in trouble. And before you deal with the rest of your pitiful life as a Stroker, you will tell me where Horst and Sullivan are.”

“Where...” Brian’s thoughts were having trouble rising above the pain in his midsection, but he registered what the question meant. *Sullivan isn’t dead.* Having been saved once, already, by the man, he felt the first stirrings of a faint hope beginning to rise. *Got to stall,* he thought. Though the man in front of him did not seem the type to allow for any dillying dallying in his pursuit of answers. Like a shock of icy snow injected over

his mind, he realized that stalling was not, in fact, necessary. There was no effort required at all to dodge the sweaty little man's questions.

"I don't know," Brian said, and in his voice resigned with the knowledge that he was going to be unhappy about this for quite a while. He licked his lips again, and tried to put sincerity in his hoarse voice. "I went home with—Horst, you called her? She told me she was Vish, or some Indian name. Honestly, sir," *that's it, show respect, butter him up, maybe he'll turn the electricity down to eleven*, "I went home with her, and she wanted to play some kind of kinky games, and I thought, well, why not, and then she pulled out this knife, and it just...got...all...weird. I didn't know it would lead to, well, any of" he jerked his head up at the ropes around his hands, "this kind of stuff." He watched the man's face closely, trying to read in it some indication of whether he was being believed, or at least tolerated.

The pompom rose again. This time, though, it was simply passed to the other hand as the sallow man rubbed his jaw, staring past Brian as if considering whether to have a steak medium well or charred. After a tense few moments of deliberation, he turned away and put the pompom back on the table. "I'm surprised you're so cooperative, Mr. Shain. Your kind rarely are. The perverse are, after all, by their nature, rebellious. Rebellious against what is natural and right." Brian had begun to relax a bit, his shoulders aching but the upright draw actually helping him to stretch out some of the muscles in his back that had knotted up in his convulsive attempts at escape.

As he isometrically pulled at the ropes, he realized that while he couldn't feel his fingers, at the same time, he somehow was aware of the ropes. He didn't dare look up, lest he give the sallow man the idea he was contemplating escape...but at the same time, he didn't need to. He knew where each loop passed over each other, where the rope was folded over in a bight to wind the loops together between his wrists. With a start he realized that he knew more than that, he could sense the rope rising up over his head, where it passed over a rafter and down again to the left, where it was wrapped to a boat hitch.

The room was dark, except for the single bulb, and the ridiculous triteness of the situation actually made him feel a little indignant. Somehow the lack of effort to go beyond the stereotypical interrogation situation seemed insulting to his aesthetic

sensibilities. The man was still hunched over the table, mumbling under his breath as he clinked and clanked something that Brian had no doubt was going to be unpleasant.

He closed his eyes, trying again to visualize his awareness of the rope, visualizing it as a glowing tendril not so much binding him as somehow connecting him. Connecting him to...what? He tried reaching, not with his body, but pushing his awareness out, further, and as he did so, not only did the shining glow of the rope in his mind brighten...but there was an answering flicker of warmth from the series of healing scars still criss-crossing his torso in intricate whorls, the patterns left by Vashte reacting somehow with the connection towards which the rope was drawing him.

But he couldn't quite reach that last inch to complete the connection with whatever it was, and abruptly the pudgy man turned and pushed his glasses up across the bridge of his nose. He raised his other hand up to the light, and squirted a little black liquid out the end of the hypodermic he held there. "The thing is, Mr. Shain, I believe you. And those two are really not terribly important, in the vast scheme of things. So there's no reason to delay the inevitable, and you can begin your work as a Stroker."

"What's a Stroker?" Brian asked quickly, eyes wide as he looked at the hypodermic. There was no real aversion to needles, but a keen awareness that strange ones often contained things that could do bad things not only in the short term, but permanently. The man wasn't bothering to answer as he approached Brian, who instinctively tried to contract his body away from him. Above him, he could sense the rope like it was his own skin, even feeling the friction of the beam as it rubbed against the fibers where they passed over. "Sounds somebody likely to go blind, heh..."

The weak joke seemed to take the man by surprise. "Why, yes, that's exactly what you'll be doing, Mr. Shain. You will be masturbating your filthy little penis all day long, secure on a mildew covered mattress we've got set up for you in dirty little crack house. Eventually the diseases, malnutrition, or just another Stroker will end your life for you, but not until you've provided us with a goodly surge or two of this Power that you don't know what to do with." He finally smiled, now, the tiny marble eyes registering a maniacal satisfaction as he looked at Brian, and lifted up the needle so that it glistened in the yellow light of the single bulb. "This is just the start of the long, sad end of your wicked life, Mr. Shain. But fear not—or fear, it makes no difference—you will be

blissfully ecstatic through the whole process. We don't, after all, want to make you unhappy." The smile grew wider, a predator sure of his prey. "We just want to use you and then get you out of the way for the next happy bit of scum."

"So it's...some kind of special drug? Supposed to make me into a sex maniac?"

"Nothing special about it at all. It's simply a variant of heroin. Enough to get you hooked, blow out your pleasure receptors, and then we add a little special bit to make you desperate to feel something, anything again. So you begin stroking that filthy little penis," he said it like a mantra, nose wrinkling and his voice rising as if it was an effort to speak of such a thing, "more and more. And you will get a few surges, but they won't be as sweet as this injection will feel. But there will be your best friend, the supplier of this sweet little black juice, and he'll help keep you happy and stroking. For a while." The man frowned, as though something of mild concern just occurred to him. "Hmmm. You may last a bit longer than most. You seem to recover rather quickly."

That's when Brian realized that yes, he did feel almost completely normal, far from what one would expect from having a door blown into his face. His mind had cleared the effects of the unconsciousness almost completely, leaving him with a sharp hyper-realistic clarity that seemed to bring out the textures in the room, the damp shine of the sweat on the yellowish skin of the man's forehead, the swirling black liquid under the cold glass of the hypodermic, the woven soft tension of the rope drawing his arms up and connecting him, somehow, to something that seemed just out of reach, something that was—

Powerful. The rope was connecting him, just as it had with Vashte, to power. It was like an antenna, and Brian realized that he could use it to amplify and

Push. It was instinctive, and he knew somehow that if he really thought about it, he would lose it, somehow, but that same awareness that was sensing the rope could be twisted, used to give a little push, a force of denial to the man's progress forward. It was tenuous, like pushing with hands full of tissue paper...but it was a lot of tissue paper, and it served, for a moment, to slow the sallow man's progress.

Brian could tell, though, that it would only last a moment. There was no time to plan; he simply had to act. Again his body moved, taking advantage of the physical as well as metaphysical reinforcement of the rope, using it to swing his leg up so that his

knees bent and landed on either side of his captor's stunned face, caught in a sudden vice grip as Brian locked his thighs together. The man's eyes grew wide as he was suddenly faced with the close proximity of that *filthy little penis* he'd found so distasteful. Brian glared down at him, and his feeling of triumph made him pause and savor the look of terror.

And that's when he made his mistake. In that moment of hesitation, perched like a raptor over with his hands held high over his head, the man recovered just a little of his presence of mind. Just a little. Just enough to lift the hand that was still holding the needle up and drive it into Brian's thigh.

If Brian had been asked to articulate what he thought he was doing when he had trapped the man in his thighs, he would have probably thought of something along the lines of choking the man into unconsciousness. Instead, as he saw the needle rise up and plunge into him, he twisted away from it...and heard the crackling pops as the man's cervical vertebrae snapped. His body was suddenly pulled straight as the corpse that he now held between his thighs thudded with a wet smack into the floor.

His hands were still bound tight by the rope, which was somehow becoming dimmer in his awareness, like sheets of gauze were being pulled over his mind, one by one. It didn't bother him at all. The cold silence of the room, the man dead at his feet, the needle now dangling out of his left thigh, none of it was worrisome in the slightest. Not knowing how or even if he was going to find a way out didn't cause the slightest concern.

In fact, his face was stuck in a wide, happy grin, as the waves of warm hot pleasure began spreading from his thigh. He felt great, better than he'd ever felt before. And knowing that it was that black liquid that had done it to him, that was now spreading its malignance through his bloodstream, it just made him smile all the more, because he felt fan-fucking-tastic.

"Sullivan..." he whispered softly, into the dark. "Somebody...need a little help here." And then giggled, because he couldn't help himself.

And that was the most horrifying thing of all.

Whispers in the dark. He's not really hearing them, he's not really hearing anything, there's nothing but his breathing through the rope. His mind has travelled along

the line up and out of the miasma of pleasure the drug forced on him and lies somewhere near the roof beams of the warehouse.

How did he know there was a warehouse?

He knows all the warehouse now, from where he is on the top of the rope. There's not much room up here, certainly not enough for coherent thought, but that's ok, he can just be up there, not having to think about the what he's been through, what he's done, what the future (*daughters, what about...*) may hold, he can just be there on the rope. Far away from that person down below, swaying against the tension in his arms, trying to keep his legs from buckling underneath him.

His shoulders are starting to ache, but that's a good thing, because it's not pleasure, it doesn't feel good, and that's wonderful. He's tired of feeling good, and would like to be able to truly feel as crappy as he knows his body has earned. But there's still that drowning tide of nebulous pleasure that coats him like oil, and is so very, very slow to drip off... Whispers again, turning to shouts. He doesn't want to think, because thinking is hard on the rope, and if he has to come down the rope, he'll lose this nice sense of being, of not having to worry about what comes next. Then he feels the hands on his body, and suddenly he is aware of steel approaching, of someone slicing suddenly into the rope, and he moans a soft protest. Too late, the tails lose their tense life and slither down the side of the beam to thud softly (*not wetly, not like sallowman*) to the floor. He hears the voices now, and the world of hurt and worry passes over him and into him like a tidal wave of sewage and muck. Suddenly he is aware of the burning in his shoulders, of the biting prick as the hypodermic is taken from his thigh, of the soft agonizing friction of the remains of the rope being unwound from his chafed wrists. He smiles at this, eyes still closed, but it's not the awful forced happiness of the drug, it's a tired, joyous smile, and so genuine that it makes Sullivan—for it is Sullivan, after all, who has found him and taken him down, Sullivan and someone with smaller but no less strong hands—wonder aloud, “Drugs and dead men and dangling on the end of the rope for I don't know how long...what exactly are you smiling about, bucko?”

Brian smiled a little wider, then lost it as he tried to form the words. “It...hurts.” His voice got a little stronger. “For a while it...didn't. That was...bad.”

Sullivan chuckled even as his hands travelled over the exhausted man's body, assessing the damage. "Here I thought you were a Rope Dom. You're just a painlut in disguise, aren't you?"

Brian's eyes flashed open at that, anger driving away the exhaustion for a moment, but before he could rebuff the big man, a soft finger was laid across his lips. He turned his head to see who was attached to the other end, and met the intense gaze of a young woman, not more than 20, with eyes as old as the world. She looked intently at Brian, making sure she had his attention.

"Sullivan's just being his normal asinine self. Pay no attention. You need to get that stuff out of your system, and we need to deal with some of the damage that nasty rope did to your poor wrists."

Brian mumbled something, and she cocked her head questioningly. It had seemed important to him. "I'm sorry. What was that?"

"Not...the...rope's fault."

She sat back, thoughtful, looking at Sullivan, who was grinning with the satisfaction of a good "I-told-you-so". "Nawashi. You were right, Sullivan, I think we've got a Nawashi here."

The two of them helped him to his feet, and they walked out of the warehouse into the brightness of the Chicago morning, the tails of the rope still trailing behind.

Brian actually lost consciousness in the car, his head resting against the woman's breast as her arm held a blanket around him for warmth. He muzzily woke enough to be able to walk with them when they arrived at a small house set in a neighborhood filled with old-growth trees that, for some reason, had not been chopped down by the developers. Brian didn't notice much as they helped him stumble into the house, but he did see a tiny cauldron, about a foot high, at the start of the path to the house, and the back of a sort of ceramic clam-shell. As they passed them, he felt a slight resistance in the air, for just a moment, like the feeling of pushing through cobwebs. He shivered, and for some reason the "Walrus and the Carpenter" poem began running through his head. "Sailing ships and sealing wax..." he muttered in a stream of consciousness blur. His head swerved just enough as they helped him along the path to see the other side of the

clamshell, and the nude figure standing just inside of it. He realized it was a sylphlike representation of the Birth of Venus, guarding the entrance to the house.

Then they were in the door, and there were more voices and hands helping the blanket off of him and laying him down on a (*so warm!*) comforter spread on the floor. His nose plunged into the soft fabric and it felt so good that there was actually some debate within his body as to whether he should actually try to move and breathe, or if it would be preferable to simply suffocate in downy bliss. The decision was made for him as gentle hands—the same hands, he realized, as had helped Sullivan bring him here—lifted his head and put a crescent shaped pillow under his face, allowing him room to breathe without having to turn his neck.

The voices sounded urgent above him, and he wished he could help, he really did, but his skin had been filled with barley and was just a weighted sack with the inertia of granite.

“He’s been marked. You brought a strange marked Man into my house?” The voice didn’t sound alarmed, but rather curious in a clinical sort of way.

“He’s been more than marked. The bastard’s a nawashi; the ‘pressors are after him like paparazzi on Presley. Vashte—you know Vashte, tantric slut?” Brian’s tired lips curved into a smile at Sullivan’s characterization of the woman. “She hooked up with him at random, and didn’t have the sense to check before she began her marking. Almost blew herself away, and would’ve burned him out as well...”

Brian felt sudden heat on his neck, a glowing warmth that sank through his skin and flesh until his bones felt radiant. His awareness came back again, and he could—no, not *see* exactly, but he *knew*—that the woman with the clinical voice had her hand over the nape of his neck. The hand and warmth held for a moment, then was gone. “This healing. It was yours?”

Sullivan’s voice took an edge of defensive pride. “Yes it was. Took care of him right after Vashte, and while it might not be as fancy as your Wiccan weavings it did the trick, I’ll have you know.”

“It is adequate. I merely wanted to know so that we know where to begin the re-alignment. Nawashi, you say?” Brian felt the sudden proximity of the woman’s lips next to his ear. “Man. Nawashi. What do you call yourself?”

He managed to force a muffled “Brian” past his leaden lips, but she seemed to be able to understand him. “I need to know your paradigm, Brian, so that we can heal you before untwisting what the Tantress did to you.”

Brian murmured something else, and for a moment the woman’s face was puzzled. “Four nickels? What is...” Then she noticed Sullivan chortling next to her, and her face—but not her eyes—darkened. “Ah. A trickster, too. No wonder you like him, Sullivan.” She looked down at the limp form of Brian again, and said, “I’m glad you have that much strength, Man, but you need to save it. It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

Sullivan grunted. “Isn’t that always the truth?” and was silent again at her sharp glance. She put her hands over Brian again, this time one palm hovering between his shoulder blades and the other over the base of his spine. Again he felt the warmth, but this time there was a dissonance as it seeped into his bones, as the warmth seemed to first travel through his spine, then suddenly meet resistance—and where it stopped, it suddenly burned, sharp enough to make even his depleted muscles spasm. He flopped once and let out a moan of protest.

She moved her hands away quickly, a look of concern on her face. “We need to get those open, and soon. You’ve still got power in you, and it’s going to start eating its way inward if we don’t help it find a way out.” Again she leaned forward and asked, “What path do you follow? Hindu? Taoist? Not...Christian?” She let out a small smile as his head shook violently. “No, but you used to be. So sad, what they do to their own. Buddhist?” She looked thoughtful as he gave a small nod into his pillow, again muttering something. She heard as if the pillow wasn’t even there. “Soto Zen, *des ka?* Hmmm..” She addressed Brian again. “You study the rope. Have you learned of such things as meridians and flow of ki?” As he nodded again, she frowned. “Unfortunately; I don’t know of any shiatsu healers close enough to help. But perhaps...”

She closed her eyes for a moment and hummed. Brian didn’t recognize the tune, but it soothed him, winding in and around his consciousness with a soft, relaxing touch that had just enough syncopation to add a little energy to his spirit, and keep him from losing consciousness entirely. The melody went on for several minutes, then her hand again hovered for a moment over his neck, and he felt the heat of her hand sinking in

again and sealing the melody into his bones so that when she stopped, a moment later, he still heard the soft flow of notes weaving through his useless muscles and frame. She leaned forward and whispered, “Stay with us a bit longer, Nawashi. They are here.”

He couldn't even murmur his assent or thanks. In spite of the song, he felt his reserves draining around, and the sounds in the room, the feeling of the comforter, they all grew more distant, no matter how much he concentrated on staying in touch with them. He suddenly wished for the rope again, just to give him that line, that place to go and hover in the luxury of the now...

“That's all?” Sullivan's voice, suddenly harsh, gave him a momentary respite, a rock to slow his rush into the tide of unconsciousness. “You're going to hum some tune and that's going to take care of him? How about calling someone? You've got to know someone...damn, if only Mistress Alicia wasn't at the Crucible this weekend...Come on! We have to do something! I didn't lose my house and get fucking shot at just so we could bleat a little Irish ditty at him and let him fade!”

“Bleat?” The single word came out of her mouth with a soft tone that still seemed to stop Sullivan's tirade with the suddenness of a slap. “Sometimes, Sullivan, you are the true avatar of the Green One, and we love you for it. Right now, though, you are simply being Man, and I would ask you to stop it while in Inanna's house.”

Brian could almost hear Sullivan's pout. “I just think that one of us should be calling for somebody that knows how to...”

“They have been called. They are, in fact, here.” The faint sound of a door opening somewhere in the house came to him.

Sullivan's dismayed grunt was followed with an explosive “Fuck, you bunch are *telepaths* now? I don't believe it...” but then it all grew dimmer, and the voices began to lose their timbre as everything got further away. It was much like when his awareness had hovered at the top of the rope...except that there was nothing to hold on to, this time, and so he was simply...falling...

He heard a sharp *snap-hiss-pop* come through the fog, and felt the vague stirrings of alarm as he identified the source as match being lit near his head. There was no energy to respond to it, though, and so he simply lay there with only the mildest curiosity as to

what might be going on around him. His back barely twitched as he felt a cool roundness, like the rim of a thick drinking glass, press against his skin, just between his left shoulder blade and spine..

A moment later, the drawing began.

The skin underneath the perimeter of glass was lifted somehow, and with it, a slight anchor for his diminishing awareness was cast. It was a tenuous thread, but it was there, and Brian clung to it with a desperate slippery hope. Another *pop* of a match, and another slightly chilly circle was placed on the opposite side of his spine, and he this time he could feel the heat at the center, before his flesh was pulled up in a little hemisphere.

The anchor for his consciousness was more than doubled; the two circles seemed to complete a circuit for the energy that had been eating away at him to flow through, and he felt the currents start to circulate around his spine—still not going very far, he could very clearly feel the blockages below—but with the flow came a palpably stronger link to awareness.

Cups. He was now alert enough to realize that this was the Chinese healing treatment he'd vaguely read about, where glass bowls of varying sizes were placed on the skin (*and isn't flame involved somehow?* he wondered). He remembered it had something to do with the flow of chi –ki in the Japanese tradition—through the body's meridians—a chart he remembered from a shiatsu class in college flashed into his head, lines of force traveling like a roadmap across a human torso, and with that memory, the glass circles on his back seemed to pulse, as if the recognition of their purpose added to their power.

The cups were now aligning the full length of his spine, and he had a strange image of himself as some sort of stegosaurus as imagined by Tesla, with glass and fleshy bumps filled with energy that seemed to crackle between them traveling up and down his body. The blocks that that woman had sensed were painfully obvious now, like dark holes in his back contrasting with the glowing force of the energy flow. He could hear the voices more clearly now around him as well, Sullivan and the Woman and two others, a man and a woman, who were discussing...kitty litter?

“Yes, we found that Zot really needed to have his own...ah, the patient stirs.” The new woman's voice suddenly shifted from conversational to a more intense directness.

“Brian. Please do not move. I am Elyse, and my partner Alan and I are trying to open

channels of ki which have been twisted and blocked during your ordeal.” She paused. “I can tell you’re aware of the flow right now. Softening the blocks will be...difficult for you.”

Another voice, male this time, came from his other side. “Brian, I’m Alan. We’re going to begin trying to work through this in a moment. Your part will be to breathe, to move the air through your body and add its force to ours.” The voice paused, and Brian could hear the gravity of concern through the soft tone. “It’s going to be very hard, Brian. Just remember, as we work through it, that the energy wants to be free, and so it is actually trying to help us.” Another pause, then “...no matter what it feels like.”

With that, Brian felt their hands each touch one of globes, towards the middle of his back, and the energy coursing between them began to expand, bands growing thicker, edging closer to the dark blockages...and then they touched, and Brian screamed.

The pain was tiered in distinct levels. There was the point at which the energy met the darkness, which drove like a spike into his flesh, a raw kind of tearing sensation as the energy eroded and broke against the black twists. At the same time the energy was trying to find other routes of escape, and each of the points where his skin was drawn up into the cups felt like a miniature volcano, bubbling and seething with a vicious determination to explode into bloody release.

Then there was the burning. It covered his skin, making it feel as though it were being ripped off as a single piece in every direction from his body, a million pricks of flame flaying him simultaneously. This pain didn’t pulse or ebb as the others did; this one simply manifest at a level of excruciation. And began to rise from there.

Brian’s hoarse scream was cut off suddenly as Elyse and Alan slid the globes in their hands softly along his spine, and the energy was pushed even more strongly into the tangles of darkness that seemed to eat into his flesh like acid. He floated in the shock of new pain, trying to find something to hold on to and keep the pain from driving him into the madness that he felt gibbering up inside. Everywhere his mind went, though, only brought him back to the pain that suffused him. There was no way to do anything more than draw another shuddering breath and try to scream through the agony.

Then he felt a soft line drawn across his palm, and instinctively he grabbed it, twisting his wrist in a circle to grasp the loop of rope that Sullivan had given him more

tightly. A bright line of energy cut through the wash of pain surrounding him, and instantly he could feel every inch along the length of rope, as it looped around his hands and flowed out to...to the strong hands of Sullivan, loops flowing over his palms and across the backs of his hands, and again the rope moved out to...to the woman's hands, this time, the Wiccan that Brian didn't know the name of yet.

But as he felt her hands on the rope, as his mind's eye expanded with it to where it met her skin, he knew her far more deeply and intimately than if he'd spent hours interrogating her. It was not about the collection of facts and statistics that normally make up a person's identity, the things he felt were far more important than that. He could feel *her*, and with it came her peaceful strength and determination to help heal him.

He drew on that strength, pulling it back along the woven rope, past Sullivan's hands again, which also added their raw and wild power to him, with an unspoken but very clear "Go get 'im, tiger" added.

Brian came back from the momentary respite to his body, to the pain, to the twisting shadows that had been planted by the 'pressors and Vashte's mistake. The pain was greater than before; Elyse and Alan had managed to erode the dark knots until they were hard, unyielding balls of roiling pain, smaller but still blocking the flow of energies between the glass cups with their tiny draws of flesh. Though he couldn't see it, Brian's flesh under the cups was now a dark and angry purple, the flesh close to bursting from the energies that were drawing beneath it.

The pain was greater...but Brian found that the strength he drew along the rope made his awareness larger than the pain, larger than just the tortured vessel his body had become. He looked at the darkness they were battling with an awareness that was now dispassionately removed from the agonizing sensation...and he saw, with a cold clarity, just how *wrong* they were. They were ugliness incarnate, planted in his flesh by the Repressors and their tools, and they offended him.

He got mad. He got to work.

His awareness poured around the cups, diving into the lines of energies that they conducted, and like a body surfer riding a wave he let the current carry him. Instead of a soft beach, though, they were carrying him towards a hard reef of coiled wrongness, that frustrated the sweet taste of the *ki* seeking release.

But his awareness could see the coils, could see where they lay across each other and pulled their own darkness into themselves...and it could shape into a fine spike of power, a pick that drove into the first knot and sank between the coils like they were soft wood, not all the way through but deep into them.

And the energy guided by Alan and Elyse could feel that attack, and sensed a victory. The waves of ki washed over Brian's sharp awareness and worked it into the knot, loosening it bit by bit, the darkness boiling inchoately with the frustrated rage of being inexorably overcome. For Brian didn't give back any ground, simply worked forward through the knot, until finally it dissolved in a silent roar of release as the *ki* surged up past it, joining the line of current connecting the cups above, and again he rode it, Alan and Elyse moving the cups to give him that extra drive, this time going deeper into the next knot with the first thrust. It took less time, not because the shadow twist was any less deep but because the energy had increased exponentially as it danced across and through his body.

The last two knots of painful darkness dissolved almost at the first touch of Brian's mind spike driving through them with the roaring power now flowing freely through the cups. The mounds of flesh under each glass globe were no longer a bright purple, and the burning had subsided to a glowing warmth that covered his sweat-covered skin and kept it from growing chill. As the last ball of pain dissolved, he felt the now-unfettered energy swirl through him, the pulse of the flow gradually merging with the slow beat of his heart and the two disappearing within each other just as he realized Alan and Elyse had removed the last of the cups from his back.

He opened his eyes.

"You need a Focus."

Brian looked up from the glass of Earl Grey at Ada, the Wiccan priestess, who was seated on the floor cross-legged in front of the plush couch he lay in. Sullivan sat next to him to the left, one burly arm cast out behind Brian's head. Elyse was on his other side, her hand gently rubbing his arm, with Alan next to her massaging her neck. The two healers had paid a price in tension from the exertions of the evening, and back rubs had

been exchanged all around before Ada had called them all into the living room for, as she put it, a War Council.

“I’m not trying to be a smartass, but just to be sure: you’re not talking about a car, are you?”

She smiled. “No. A Focus in your particular branch of the Path is a sort of funnel...no, that’s not right. An aiming device, perhaps would be more accurate...a way for the energies which you can create with your art to be sent through them towards whatever task is necessary to be done.”

“What is it?”

“Better to ask *who* is it, unless you are the kind of Male who objectifies that much. Have you ever met a person who, when they walk into a room, will make members of both genders catch their breath, just for a moment? The kind of person who can’t help but draw your eye, your ear, your attention? Not the ones who seek it, through garish decoration or expensive baubles; the ones who seem to do it without trying.”

Brian thought immediately of an actor he’d known in college, James Marqueson, a man with a deeply resonant voice and a presence that had brought to life the both the roles on the stage and the drama in his personal life. He recalled Marqueson’s obliviousness to his effect on the opposite (and often the same) sex. “Yeah, I’ve known some people like that. Lucky bastards.”

“Sometimes, perhaps. They often have more problems than you would think, though. Imagine trying to find time to be alone when everyone wants your company. Imagine trying to be inconspicuous in a crowd when every eye is turned to you. Regardless; those people are natural focal points for the energy that you produce. Most of them end up in some field that makes use of their natural draw for the public eye, whether it be acting, educating, or politics.”

“The thing is, you can control your power to an extent, but no more; especially with the way Vashte marked you, your rope work especially will cause Power to accumulate, and without a release and a direction to send them, you’ll again become a target for the Repressors.”

“Couldn’t I just...not do rope work? You know, I do have vanilla sex occasionally...”

“Could you? Of course that would be the easiest answer. Look inside yourself; could you lead a fulfilled life without ever using your weaving patterns again?”

Brian bowed his head again to his tea, and did as she asked, looking into his own desires and needs...and finding there a real need to use the strands to weave round and through the others he interacted with on that sort of level, to find that connection. He tried to take it out, to push it aside, but even as it moved within his mind it always came back.

He felt Sullivan’s hand tighten on his shoulder sympathetically. “Don’t worry, bucko, it’s always that way when you find a fetish. Hell, you have it easy; you can untie your knots and start over. I’m eventually going to run out of skin to stick the inky needle into.”

Alan reached over and patted his thigh. “Elyse and I tried to be vanilla, what, dear, four separate times during our relationship? We would throw away the shackles, rip up—oh, on one occasion, we actually burned them—all our copies of *Skin Two* and the *Beauty* books. We’d decide that this time we would meditate, do yoga, try scrapbooking, anything to keep our filthy minds from going back to that degrading nasty habit...”

Elyse laughed and tousled her husband’s hair, dyed a bright blue and contrasting with her brilliant gold and purple locks. “Well, *you* did, dear, you were always the stronger one. Me, I had a stash, always. And so,” she turned back to Brian, “the pain of being in full lotus began to feel sweet, the yoga began to be nude and pushing past the point of comfort, the scrapbooks started becoming lined with black leather with little chains bounding each of the pictures...and then one night it would all come to a head, and he’d be happily spanking my ass while I screamed and loved every minute of it. For some,” she looked at Ada on the floor, who nodded, “it’s just a spice, an occasional foray into their darker side. But for some of us, the darker side is not a side that we can ever get away from, it is too much a part of us. It is just the way our nature’s are wired.”

Ada nodded. “I don’t share that path with you—my path has more peaceful means to power—but I understand and even on occasion enjoy—“ her eyes flashed for a moment to Sullivan, who grinned ferally back at her, “—playing with those who do follow it. And as my calling is that of a healer, I have some understanding of it.”

“The Mark that Vashte has put on you, combined with your natural affinity with the ropes, has put you in the delicate situation of being too powerful for your own good.

As you've felt, the power tends to run wild; as such, you become both a beacon for those who would like to either utilize or destroy it."

Brian frowned. "It's really that cut and dried? Couldn't I reason with them somehow, or find a way to play that would keep the power from growing within me, or something?" He paused, trying to control the quaver in his voice. "Is my life going to always be like this?"

Sullivan gave his shoulder another squeeze, and Brian looked up at him, and was surprised at the serious expression there. "Aye, Bucko, likelihood is it will be. What's worse is that it's not like we're organized or able to offer you any kind of security. Sure, we've managed to save your bacon here, but for the most part? It is just a ragtag group of people who happen to share both a dislike for the system and the ability to manipulate power of one sort or another. That's all."

"But...you all seemed so capable of taking care of what went wrong today. You found healers," he gave a squeeze to Elyse's hand on his thigh, "and Ada, you found me in the, the...torture tower?"

Ada sighed. "Brian...no, I didn't find you. You led us to you. You and that rope. It was like a beacon, and I only noticed it because...well, because some forces I work with would not let me ignore it. And Elyse and Alan are wonderful, yes...but I didn't call them with my mind." Sullivan looked up suddenly with a grinning mutter of "*I knew it!*" which she ignored. "They were called last week to come over for tea with me this afternoon. It just so happened that they were to arrive right after you showed up on my rug...so I simply let things take their course." She looked a little embarrassed. "Normally I eschew such theatrics, but Sullivan, the Rascal, tends to bring it out in people."

"So no, there really isn't any support system. We're just a bunch of different people who sometimes help each other, sometimes do stupid things like what Vashte did to you, and sometimes just get lucky. I'm sorry, Brian, but that's the lot you've thrown in with."

Brian looked at her for a moment, and said, very quietly, "What is the alternative? Nothing personal, I'm very grateful to you all for what you've done, but I have to ask this: what is so bad about just going and giving them what they want?"

Ada looked at him sadly. “Aside from the loss of the art and beauty you create, you mean? Aside from living your life in a hollow imitation of your true potential? Brian, I will describe a best circumstance for you, right now, something I have seen happen before.”

“You will try to contact them. They will become very solicitous and friendly to you. They will offer you what seems to be a great job, something in the adult entertainment industry, perhaps even doing rigging, and use your talent to promote the vapid, cold and lifeless images they purvey.”

“Your friends and family will be taken from you by the means of some scandal, whether contrived or actual—they are quite gifted at tempting you into situations that you cannot extricate yourself from. Drugs are the easiest way; and you would find it is much harder to say no to a needle offered by a woman you are lusting after than it is by men such as the one who held you captive.”

“You’d find that, as the drug wormed its way deeper into your life, your talent, your feeling for the ropes would be blunted, fade away as you tried to fake it through repetition and excuses. Finally, even the tawdry magazines would have no use for you...and you’d still be hooked on whatever substance they put in you in the first place. And since you’d be willing, at that point, to do anything to get it...well, do I have to go on? I’d rather not; all of us here have seen friends go through this, and know what comes next, and I think we’d rather not be reminded.”

Brian sighed and rubbed his eyes. “No, no, I get the picture. But I still don’t understand...what do I do next? I have a wife who will be back from visiting her lover in New York in a few days. What do I tell her? ‘Hon, we can’t have sex, or the Missionaries will bust in and try to hook us on heroin.’” He leaned forward and looked intently at Ada. “And what about my daughters? They should be with their mother this weekend, but they would not be hard to track down. And they would be the easiest way for these, these Repressors or whoever, to get me to do what they want.”

Ada nodded. “Good questions, both, and like all real answers, the answers are nested inside of each other.” She looked at Alan and Elyse.”This is more your path than mine, so please let me know if I go astray in my answer.” She returned to Brian, and said again, “You need a Focus.”

Brian sad back again heavily. “Back to that. What is it? Or, what did you say, *who* is it is a better way to ask? And why can one help me and mine?”

“A Focus, Brian, is not traceable. Unlike you when you manifest your power, when you use a Focus, the power can be aimed, but cannot be traced back. You would be able to raise and release the energy—doing vast amounts of good, I might add—without fear of being traced.”

“But more than that, my boy, you can help in the fight.” Sullivan had sat forward and turned on the couch so that he was facing Brian. “How does the Spider-Ethic go, ‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility’? We have...ways that we are trying to get organized, to influence a senator here, a businessman there, and get things turned around.” Sullivan’s grin came back, with a smirking twist that was infectious. “Not to mention that Focuses are a *lot* of fun to work with. And the first thing you could do, Brian, is put a ward on your daughters—not so much shielding them as giving them and you early warning of any ‘pressor activity.’”

“Warding? What good is that against people like that man, like those missionaries?”

Brian’s grin got even wider. “Tell you what. Let me introduce you to a new friend of mine, and we can talk about *that* later...”

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“Hi, my name’s Sally. How are you?” The woman’s voice had a strength and directness that contrasted sharply with her slight frame. Taking her hand, which seemed to sink into his wide palms with a cool smoothness, he tried to feel if there would be some sort of instant connection, if he could feel her presence as vividly as he’d felt Vashte’s or Sullivan’s..

There was something there, some sense of something hidden, but it was behind a smooth and solid façade, not so much a barricade as simply a part of who she was. As she murmured the standard pleasantries, her slender hand disappearing into Brian’s wide palm, he felt a twinge of disappointment. She shook his hand with a confident strength that belied her slight frame, and then let out a delighted squeal and threw herself into a hug for Sullivan.

“Ah, lass, how are you? No kilt today, I’m afraid—it’s been a bit of a rough time for my boy here and I. Let me tell you...” She took his arm and walked between them as Sullivan began describing, in graphic and often grotesque terms, the events of the past two days. Brian tried not to be too obvious as he looked for what it was that would make her so instrumental. The three of them walked through the park near Ada’s house, a suburban monument to prefab child’s play structures and cement companies.

Certainly there was beauty. She had shoulder-length auburn hair and was wearing what Brian would have called “upscale club” clothes—skin-tight pants with a dark shiny purple texture somewhere between scales and fishnet covering the curves, a low-cut tight cotton blouse printed with diagonal stripes that led the eyes inexorably to the center of her chest, where her breasts were tightly pushed up and out by the maroon bra that peeked around the edges of her décolletage. He managed to avoid the “eye trap” as he thought of it, and focused on her face as she giggled and listened to Sullivan’s wry commentary. Her sharp features at first seemed startling in their precise beauty, with her lips slightly darkened in a way that drew the gaze and emphasized every word and smile.

Sullivan finally finished his tale, and the three of them stopped near a blocky monument topped with a bronze general. She turned to look at Brian, “Sounds like you’ve had quite a time of it. And you think I can help?”

Brian smiled and was about to make a witty reply when he finally was able to look directly into her eyes. They were a silvery gray, and the sunset coming through the park brought them into bright contrast with the warm glow of her skin. He looked into them, and there was a snap of sensation, of his self falling, sinking into them. After a moment, he realized that he ought to feel awkward about the silence as it stretched between them. He would have, except that she, too, seemed silent and lost in the overwhelming suddenness of the connection.

Sullivan watched the two of them sharing the moment, and then broke it, not unkindly. “That would be a ‘yes’, I do believe.” He chuckled as the two of them looked at him with the embarrassed glances of people who had forgotten that he—or anyone else—was there. “I would call that an auspicious beginning. So here’s the thing: I would love to give you both the time for a courtship, for a gentle getting-to-know you, but things are moving more quickly than that.” He looked seriously for a moment at Brian.

“Sally knows everything that you know, now, but while we know she’s a Focus, she’s not yet actually channeled the kind of energy that you have to deal with.” He sighed. “And by the nature of her fetish—and yours—I can’t exactly tell you to be gentle.” Sally blushed and looked down for a moment, a slight smile curving her lips. “But be careful, both of you. You’re going to have to play near the edge to get where you need to go. I’ll be...listening, you might say, but really, either this will work or it won’t—I don’t think I can haul your ass out of the fire too many more times, bucko.” He gave Sally a friendly leer. “Your ass, however, I will gratefully haul anywhere you’d like, at another time. Ah, if only you were more into ink and less into cumsluttery...”

She returned the leer in a mischievous crinkling of her eyes and Brian suddenly saw, for a moment, a glimpse of what was behind the smooth professionalism. His stomach felt suddenly hollow. “Is that the word for it now? Ah, Sullivan flattery will get you this—“ she suddenly pressed her body full length against him, twining her arms up around his neck and kissing him ferociously. His hands came around and naturally gripped the curves of her ass, the shiny pleather dimpling under his fingers. They disengaged, and Sullivan gave Brian a final wink before turning and jauntily strolling back along the path.

“Not to be nosy, but...cumsluttery?” Brian said as they watched him go, trying to make his voice nonchalant.

Sally laughed. “Well, that’s one word for it. Really, it’s just that I really, really like cock. And cum.” Her voice went into a throaty parody of a cartoon. “Mmmmm...sticky!” She watched Brian intently as she spoke, and he realized that she was testing him, trying to gauge his level of shock. An aggressive competitiveness rose in him, and he suddenly resolved not to give an inch.

“Ah, that makes sense. Attached or detached?” He watched her eyes widen with glee, and was right with her as they both chanted “Dee-tachable Pee-nis!” The shared laughter seemed to set the mood, and she took his arm. Brian was sure she deliberately pressed the swell of her breast into his arm, and just as deliberately ignored it as they walkd. He lapsed into a Freudian accent. “ZSO!. When did this particular affinity for zee male organ first manifest, *liebchen*?”

She giggled again, then looked thoughtful. “Well, you know, it actually wasn’t always like this. In fact, I think it started back when my boyfriend pointed out that I really didn’t like going down on him. I’d do it for him, sure, but it was not something that I enjoyed. As a result, I...wasn’t very good at it.” Her look of demure embarrassment was so out of kilter with the subject matter that Brian couldn’t help but laugh, and he realized that he was becoming captivated by the layers of this woman.

They strolled down the paths of the park, chatting like old friends as she told him the story of how she’d learned to stop worrying about fellatio and learned to love the cock. He entertained her with what he could remember of a Hoot Island column about reasons the man loved his cock. (“Use it as a catapult for M&M’s and see how many you can flip into your mouth!” was a particular favorite). They discussed their particular kinks, his voice intense and excited as he spoke of the ropes he used, the ties, the imposing of sensation on the minds of his partner. She blushed pink as she confessed that spanking was the one act that turned her on more than any other, and told him of her desire to submit combined with a need to rebel. It was an easy, friendly conversation, and the open and frank nature of their exchange was refreshing to both of them. The attraction they’d felt for each other was a constant undercurrent, but there seemed to be none of the awkward embarrassed silences or even blushing admissions. The conversation might go from current political races to species of flowers to unusually shaped anal plugs, and it all seemed perfectly rational and open. *I think this is what sexual maturity feels like*, Brian found himself thinking at one point, and he said as much aloud.

She looked up at him for a moment, and then put her head down. For the first time he heard her silence as an indictment, and he worried that he might have said something wrong. “I’m sorry...was that not the right thing to say?”

“No, no, it’s fine. Really. It’s just...” She looked off in the distance, and sighed. “You don’t know how hard this is, really. Dealing with this part of myself, which I really don’t know much about, except that it’s there, and that when I acknowledge it, it makes it all feel so...right. Whole.”

“My first real boyfriend and I went through hell—no, let me rephrase that, we put each other through hell—simply because we were unable to talk like this, to be frank and open about what we each wanted. What we needed. I mean,” she gave a rueful laugh, “it

was really bad. And I've had relationships since then, where I've forced them and myself to be open and honest...and it was always such work, and usually drove them away before long."

"Now I meet you...and you're great, really, you are—" Brian filled out the next word for her: *but...*"and all I can think of is, what if it doesn't work this time, either?" She laughed at his sudden worried look. "No, no, I know what you're thinking. I know you're married, with, what is it, two daughters?" Brian nodded, relieved that Sullivan had included that in his introduction. "Believe me, with my life, marriage or even monogamy is the furthest thing from my mind. But Sullivan and Ada think that you and I might be able to help each other, not only now but as some sort of...partnership? Is that right? I'm still not clear on how that works."

Brian smiled wryly. "The more I get to know these people, the more I think they're not especially sure, either. I know what my problem is; I met up with someone who marked me in a way that means that every time I get hot I turn into a target for those Repressor types. And you...well, they told me you were a Focus, and could give the power that my ropework a place to go, a way to let it go without setting off a neon 'come and shoot drugs into me' sign over my head." He looked at her seriously for a moment. "I definitely feel the...draw of you. I won't pretend that I don't know that it's us, too, not just me. And I don't know exactly how, or what is supposed to exactly happen between us. Or what you'll get out of it. But yes, I have two daughters who right now are probably in danger from the same assholes who tortured me, and I would be very grateful if you could...what?" She was staring at him with such a mixed expression he couldn't tell if she was laughing at him or simply was about to sneeze.

"What *I'm* going to get out of it? Brian, do you realize what I am?" He shook his head. "I guess I didn't make it clear. I am a submissive. Yes, I love sex, and cock, and all that stuff, but that's like...fluff." She took a deep breath. "My ability is to control people's gaze, get their attention, make them listen to me. It's what I do for a living. 'Doin' a-what comes naturally.'"

"But that's why, in order to get the kind of release that works with this Power—in order to add my own Power to it—it needs to be with someone who is *not* controlled. Not oblivious to me—they wouldn't want to do anything with me in the first place. No, it has

to be someone who feels the pull, feels my power, gets me—but is in control of its effect, rather than being controlled by it.” She smiled at him. “Someone, to use a simple example, who is certainly aware of my bodacious ta-tas but whom I’ve never once caught sneaking a peek.”

Brian grinned into her eyes. “Well, to be honest, your eyes are at least as beguiling. So it’s not so much being immune to them as choosing my poison.” She dimpled at that. “So let me get this straight: I’m supposed to dom you? And that’s going to help my daughters?” He frowned. “You know, I’m not really comfortable about the idea of using sexual energy like this where it involves them. Maybe it’s because I’m a teacher, or because I raised them mostly alone, but I’ve never been into the whole ‘daddy’ kind of kink. .”

She scornfully sniffed and lightly slapped his arm. “Oh, give me a break! How exactly were they created in the first place, Mr. Puritan?”

He blinked in surprise. “I...never thought of it that way. Good point.” He rubbed his arm where she slapped him. “So, I’m going to dom you?”

She nodded, and smiled again, a devilish look in her eyes. “You’re going to try, anyway, sugar. Much as I would love to just say ‘I give in’ and spread my legs for your tall sexy self, from what Sullivan tells me, that won’t work. That’s about as sensual as the plastic and fur handcuffs they sell in the back of Playboy. I have to really resist you, and you have to really conquer me. And that’s something no one else has managed to do, though they have spanked me until I was bruised for weeks.” She added, more softly, with a concerned look. “You do know, don’t you, that I would make it easier on you if I could? I wouldn’t fight you if I could help your daughters any other way. You have to know that...because it’s a part of this, a part of me that I hate right now.”

He shook his head, and lifted his hand to caress the side of her face—the first time since shaking hands that he’d actually touched her skin. His palm rested on her cheek, and she leaned slightly into it, her eyes never leaving his as he spoke. “No. I understand. Nothing good comes for free. As someone said about surviving the fire swamp, ‘You’re only saying that because no one ever has.’”

“Hey, no fair!” she protested. “I’m the only one allowed to quote from my favorite movie! And besides—“ her voice cut off in a gasp as Brian’s palm rotated

slightly so that his fingers curved behind her neck just at the base of her skull, his thumb sliding under her jaw. He had suddenly tightened his grip, just slightly, lifting with his hand so that she was pulled onto the balls of her feet, her head tilting back. Their eye contact never broke, and there was the thickening of the air between them as Brian stopped trying to hold back.

“We have work to do. Is your car here?” He held her eyes as she gave a slight nod, her breathing fast and a far away look relaxing her features. “It will keep here. We’re going to Thornhall, right now.”

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“Thornhall will be a good place for you to try to form the connection,” Ada had said. “We found this Focus, this woman, through a local BDSM support group that meets there. She’ll be comfortable there, and able to concentrate on you and what you do.”

“Sullivan is the one who determined that she is a Focus, or has the potential to be. But he’s not ...attuned to the kind of connection she needs. But I believe you and she may be able to work together and build the kind of energies necessary for the wards.”

“Wards?” Brian had asked dubiously. “Can’t we take more...direct action? I mean, I was able to mess up those missionaries pretty well by myself, and the Torture Guy didn’t seem so tough once I unplugged him...”

Ada had looked uncomfortable. “Yes. Well. We’ll deal with that later. Right now the priority is to safeguard your daughters, though, isn’t it?” She’d all but pushed Sullivan and him out the door, and they’d gone to the park.

Now Brian and Sally were standing downtown in front of an industrial-looking building. A slight drizzle had coated the asphalt with a sheen of reflected lights distorted and broken. Sally was wearing a black velvet dress, cut low in back, and white opera gloves. She would not have been out of place at an opening at the Met, with smooth glittering silver decorating her neck and ears. The only thing that was a bit out of place was the extreme height of the heels she wore, which pushed her arches forward and gave a subtle accent to the curve of her ass as she walked, her arm woven into Brian’s.

Brian was more simply dressed, a thick white cotton shirt that was slightly puffed out in the sleeves and tight black trousers, a shining leather belt mirroring the polish of his shoes. He carried a dark green bag over his shoulder as they walked towards the grungy door and pressed the button. The harsh buzz-click of the latch opening signalled

the acceptance of the closed circuit camera Brian saw mounted over the door, and they walked up the steep stairs in greenish fluorescent light.

At the top of the stairs, an older leather daddy with a bristling gray crew cut gave Sally a big smile. “Monique, my dear, so nice of you to join us! And you brought me a toy to play with! Sign here, big fella, and tell me you’ll be mine...”

Brian smiled at the man as he signed the waiver. “Sorry, ‘big fella’, I’m spoken for this evening. Maybe next time.”

The man grinned toothily at Brian. “Don’t tease, boy, I may take you up on that.. Ok, you two, go on in. Whatever you do, doin’t play nice.”

Sally smiled at him, and turned to Brian, bringing her lips to his ear. “Brian... Don’t forget what we are trying to do.” Her soft murmur caressed his neck and he felt his cock thicken slightly at her nearness, the curve of the velvet covering her ass filling his hands with warmth.

Giving her a reassuring squeeze, he opened the door for them and they entered Thornhall.

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In a room without windows or doors, there sits a man. The room was built around him. He is naked, covered with wrinkled brown skin, his skin encrusted in places with some unnameable substance that he occasional peels off and chews meditatively.

He doesn’t do it for sustenance. He doesn’t actually need food, drawing his energy from a more direct source, the three women and one man dreamily sitting in puddles of urine and excrement outside of each wall of his room. They have intravenous drips going directly into shunts inserted in their jugulars, and their bodies are thin and malnourished, the skin hanging off their collar bones, ribs framing bloated bellies. They are all smiling as the cloudy black liquid drips from the tubes into their bloodstream.

They will need to be replaced soon, the man thinks, with the same sort of emphasis a person might consider changing a roll of toilet paper. People were cheap these days; so cheap, in fact, that feeding them was no longer cost-effective. He sends out a stabbing will that sends a couple of clean-cut young men in black suits into a homeless shelter thousands of miles away. They believe they are bringing lost sheep back to the fold of their Lord and Savior; they will write home about the incredible feelings they had as they watched the homeless couple enter the School for the Disadvantaged sponsored

by their church, knowing that they had saved the married couple from the wages of sin they'd fallen into.

They would not see the couple stripped, pumped full of a combination of aphrodisiacs and barbiturates, and used as extras in videos not sold in stores, but only to certain "collectors" with specialized tastes. The Wrinkled Man knows how to reward and feed his tools' addictions. Eventually the couple would lose even the appearance of attraction, though, just as his current four energy sources had. And they would end their lives here, yards away from each other, oblivious to anything but the constant waves of pleasure coursing through them.

They would die smiling.

The Wrinkled Man is not smiling, though. In a town full of troublemakers, a new threat has appeared. It is something he has not seen before—and for a man as old as the Wrinkled One, that is quite disturbing. Twice he has felt it directly through his tools, and other times he has seen the aura the—man, yes, it is a man, a Troublemaker—has left behind after he has done some work.

The Wrinkled Man is not smiling at all. The man's work is wicked. It is sacrilege, and it takes away what is rightfully his. So the Wrinkled Man decides to take away something that belongs to the Troublemaker.

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The room was a single large open space, pulsing with a techno-trance sound coming from hidden speakers. At the edges of one could see traces of the industrial cement and unfinished walls. Most of the roughness was disguised, however, by the layers of Turkish rugs spread over the floor, plush and dark and lending their warmth to the high ceiling crisscrossed with ductwork and dimly-seen wiring. Most of the open sections were dimly lit with indirect torchieres or accent lighting, and the people filling these spaces with low murmuring conversation were only gray silhouettes of organic curves with the occasional glint of chrome or sheen of leather reflecting the objects of attention.

These objects were set in pools of light every twenty feet or so along the floor. First was a row of dark wooden X-shaped frames, each reaching about eight feet tall, richly finished in dark mahogany tones with shining metal rings at the end of each limb.

Attached to four of these were semi-nude forms, three female and one male, their bodies adorned with black leather at wrists and ankles and occasional scraps of black. The roundness of their bare buttocks shown pink in the bright light over each them, the muscles sweaty and quivering under the floggers (and in one case, whip) that whirled through the air and impacted with a snapping wet sound over and over. The arms of the doms wielding them were strangely syncopating the music, and Brian could feel Sally's hand tighten on his forearm as they walked past them.

The other furnishings of the dungeon space were more varied—here a traditional wooden stock, three round holes in a plank set up four feet or so from the floor, set next to a seat that seemed to be a dentists' chair as designed in mission-style furniture. There were several couches set along the walls, and in one corner a full medical examination table, stirrups extended and holding a squiming woman being stroked with glittering chrome instruments by a couple wrapped head to toe in stretched rubber outfits. *Prie-dieux* were set in each corner of the room, set slightly higher than the Catholic standard, and all but one had people bent over them, their skin turning red as they were spanked by hands and paddles. Traveling between these stations were dominants and submissives in various states of connection, leashes, shackles, or chains pulled tight as they were led to or from the areas of activity.

The sexual energy permeated the room, and Brian could feel the scars on his torso growing warm as the Mark responded to the surroundings. Sally could sense the change in his walk, the stride slowing and lengthening, his shoulders pushing back as he naturally extended into the space around him. His hand released hers and fell naturally to his side, arm angled to subtly hold her palm at his side. She could feel the change the way he felt walking next to her, suddenly seeming far larger than the six-foot man who'd hugged her at the door. For just a moment she had the urge to kneel, right there next to him, and press her face against his thigh...then she shook herself. She straightened her own shoulders, pushing her bust out and adding a slight twist to her walk that she knew would draw eyes to her ass. She kept her hand at his arm...but sped her walk slightly, to pull ahead of him just enough to allow herself to imagine she was leading him...this handsome strong man becoming, in her mind, an accessory like the glittering silver encircling her neck.

Sally suddenly squealed a high, girlish greeting as she spotted some of her friends standing in one of the voyeuristic groups, and there was a series of laughing hugs exchanged. Brian waited to be introduced as she smiled and flirted with a long-haired bearded man wearing a dark silk shirt inset with crimson flames and his wife, a blonde in a tight red corset that pushed her breasts into improbable balance over the edge of the silk.

“Artemisia! You look *stunning!* I *love* the corset? Is it new?” Sally pulled away from Brian and laid her arm conversationally on the blonde’s, and they began discussing the boning techniques used in the material while the man, who Brian gathered was named Port, made slightly lewd comments and occasionally patted one or the other woman’s ass with a light spank. Obviously they’d played with Sally in the past, but Brian found himself getting more and more annoyed as the conversation continued with no acknowledgement of his presence.

They were joined by another couple wearing business attire and matching silver-and-black dyed hair. The man’s suit was subtly cut to accentuate his shoulders, and the woman’s matching pinstripe was stretched tight across her chest, pushing up and out of the double-breasted fabric that strained at the buttons. Her legs were revealed by the swatch of skirt that barely stretched to the lower edge of her ass, stockings going down into the sharpest stiletto heels Brian had ever seen. Once again Sally went through the ritual of hugs and smiling innuendoes, and once again didn’t bother to include Brian. The snub was becoming painfully deliberate, and finally Bettie, the woman in the pinstripe, asked “So, who is your dashing friend here, Sally? He’s new and yummy...”

Sally looked briefly at her companion, her eyes cold and glittering in a shocking contrast to her glowing words when they’d walked in. She said dismissively, “Oh, he’s just my boy for the evening. Pretty, but not much for mental stimulation.” She turned back to Ivan, the man in the business suit. “So, did you get that new cross for your playroom?”

Brian could feel his hair rising in a flush of anger and his eyes widened at her presumptive tone. His hands flexed, and for just a moment the anger flashing through him made him simply want to turn and storm away. Just for a moment, it almost carried him off...then a thread of insight wound around the rage. *This is the way it starts*, he thought,

and with a soul-filling click he suddenly grounded and felt himself expand into the role she'd cast him in.

“Good to meet you. I'm Brian.” He smiled and confidently shook hands with the four friends, their expressions both relieved at the introduction and curious as they watched Sally's expression become annoyed. “I usually play north of here, but I heard about this place from some mutual friends. Very nice set up.”

Ivan's smile widened. “Thanks! I was chair of the dungeon committee, and it's good to see we're drawing new blood into the local scene.” His hand came up and rested on Betty's neck, and Brian watched as her posture instinctively tilted up her chin, feet spreading wider and her hands instinctively drawing back behind her back. “So to speak.” He turned and gave her neck a little nip. “You like new blood, don't you, pet?”

Sally gave a throaty chuckle and stepped forward, pushing her breasts to brush against Betty's arched bust, rubbing them back and forth. “I'm so glad your tits are bisexual, Betty, even if the rest of you isn't.” She had stepped directly in front of Brian, effectively shutting him out, again, from the circle, and continued the slight by adding, “I'm so glad there's fun people here. I was afraid I'd be stuck with only this decoration...”

The two couples were beginning to realize that there was a tense conflict developing between Brian and Sally, and their expressions became speculative as they looked at him, waiting to see his reaction. Brian looked calmly down at the back of Sally's head, then up at the four of them. “I'd love to speak with you more later, but there's some matters I need to attend to, first. Please excuse us.” He quickly grasped the back of her slender neck, wrapping his thumb and forefinger around and up under her jaw at the nerve junction, forcing her head back. She gave an indignant shriek as he turned, drawing her with him, and started walking towards the stocks.

She stumbled but managed to keep her balance on the spiked heels as he forced her up onto the small platform that the stock supports were set in. He let his bag fall from his shoulders with a heavy thud, and reached up to open top slat, which hinged at the end and lifted like a parking gate. Sally had both hands up behind her head, grabbing Brian's forearm but unable to get any kind of leverage. Her posture arched back, and the resulting silhouette of slender curves lined with black velvet began to draw attention from the

people in the dim outskirts of the circle of light which illuminated them. Brian could see the two couples that had only barely met him at the front of the gathering crowd.

He drew his arm in, guiding Sally's head towards the center indentation in the stocks. She was spluttering and starting to swear, first with variations of "What the FUCK do you THINK you're DOING you BASTARD!" followed by "No! NO! I will NOT go in there!" as she realized where he was leading her.

He got her head down into the stocks, guiding her firmly past the edge of the wood, his grip keeping her from thrashing her head too hard and hitting it on the dark edges. However, he realized as he held her there—her legs kicking up helplessly in flashes of skin through the side slits of her dress.—that he had a problem.

He could hold her head there, no problem. Likewise one arm, since he had a free hand. That left her other arm still free and entirely uncooperative, and he would still need to somehow close the stocks then over her head and limbs. He leaned forward and spoke low into her ear. "You need to be taught a lesson in manners, Miss Sally. And we will start with you granting a simple request. Put your arms in the stocks. Now."

She angrily turned her eyes to glare at him, her teeth bared in an animal's grimace. "Fuck you!" she hissed.

"Eventually," he nodded, amicably. "But for now you simply need to put your arms in the stocks. It is, as I said, a lesson in manners. You were quite rude." His tone was deep and calm, in contrast to the force with which he held her immobile over the edge of the open stocks.

"I *won't*," she hissed again, her eyes blazing at him. "You can't *make* me."

"Of course I can't make you," he replied, again in the measured tone. "If I could make you, I would not ask. What I can do is make you regret your choice." Abruptly he lifted her, straightening her body so quickly that she lost her balance for a moment and was only kept erect by the grip on her neck. He moved behind her, so that she was facing all of the crowd, her friends in the front row smiling up at the scene.

.....
The Wrinkled Man was smiling now.

The Troublemaker had apparently been naughty in his youth. Several Tools had done the looking, and the Wrinkled Man had looked through their eyes even as they

pulled up files they didn't know they wanted, and whispered answers into phones that had never rung.

The Troublemaker had been a nasty young teenager, and had fathered not one but two daughters on his girlfriend. More than that, he had stayed with them, through a divorce, military service, poverty, raising them to be—if the records from the school were any indication—more Troublemakers. They had a history of asking questions, of challenging the system in order to improve it He had let them go once, when the Mother had seemed to be marrying up into a better environment—but he had taken them back in an instant when she was no longer able to sustain that charade.

But the Wrinkled Man was smiling, because now he had the lever. He could stop the Troublemaker, possibly even turn him into a Tool, or simply use him to replace one of the wasted bodies outside his room.

Because the Troublemaker loved his daughters. And love was the best lever of all.

The Wrinkled Man had two more of his tools, two women who believed they were working for the betterment of their sisters, start towards a house. A house where the Mother and the two daughters were watching TV. Or reading. Or playing a game. It did not matter, for when the women arrived, the Wrinkled Man would choose what they would be doing for the rest of their short lives.

He cracked a piece of skin off of his left thigh and popped it into his mouth. It crunched as he bit down, and he kept smiling.

.....

Brian held her there for a moment, swaying, letting her see herself put on display, feeling her skin warm as she flushed at the spectacle of helplessness she displayed, so different from the snobbish social air she'd had a moment before. He held the moment out for a few seconds, then focused on the small bump in her spine at the base of her neck. He pressed a finger there, gradually increasing the pressure until he was certain she was aware of it...then began to draw it downward, slowly, along the bare muscles and ridges of her back.

Inch by inch he drew it down, watching the finger as it passed, letting the warm energy that burned in the mark flow directly through that point as it travelled. The connection was quick and deep, his awareness encompassing her hard shell of resistance

like a flow of ivy pouring over a wall, stopped by its apparent impermeability while at the same time flowing all over and through it, finding manifold chinks and crevasses to sink into and dig deeper. She had stilled during this process, still trembling, but with anger as well as something else stirring behind that wall.

Finally the finger had travelled past the base of her spine to where the ebon fabric flowed to a point just above the swell of her ass. At that point Brian paused for a beat, then grasped the zipper of the dress and swiftly drew it down, the back of the dress turning into flaps of velvet that parted to reveal the cleft cheeks. Sally gave another indignant squeal and began struggling again, her hands flying behind her to try and close the flaps.

He'd been waiting for that, and as her hands met behind her he suddenly released her neck, causing her to stagger for a moment, and in that moment he put a hand on each shoulder and drew the straps down, the loose front falling to her waist. Her nipples shone pink and hard in the yellow light, their tiny aerolae serrated by the sudden exposure. There was a smattering of applause from the observers, and Betty gave a loud cheer, "Boobies!"

Brian moved again quickly while she was off balance, and drew the dress down over her hips and let it puddle on the floor around her spiked heels. She was still wearing her garter and stockings, but was nude aside from that, her vulva a tiny orchid shape under a smoothly trimmed strip of pubic hair. "Such a pretty little pussy!" cooed another woman from the audience, and there was a tittering of laughter. Sally's face grew more red, but she defiantly stepped out of the dress and refused to lift her hands to cover herself, letting her pride in her body and lack of shame serve as an anchor of resistance against Brian.

He stepped back for a moment and let her enjoy her celebrity, proud and beautiful standing on the wooden platform. He knew that in a moment she would begin to try to work the crowd by doing some sort of dance or strut. He folded his arms, waiting patiently, aware that she was too busy basking in the attention of the crowd to realize that she was still within his reach. Sure enough, his dancer's eye saw the shifting of her weight onto the ball of one foot, about to pivot—and that was when he reached up and grasped her neck again. She froze for a moment, then tried to move away—only to feel

his thumb and forefinger digging into either side of her jaw, the pressure on the nerve clusters causing her to be still in much the same way that a bit will temper a wild horse.

He moved closer to her, until his lips were next to her ear, and she could feel the smooth cloth of his trousers brushing the skin of her ass. “Miss Sally. Observe one of the rules of body mechanics: where the head goes, the body will follow.” With that, he stepped off the platform, picking up his bag as he strode across the room, pushing her ahead of him.. The crowd laughed again and parted for the two of them, some wandering off inspired by the play, others

She was screaming at him again, hands waving in the air but unable to reach him or affect the grip on her neck. He did not respond to any of the comments. His body felt a foot taller, and every step seemed to be through waves of energy that eddied through the air, and he felt that his scars would burn through the shirt in a moment. At the same time there was a calm *hereness* that he felt, like this state was one that he could rest in forever. The fortress within her was still firm and entrenched, but he felt a small tremor come through the connection between them, echoed in her body as they walked across the room.

Bringing her to a spanking bench in the shape of a leather-covered sawhorse, he gave a little twist, swiveling her while at the same time driving two fingers into the crease of her leg into her lower pelvis. The sudden pressure didn't hurt, but it caused her to jackknife down, and he unceremoniously picked her up with one hand coming down over her ass and between her legs, the other grasping her shoulder, lifting her and lowering her down over the sawhorse, feet and arms astride. One of her feet struck the hard wood, but with a slight adjustment he swung it over as she continued to swear at him. He kept one hand at the small of her back, pressing her down into the soft leather.

The transition knocked the breath out of her, and she lay lengthwise on the leather for a moment, gasping. Brian enjoyed sight and feel of the curve of her body as she lay, gasping. He waited for what he knew would come next—not that he could have told you how he knew it, he simply knew that in a moment, she would—

“BASTARD!” her scream rang out as her arms tried to push up from the sawhorse, legs and feet scrabbling for some sort of purchase to push up from. Brian simply kept his hand at the small of her back, pressing down, and she stayed pinned. She

couldn't reach him with a fist or foot, as he was standing just out of range of either, holding her helpless with one hand. After about a minute, she realized it was futile, and, gasping with exertion, lay her arms down on the small platforms jutting from the sides of the horse for that purpose. Her legs also rested, but Brian could feel the strength and defiance still in her, and knew that she was simply waiting for the next opportunity to break free of him.

.....
The two women neared the house, and as they rang the doorbell, they smiled at each other. Another sister saved, another victim of the patriarchy about to be rescued and join them in the fight.

The Mother answered the door, her face suspicious of the two women, who were somehow very like the Missionaries she'd seen before. They spoke of Men, and the evil Men do, and of the dangers Men can pose to, not only women, but especially daughters.

The Mother was nodding, slowly. Their words were rhythmic and strident, a pounding rhetoric that strung a delicate logic supported by misdirection and that most useful tool of the persuader, statistics. The friendly sisters now, three in solidarity there on the porch, laughed in the strength of their reinforced view of Man as a whole.

And where were the daughters? One asked, casually. Might we meet them?

.....

He lowered his lips to her ear, and spoke again in measured tones. "Miss Sally. You have been rude and inconsiderate to me, your guest. Wouldn't you agree?"

She gave a sarcastic laugh. "Yeah, I treat all idiots that way. You can be the big hulking barbarian all you want, you still can't make me submit to you."

Brian smiled. "Right now, Miss Sally, I simply want you to notice a matter of control, since you seem so incapable of it for yourself. By controlling your center," he gave a little extra push to her middle, again forcing a gasp out of her, "I control your movement, your position, even your breath." He increased the pressure a bit more, not on the spine directly but spread over the torso, letting her feel the sudden difficulty in drawing breath. Then he lightened the pressure, just a bit, and continued in his deep and mild tone.

"I admire your beauty, strength, and intelligence, Miss Sally, but that does mean I will tolerate being treated rudely by you. You could have chosen to take your punishment

more easily—you recall, I gave you that choice?” Angry glaring eyes were his only answer. “Miss Sally. I will ask you again. You recall, I gave you that choice?”

When she refused to respond again, he reached with his free hand into his bag and pulled out a length of soft red rope, coiled neatly with a knot he was able to release with one hand. His fingers gripped the protruding bight where the rope divided in half, and he cast the rest out across the floor, feeling a surge of energy like a solar flare travel along its length as his fetish resonated with the beginning of his work.

He fed the doubled rope through the hand at the small of her back, stretching it the length of her spine, letting the touch of it lightly brush her skin before pulling it taught. He could sense the power building in the rope now, and in his mind’s eye it had taken on a glowing pulse. It seemed eager, with a presence of its own, ready to wrap and bind her into the flows of power they were creating.

Quickly he drew the rope up and over her back, looping it around each of her shoulders and passing across the back of her neck. Splitting the tails of the rope, he passed them through the doubled rope on each shoulder and passed it under the horse, front to back, keeping it loose but drawing up most of the slack.

Throughout this he had kept his hand at her back, pinning her, but now he released her, watching her breathing ease up, seeing her muscles tense up in preparation for her leaping from the horse...and just as she pushed up with her arms, back arching up, he tightened the rope.

Since he left her hands free, she was able to keep her face from quite slamming into the leather top of the horse. The ropes passing over her shoulders and across the back of her neck drew her down and pinned her as effectively as his hands had. He checked to make sure there was no pressure on the carotid, jugular, or windpipe, and then looped the tails around her ankles and through the D-rings on the foot panels of the horse. As he tied the square knot between her ankles, he could feel the loops flare with the resonance that simply felt *right*, and he could feel another tremor in the fortress of her inner being as she felt the increase of power over her. She only kicked once, discovering in the process that the loops of rope would cause the neck and shoulders to tighten more. Her hands tried to find a loop or slackness in the rope, but there was none, and there were no knots except the one between her ankles, far out of reach.

Her energy flared with the sudden imprisonment, and Brian could feel the cycling forces of the erotic power spiralling up. He reached out with his awareness, feeling the energy captured within the knot, and for a moment put his fingers in the mudra Ada had shown him, blowing up and out with a soft puff of his cheeks.

The first ward was cast.

.....
The daughters were playing frisbee in a park blocks away, laughing and finding joy in the cool breeze of the summer evening as the disc floated magically between the two of them. Phina and Lisbet, a year and a half apart but often mistaken for twins, their merry grins usually contagious to those around them.

This time, however, anyone watching them would have suddenly gotten a slight headache, or felt their eyes begin to water, and they would rub them, shake their heads, and find a reason not to look at them anymore.

This is why the two sisters, walking through the park with eager eyes and small black leather pouches in their hands (though they were, in fact, not aware of them; these were now the Wrinkled Man's tools) didn't see them. They passed on the path near where the Daughters threw the frisbee, and Lisbet even had a moment of friendly alarm as it headed towards one of them. But a graceful leap and the disc was trapped in her hand, just the way Dad had shown her. He would have been proud.

The sisters walked through the park again, looking for their targets, but they only saw the gay couple on the bench, and wrinkled their noses. Two Men. Worse than one.

The Wrinkled Man was frowning again. Something was not quite right now. He felt as though they were there...but the tools were failing him.

He sent them away from the park, annoyed. They put away their black pouches, forgetting that they kept them in the bottom of their purses, and began to discuss the demonstration they had planned in front of the adult book store the next day...
.....

Brian stood back and watched her struggle for a moment, enjoying the play of her muscles in the light and feeling the flow of energy between them. Slowly, elegantly, he moved to the front of the horse. As he came even with her head, just for a moment, he paused, knowing that she would be aware of the bulge of his cock inches from her face, which was unable to move. He saw her breathing change, deepen, and something deep

within her walls again moved, something dark and primal. He moved closer, feeling her gather another burst of defiance ready to fire off at the moment that his cock actually touched her...and then he suddenly crouched, lowering his face to hers, leaving her with another choice denied.

“Control is easy, Miss Sally. One hand and one rope and you are lying here in the middle of this room naked and unable to do anything.” His eyes turned cruel, and he let a harshness enter the mellow tone of his voice. “I could line up every person with a cock and a strap on at either end of this horse and let them teach you a lesson in manners that you would never forget, two at a time, and you know what the strange thing is?” He leaned closer. “You and I both know that it would only be what you’ve dreamed of in your masturbatory fantasies for years, Sally. It wouldn’t be punishment, or rape, it would be wish fulfillment.” Again he felt that stirring deep within her, even as her eyes left his, unable to look past the flush of her face, her mumbled “I’m not...” lost into the leather padding.

He continued, again in the mild tone. “But as you put it, Miss Sally, force is easy. And very tiring, and I have better things to do with my energy this evening. But you will be punished both for your lack of manners and for your reluctance to do penance in the stocks. Then, Miss Sally, you will apologize, and we will go about enjoying this party.”

At the word *apologize*, her eyes flashed up again, and he saw, to his pleasure, that the defiance was back again. He returned the intensity of her gaze, meeting and holding her eyes, feeling no need to move as his energy poured into and around her, causing the rope yoke to pulse with the pounding connection between them. She spoke through clenched teeth, and he got the feeling that if the ropes had been in reach she would have chewed through them in a moment. “I will never apologize to you, fucker.”

“As I said, Miss Sally, I won’t earn that title until later. In the meantime, the punishment for the rebellion first.” He stood quickly and drew a riding crop, long woven handle topped with a tiny tongue of leather, flexing it through the air with a whooshing noise, making sure that it was swinging true. Kneeling down again, he matter-of-factly forced the crop between Sally’s teeth and lifted her jaw up, looking again into her eyes. They were still filled with defiance and anger, but there seemed to be something else growing, something else building within them. Her breath hissed through her teeth as she

faced him, jaw clenched around the hard stem of the crop. “I’m going to use this to give you twenty strokes for your refusal to submit at the stocks. You will count each one, and add ‘sir’, the appropriate honorific, afterwards. Do you understand?”

He waited a moment to give her the chance to reply. She simply glared up at him. Taking the crop from her mouth, he said. “So. We begin.”

The first whistling slap into the flesh of her ass elicited a shriek from her far out of proportion to the sting of the leather. Brian wanted to warm her up slowly, somehow knowing that the energy they needed for their work required not only the conquest and submission, but sexual arousal and, eventually, climax.. He waited a moment to see if she would count the stroke, and when he saw her sullen form lay there silent, he shrugged and lay down two more, slightly harder, observing her start and yell a bit after each of them.

Moving to her head, he again let the crotch of his trousers fill her field of vision, keeping her very aware not only of her vulnerability but also of her own particular fetish for the male organ. He was playing with extremes, stoking her desire for him at the same time that he purposely instigated her struggle against him, knowing that when the one overcame the other, the power of them both would be combined. Crouching down, he said to her, “Miss Sally. Was there anything about my instructions you did not understand?”

She actually growled at him. “I will *not* do anything you say. You *can’t* make *me*.”

“We shall see.” He stood, leaned over again, and added “So. We begin again.”

He ran the tongue of the crop over the skin of her buttocks, letting it trace around the three marks already left there, and then, just once, let it dip in and stroke the labia peeking out from between her spread cheeks. The energy surged at that, her slight cry and sudden tensing of her thighs only the most superficial indication of the feelings suffusing her body. He rode the wave of sexual stimulation, letting it carry his arm back and driving it down with a snapping gesture. As the tongue hit, she let out another shriek, this one deeper and more genuine, and though he waited to hear if she would count, there was nothing more from her shaking form.

Brian struck nine more times, this time, letting the red marks form a pattern of rectangles lining either side of the cleft of her ass. He'd applied them to the upper curve of the cheeks, five on each side. She twisted within the rope yoke, arms flailing but knowing better than to try and block the blows, her cries getting deeper and throatier as each blow struck her. With every blow the level of power between them increased a tiny amount, the rhythm and shape of the marks causing a cycling resonance to build.

Once again the front of his trousers, now noticeably bulging, filled her eyes, and before she could stop herself she felt her head move towards it—then the resistance re-asserted control and she just gritted her teeth. As he knelt again next to her, leaning close, his soft tone caressed her ear. “Miss Sally, that was ten strokes of the crop.” He paused, to let her think about that. “Since you didn't count aloud, however, they have to be repeated. It's a very simple task I've given you, Miss Sally, and we will continue this until you have fulfilled it.” He did not wait to hear her response; rising, giving her a last murmured “So. We begin again,” he moved to the back of the horse and resumed a quick series of strikes, letting them fall harder this time, no sensuality involved.

The cycle was repeated three more times before she showed the first signs of breaking, a low moan at the repeated “And so. We begin again,” this time the strike of the crop followed by a soft, almost wailing sound.

“One.”

Brian smiled, and let her count out the next five. Then kneeling before her again, he let his hand come up and stroke her hair and cheek. Sally's face leaned into his palm for just a moment, eyes closed at the sensation of gentleness, before her eyes snapped open as she fought her own desire to submit. The stream of sexual power traveling between their eyes seemed as tangible as the rope that held her to the sawhorse, and he let it flow and hold as they both breathed. He could see the question in her eyes.

“You're wondering why I stopped. It is because I am feeling merciful, Miss Sally.” He watched the hope for release blossom in her eyes, and turned his voice cold and hard. “I very specifically told you to follow every count with a measure of respect. That is, after all, why you are here.” Leaning in, he used his voice like the crop, striking her walls of resistance with every syllable. “You will follow every count with a ‘sir’, Miss Sally. Until you do—we begin again.”

She didn't break at that. Her inner fortress was still strong, in spite of the assault now coming from both Brian's work and her own deeper desires. The tendrils of his awareness now covered it completely, each breath a new growing branch of pressure on her resistance, which nonetheless held firm, and she was able to ignore, still, the stirring *something* behind the walls. So she didn't break.

But the tears came.

And at the next hiss and snap against her flesh, a clear "One, sir!" rushed from her throat.

Brian wanted to smile. It had begun. Instead, he walked around to the front of the horse and reached to grasp her wrists. She felt his hands, and knew what was needed. Her fingers twined in his, and his head and hers touched for just a moment. Behind his closed eyes, he could picture the house of his ex-wife, trying not to let any of the residual anger from thirteen years divorced cloud the purity of his intent. Sally helped anchor him, lending a burning line of power from the rope that bound her, and he felt his scars pulse in time with her heartbeat, felt through her hands and travelling through the flow.

He held the pattern of the mark in his mind, and set it in lines of bright power across the image of the house. "I am Man; I am Protector; I will care for my own," he whispered, not knowing where the words came from but knowing they were right.

The pattern flared in his mind. The second Ward was cast.

.....
The Wrinkled Man was becoming annoyed.

With the failure of his minor Tools, he had decided to use a more blunt object, and had planted the idea to search the Mother's house for drugs into the mind of a police officer in a patrol car nearby. He'd expected the search and seizure to go as smoothly as it always had, with the rights of the Mother lost in the scandal of the planted drugs, perhaps a plea bargain found if she were willing to manufacture the complicity of the Troublemaker in her habit, the Daughters held in "protective custody" as they began their voyage through a series of foster homes...

Instead, on the way to the house, the officer had suddenly seen a speeding car and decided to give chase, ticketing and then lecturing the hairy tattooed man driving the car. Unfortunately the man had not been nearly as disrespectful as he'd looked, "yes sir!" and "Sorry, sir!" uttered in the humblest of tones and all his paperwork in order...

Then when the officer did get back on the road, he couldn't find the house. He drove up the street, counting the house numbers, and somehow kept missing it. The Wrinkled Man couldn't see how the man's eyes were sliding off of the two story house every time he passed, how the man's mind justified the change in the house numbers.

The Wrinkled Man attempted a deeper contact with the Tool, and as a result when the man made the fourth attempt to find the house of the Mother, the spiking headache that flashed into the Tool's head travelled through the connection and caused the Wrinkled Man to wince.

He was becoming annoyed. Now he knew what was happening, and the Troublemaker was becoming more than a nuisance; he was becoming a danger.

The Wrinkled Man frowned. There was only one response to danger, of course. Annihilation.

.....

She made it through the rest of the strikes, managing a full count to "Twenty, sir!" When Brian congratulated her on her cooperation, she simply lay there, no longer crying but with her cheek lying against the wet leather under her. He moved on to punishing her for the original slight with a more traditional spanking, letting the palm of his hand lay a stinging glow of pain over the sharp welts left from the crop. The skin of her ass became a steady burning ache, around which the rope and their connection flowed and throbbed.

The spanking added another level of energy as well. There was a way of striking, an upward, thudding slap to the underside of her cheek, that would not hurt at all—rather, it sent a jolt of pleasure through her, making her shudder and give quite a different cry, a soft mewling hungry sound. Brian used these strikes sparingly, at first, only occasional giving her the pleasure in among the stinging blows. Gradually they increased in frequency, though, the burning melding into the pleasure slowly until they were indistinguishable. He gave ten of the pleasure strikes in quick succession, watching her spine arch, both lifting her ass in eager anticipation and struggling for friction against her engorged vulva, rubbing over the leather now slick with her sweat and fluids. Suddenly he stopped, and her ass hung there, beautifully arched, red and patterned and hungry for more, for something, any sort of stimulation.

Brian moved again, deliberately, to the front of the horse, suddenly becoming aware of his own body, sweaty from exertion, the white shirt sticking to his chest. Though his breathing was deep and even, the energy filled his arms and shoulders, traveling up and down his spine, making his head thrum like a high-tension wire being plucked on a suspension bridge. His cock was fully erect, its silhouette clear under the fabric of his jeans, and as it neared Sally's head again, she didn't hesitate, moving her cheek over to nuzzle its shape, laying little nibbling kisses along its length, pushing the top of her head down under the pouching shape of his testes, rubbing up and down.

He pulled away from her questing mouth, bending over to murmur in her ear. "I know you want the cock, Miss Sally. And it wants you, as well. But we have some way further to go on this path. You have paid the price for your disrespect; are you prepared to behave appropriately now?"

"Yes, sir." Her voice was low, throaty, hoarse. "Please, sir...I need your cock. In my mouth, in my pussy, I just need it in me. Please."

He was surprised at that. He had felt her surrender, felt the way it was tied in to her desire. But this raw need blazing from her eyes—they were heavy lidded, and he felt them drink up the energy surrounding them like a stroking caress along the connection between them. Prepared to continue fighting resistance, her sudden predatory lust had him off balance, and he didn't know what to say.

He overcame his hesitation, deciding to go for the direct route and shock her. "Oh, suddenly the high and mighty stylish Miss Sally has become a little slut, has she?"

"Yes, sir. I am a slut." None of the fury he had expected from her; instead, he felt the way his words had enflamed her lust even more, the air beginning to take on that heaviness that signified the gathering of true power. "I am a cum-hungry cock slut, and I want your cock, now, sir, please fuck me, somehow, some way." Her voice dropped slightly, in a throaty growl. "You know you want me, too, sir, you want this ass, this pussy with your cock deep inside, my lips wrapped around sucking you dry. Please, sir, fuck me *now*."

He stood there, a moment, enjoying the feeling, letting some of the direct sexual arousal flow back into him from her...and was struck by the thought, *Why not just do it?* He was ready, she was more than ready, they could fuck and release this tension right

then and there. He was suddenly aware of how tired his body was, in spite of the energy that suffused it, the muscles under the pulsing scars of his mark beginning to burn with the lactic acid buildup. He had no idea of how long they'd been there, but suddenly it seemed like hours, and the desire to simply stop, to simply give in to the urges they both had and let their bodies go where they would seemed overwhelming.

.....

There were Tools, and there were Tools.

Most of the Wrinkled Man's Tools were little more than impressionable humans who had been encouraged to stop thinking too thoroughly about the world around them. Over the centuries, the Wrinkled Man had assembled enough of an infrastructure, especially in this young culture, that he rarely lacked for material to work with.

When that material was not enough, though, he used his Mauls.

They had been with him for a long time. They had worn many uniforms, adorned with flags of all nations, from lansknecht to green beret. They were used when oblique force was not enough, when the Wrinkled Man decided that a Trouble was worth more than the usual lazy elegance with which he sucked the life of the culture into himself.

The Troublemaker had found a way past them once before, but Mauls had long memories; they would not forget him, nor what they owed him. Now he sent two, disguised as lesser Tools, in a uniform of black with shining black plastic nametags, with singleminded purpose: find them. Take them. Destroy anything that gets in the way.

They were the only tools that knew who used them.

They never smiled.

.....

The rope held him.

The rope that still bound her, that still glowed in his mind, white hot with the flowing lines of pain and desire that had coursed under it, the beauty of the pattern that it made drew him back from the edge of raw desire. The line of its shape drawing over and pressing on her skin, providing both support and resistance to her movement, and to his stimulation of her there as she lay. It whispered of a greater goal, a larger reward than the rush of orgasm and the release of simple endorphins. It hinted at the possibility of a spiritual aesthetic peak within reach, of the deliberate combination of discipline and desire into something greater than the sum of the individuals.

He surrendered to it. Rather than let the fatigue and desire push him into taking her with surge of animal lust, he let the pattern of the rope and the energy it conducted wash them away. It was like relaxing back into a salt sea, feeling the energy like water supporting him and carrying him forward past the temptation and into the smooth calm of centered readiness. And in that centered place, he was able to see and realize just where she was actually at in her submission.

She was not submitting at all. Her walls were strong as ever, in fact energized and strengthened by the same sexual power that flowed through him and the rope. This was another, more subtle form of rebellion, an attempt to control the situation not through defiance but through lust, through controlling the pace and action of their interaction. He smiled, then, with the satisfaction of knowing the game was far from over, the acknowledgement of a worthy opponent. He moved back to her, letting her head nuzzle him again, her lips now actively sucking at the swell of his cock under the trousers. He knew she could feel the pulse of his heart through the blood vessels there, and he concentrated on that, letting the energy flow into her deeper and more, increasing her own desire in a false security of her impending victory. “You’re a cocks slut, then? A cum-hungry cocks slut ready to be fucked any way you can.”

She pulled away from his cock slowly, letting him see her lips lingering over the mound. “Yes. I am a slut, I want you to take me, fuck me, use me *now*.”

Brian reached down with his hand and grasped her hair behind her neck, pulling her head sharply upward and away from his cock. She gasped at the sudden pain, her eyes alarmed and confused. “But I am not a slut, you see. I am a Dominant, a Master, and I choose when and where and how you will be fucked.” He leaned in closer. “It’s not about you being a slut, Sally. It’s about you being *mine*.”

With that, he loosened the square knot and lifted her to her feet, her body working out the stiffness while she stared, eyes still wide with desire but also with a touch of helpless confusion. She could feel the stirring behind the walls of her defiance stronger now. And its strength frightened her. “You’re not...not going to fuck me?”

He didn’t look at her as he led her to a semi-private alcove, past all of the crowd that had gathered to watch. “If I do, slut, it will be at a time and place of my choosing. Not because you tell me to.” He stood her in the rounded alcove, about ten feet in

diameter, with a faux tiffany lamp hanging down into the open area. There were mats on the floor, and a stack of clean blankets on one side of the entrance, a hamper of soiled linens on the other side. Naked save for her stockings and heels, she stood, arms at her sides, not turning, not even considering the idea of moving. She waited for what he would do next, listening as he arranged something behind them.

Finally there was silence, and she stood there, breathing, for what seemed hours. Her ass was still on fire from the working he'd given it, a throbbing ache that at the same time sent pulses of excitement to her clitoris. She could feel, even as she stood there, a long slow drop of moisture flowing from her labia down the side of her leg, and she couldn't remember a time she had been more scared, or more aroused.

Suddenly he was *there*, behind her, and she could feel the bulge of his jeans pressing agonizing friction across her ass, the soft material of his shirt brushing her back, and his breath at her ear. "I am truly pleased that you have found the slut inside of you, Sally. But desire is not enough; we must also have beauty, and we must have discipline." His soft tone grew more intense as he pressed closer into her. "I would decorate you with my ropes, slut. Will you give your body to my art?"

The words traveled to her head with a whirling rush of blood and emotion, and she swayed a bit, leaning into him. Deep inside, the stirring came fully to life, and she recognized it for what it was—the desire she had to submit, to be taken fully by this man who played her body and mind with virtuoso skill. Now the walls that had been her defiance became her cage, the strength of will she'd developed as an independent adult keeping her from that final leap, from being able to feel the surrender to the power that pulsed through the strands of energy he'd strung within her. She pushed against them, her need a vast serpent coiled and restless within her, but constrained within the walls of inhibition. She felt the sudden urge to weep, not from pain or frustration, but from the desire for the freedom that seemed so close but was beyond her.

She opened her mouth, and at first no words would come out. "I will try, sir," she finally managed, and almost sobbed when she felt his hand stroke her neck.

"That is all I ask, slut. We begin. Place your arms behind your back."

.....
They arrived at the Mother's house easily.

Their eyes could not be deceived by something as basic as a Ward, because they saw with deeper views than the humans that were their prey. They could see the Mother inside, smoking a cigarette as she washed dishes. They could see the blackness in her lungs as it spread micro-thin with every breath. They could see the stretchmarks like flames flowing across her stomach. They could see she'd had a lover the night before.

Yet they waited. Because they could not see the Daughters.

Yet.

.....

Her wrists lie parallel to each other as her arms crossed behind, unconsciously arching her back slightly to thrust out her breasts, nipples darkly pink with her arousal. He lifted his arms around her, and she saw him loosen a coil of sand-colored rope, the tails flowing out in ribbons of energy as his fingers moved through the loops.

The energy built between them seemed to take on a different rhythm than the wildness of their desire not diminished but somehow more modulated. Brian pictured a tiny ball of energy gathering between her hands as they lay, half cupped, behind her back, and he felt it resonate and begin to flow as he wrapped her wrists a few times, then securing the small binding with a simple over hand knot. As the knot pulled tight, there was a tiny chiming in his head, as if the wraps had completed some sort of structure within which the tiny ball of energy could play and travel. Holding her hands for a moment, he let his awareness examine the energy contained there, and could feel it building with every breath she took.

He drew a length of the doubled-up hemp rope up before her eyes, and she could see every strand clearly in the golden light, the twisting fibers seeming endless. She could smell the earthy mix of hemp and mink oil that permeated it, and closed her eyes slowly, letting the sensation fill her, not needing to have her eyes open to know that he was lowering the rope across the top of her chest, just above the swell of her breasts. As the fibers touched her skin and wrapped around her back, she could feel the rope drawing in the wild energy, binding it deeper into her, buffeting the walls of her will with a storm of power. The serpent she imagined inside of her, the desire for submission, also moved more restlessly, responding to the new assault with its own tempest from within.

Slowly Brian wrapped twice more around her, underneath her breasts, each coil carefully laid and smoothly set next to the first, the bands above and below pushing her breasts out a bit, the blood flow increasing their sensitivity to the air around them. Her nipples now seemed like tiny tongues, tasting every movement of air and even scents around her, and she knew if they were so much as brushed she would scream out with pleasure.

Brian was in a state of meditative calm as, inch by inch, he laid the lines of the *shinju* upon her, the chest harness binding her arms closer as he pulled the loops tight behind her. The doubled rope split and traveled up over her shoulders, looping through each of the bands as they went into her cleavage and pulling the horizontal lines tighter around her breasts. The power was like electric clay, being shaped and drawn into Sally's form by the rope, compressing and travelling through and around her.

Each touch of his finger on her body and on the rope was like a chiming bell, lending a sweet pure tone to the energy as his concentration narrowed from the world around down to the point of contact with his hands, the ropes, and her body. Pulling tight the cinches that secured the bands under her arms, he again tied the final knot, and felt a thunderous bass echo slam into the two of them as the rope harness completed and the sexual energy they'd gathered expanded to fill every part of this new binding that contained it.

With the pulse came a further strengthening of the Wards, and with them, Brian and Sally caught a sense of what was waiting for the daughters outside their Mother's house. It was not a vision, more a black menacing absence sitting at the edge of the second Ward. Brian recognized the same cold sour taste to their auras as they'd had in the coffeeshop, and he realized it was not enough to have the Wards. The danger was too close and real for that.

He realized what he had to do, and refused to let himself think about the improbability of it. It had its own strange internal logic, and like the dancing that had defeated the two earlier, it would only work if it were done, not debated. He reached out to the second ward, and made a slight change in the pattern.

Breathing in the energy swirling around, he exhaled...and cast out along the new line.

.....

In the car, the Mauls shifted uncomfortably. There was still no sign of the Daughters, though the fall of twilight implied they would return soon. But something had changed in the house, something had adjusted, and even their strange and altered eyes could not exactly see what it was. Everything looked just as it had; at the same time, there was something about the entire setting that was different.

Suddenly they realized it did not matter. At the end of the block, rounding the corner, Phina and Lisbet were walking as they tossed the frisbee back and forth, often so convulsed in giggles that they dropped it, slowing their progress toward the Mother's house.

One of the Mauls made to get out of the car, but the other laid its hand across a shoulder. The Wrinkled Man in his room smiled, agreeing.

The prey is always sweeter if you let them come to you.

.....

Sally had fallen to her knees, steadied by Brian's hand on her shoulder, and she leaned back for just a moment. The back of her head pressed into the firm erection blousing out his trousers, and she felt a resurgence of the lust that had consumed her earlier, this time with a measure of calmness mixed in, a secure knowledge that this cock would become a part of her, eventually, as surely as was the hemp that now bound her.

"Steady, slut. There is one more binding necessary." Brian wasn't sure how he knew this, but he did. The energy was strong, but an element was missing, like a choir with one of the voices silent. The room seemed to be trembling around them as they stayed in that between moment, their breathing slowly matching pace. Her skin where he'd spanked her earlier was still a stinging burn, but it was a sweet spice added to the waves of pleasure that flowed between them, the *shinju* binding giving her a grounding for the wild energy that flowed through them.

"Spread your legs, slut." There was no degradation in the word; it was the most accurate way to describe her current state of arousal, and even the implicit dirtyness of the word added to her lust, her labia feeling heavy and engorged beyond her clitoris, as if her entire mons was as sensitive as that tiny knob of flesh. She shifted her knees wide, closing her eyes and letting the feeling of the air cooling the fluids add to the rush of stimuli, all of which seemed to bring her closer to explosive release.

Brian took another length of the hemp rope and began the final binding, a *matanawa*, crotch rope. The doubled length passed between her legs, the bight held by one hand just under her navel as the tails pulled up and through the cleft of her ass. She shuddered as the two strands touched her labia and she twisted slightly, letting them part and take the strands deeper into the slit, pressing into the lesser lips, until she could feel them flanking the hood of her clitoris. She dared not move any more, after that, for fear of losing her ability to continue to hold herself up.

Brian passed the tails up over each of her hips and through the bight in front of her, drawing them back loosely around her hips and holding them there while his other hand moved to a point just over her mons. He paused for a moment, and then brought his face close to hers.

“Look at me.” Her eyes snapped open, pupils dilated, and for just a moment he knew how Vashte must have felt when he’d pushed her off balance in her ceremony. To stare into those eyes too long would be to fall and fall, with no end to the soft silver depths they held.

Desire. Beauty. Discipline. “You will not cum yet, slut. I am going to adjust the ropes right now for one reason only. And that reason is not for your pleasure. You will want to release and let the orgasm flow, and I am telling you, you will not.” His eyes held hers as his hand dipped down between her legs, fingers pushing into the cleft labia and spreading them around the edges of the rope...and then continuing, spreading her *labia minora* until they also rested on either side of the ropes. She did not move a muscle as she held onto his gaze, eyes wide, but a low moan grew in the back of her throat as he finished by pushing the bight down further on her mons, until the loop of rope, drawn open just a bit by the two tails flowing over her hips, rested just over her clitoris. He gave her a small smile. “Well done, slut.” Continuing to hold her eyes, he pulled the tails in his other hand suddenly taut.

The slack disappeared as the tails pulled the bight of the rope open, and her labia spread wide while her clitoral hood was pulled upwards simultaneously, pressure increasing across the mound above it as he secured the *matanawa* behind her with another simple knot, this time ready for the burst of power it gave both of them as the energies, magnified by her arousal and the patterns of the rope binding her.

He stood again, and she had no more strength; she fell softly to her side on the mat, legs slowly scissoring as she moaned with the ropes' enforced exposure and stimulation. Brian watched her, felt the echoes of her arousal through the saturated air around them. He felt his own need grow, his own cock throbbing with the need to fulfill its purpose, its only reason for existence in the human species: to join with the object of his desire.

But something wasn't ready. He could feel it, the dissonant thread in the harmonic symphony of lust they'd woven together. He followed the thread, eyes unfocused on Sally's writhing form as he tried to find out where something had been left awry...and there, deep within, he found it.

.....
The daughters were half a block from the house, now, and the two Mauls, disguised as Men, got out of the car and walked towards the porch. Each of them reached into their breast pocket and withdrew a hypodermic needle from a small black pouch, holding them out of sight of the two girls.

Lisbet looked up, and saw the young men. Her smile faded, and she looked worriedly at her sister. "Aw, fuck, " she said softly. "Mom invited the missionaries to dinner again."

.....

Awash in the sea of animal passion that filled her, in the buffeting storm of unfulfilled desire and roiling streams of power, Sally's fortress still stood. She still was unable to let go of her will, the very desire to do so interfering with the loss of self towards which she was striving. Her spirit, locked deep within the walls, was twisting and fighting along with the storm around her, but the walls of inhibition, of cultural identity, of independence as an end unto itself, they kept that spirit from breaking free with the power they needed...the power that she needed to focus.

They had passed the point of no return. So much power roiled around them now that it had suffused the entire club, and Brian became vaguely aware that the scenes around them were more violent and intense than usually seen at Thornhall, affected by the building tempo, and he could sense that unless the energy was used they would end blasting out destructively, tilting masters and slaves alike towards the kind of dark play that left scars on the psyche as well as the body.

And his daughters were still unwarded. He could not feel them, but he knew they were out there, unprotected. *Repressors are after my daughters*, he thought, and grew angry—at them, at himself for drawing his daughters into it...and suddenly at the resistance that was keeping Sally and him from completing their ceremony and doing something about it.

He reached down and grasped the back of the *shinju*, lifting Sally up and tossing her onto her stomach on the mat. Reaching into his bag, he growled. “Get that ass in the air, slut. You will submit to me, and you will do it willingly.” She went to her knees and lowered her torso slowly and elegantly, resting her head on the floor in front of her, body still quivering, and the dark purple shine of her spread vulva glistened in the yellow light.

“Yes, sir. I am trying, sir.” The truth was, Sally was tired, and didn't care what he did to her. At the same time, she was determined to take everything she could, like the surrendered compliant slave she was trying to become. The walls that refused to bend inside of her, the driving need of that spirit looking for release into the bonds of his ropes and his sex, they felt as though they were tearing her weary body apart, but she presented her buttocks in an arched beauty, letting herself fall into the throbbing need of her sex as it spread open before him. She would endure anything. She would.

She did, at first. Quietly, with only an occasional moan as he worked her over thoroughly, first with his hands, warming the skin again, bringing back the bright red flush to the skin, setting a burning undertone to what followed.

A few floggers were laid out as she knelt there, and one after another, small to large, they were woven in figure eights over her ass, striking with more and more intensity, lightly stinging at first and then growing harder, the impact of the final thick buffalo skin falls actually forcing her body forward with every blow. Her mind was beyond conscious thought, the world shrinking to her body, the man behind her, and the implement that formed the physical connection between them.

She held that position as he threw the flogger into her flesh, over and over, and did not break.

Finally, he pulled out the single-tail. A snake whip made of black kangaroo leather, it coiled out like a living extension of his hand. She heard the sharp crack of the

tip next to her ear, and it penetrated the haze of lust with a shivering dart of fear. The whip was one of her greatest fears, and with a cry she fell face-down on the mat.

He did not hesitate, and started laying coiled strikes all over the already-red skin on her buttocks and thighs. It was stinging sharp and heavy, leaving a mark with every flick of his wrist. Out of instinct she tried to curl and squirm out of the way, but he didn't reproach her or try to reposition her. Instead, he just kept throwing the whip, no matter which way she moved. She quickly learned that trying to turn on her side or back only exposed the more sensitive areas of her inner thighs and stomach. Her cries turned quickly to tears, as everywhere she moved seemed to be met with an electric snap. There was no way to escape, no task as before she could perform. Her arms, bound behind her, were unable to cover her at all, and his whip went over and around her, now biting into her thigh, now her stomach, her breast...soon she had returned to facing down and presenting herself properly, simply crying out softly with every strike of the whip, not moving to escape it at all.

Submitting.

Brian set down the whip and strode to her, entangling his fingers in the hair at the base of her neck and dragging her to the edge of the alcove, where a bench was sitting. He knelt her up in front of it, about a foot away, and then she heard a sound that sent shivers through her.

She heard the distinct sounds of his belt loosening, his zipper coming down...the soft rustle of clothes, and then he was in front of her, she could see the cock she had only felt before, lifting strong out of a thatch of pubic hair. She could see the shiny tip glisten with seminal fluid, and licked her lips in sympathetic desire. He made himself comfortable on the bench, leaning back against the wall, and looked at her kneeling there, gasping. Quite deliberately he unwrapped a condom, sliding its bright latex over his cock in a sensuous downward sweep of his palm. She watched it unroll across the length, lending a smooth elegance to the rough veins, reminding her of a fine marble sculpture. He finished, and sat back.

That's all. He simply watched her, and as her body came out of the waves of pain and despair, she found that she only wanted one thing: to please him, to bring him some

kind of joy with her body. *This is what submission is*, she thought, and leaned in to service him with her mouth.

Which was a mistake. He knew from their first conversation how much she enjoyed oral sex, and he growled “No, slut. You do not get the satisfaction of initiative or pride in your skills.” He drew her across his lap and lay down ten quick, hard strokes, no pause as she cried in helpless pain, the burning spanks bringing new deep hunger to her body through the agony. Suddenly he stopped and pushed her back to her knees, standing and forcing his engorged cock all the way into her mouth, her lips straining around it as it pushed deep bringing tears to her eyes. He held it there, hearing her breathing around it, his hand holding her head precisely at the point short of choking on him. When he finally withdrew it, he pulled her up and threw her face-down on the bench. Leaning in behind her, he whispered a question: "Are you ready, now, for me to fuck you?"

She was torn. She was exhausted, broken, and tearful, but somehow her vulva didn't seem as ready as it had been before. Suddenly his cock, which she could still feel stretching her mouth, seemed more than she could handle. She chose to answer honestly: "I... I'm not quite sure that I'm... that she... is ready, Sir."

He paused, stood up and took a step back. She breathed a small sigh of relief... too soon. He grabbed her hair again, pulling her up to her knees, and then shoved her torso down roughly so that her ass was again presenting, her wet labia a dark purple. With a menacing voice, he challenged, "You know how to answer that question." He stood over her, waiting.

She paused, drew breath, and hung her head. Suddenly it all came clear; she did, and the knowing was the final crackling tumble of the walls of her defiance into dust blown away in the winds of power that suffused her. "Not unless it pleases you, Sir," she said, the phrase finally giving her complete submission, body and spirit.

With that, he took her, roughly, and the energy found the conduit it needed. With every drive of his cock into her, the energy built, and she felt it whirling faster through her as her body responded. With a wailing scream she threw her head back and screamed with pain, joy, and pure wanton pleasure, the orgasm running through her shuddering frame as the torrent of energy shot forth, guided by the pattern inscribed by the rope on her flesh and the scars on his, up and into the Wards.

.....

The first Maul had smiled as Lisbet approached nervously, then casually grabbed her arm in a painful grip, twisting it again in the arm lock that both immobilized and presented a target for the needle.

On most people it would have worked; Lisbet, however, had arms that hyperextended at the elbow, and so where he expected the arm to lock, she still had a good six inches of wiggle room.

Which she used, immediately, doing as Sensei had taught her, kicking first at his kneecap, then sliding the side of her shoe down his shin in a scrape that tore skin, her booted foot pounding into his instep with an audible crunch.

On most people it would have worked. Unfortunately, this was not people; and so he merely pushed the armlock a little further, popping out her elbow.

She did the second thing Sensei had taught her. She screamed.

Phina saw a dark shape coming at her from the left, as the other Missionary Man reached for her, and she moved and ducked, not quite fast enough. He snagged her coat neatly, then hissed in fury as she simply shrugged it off and ran up the steps, yelling for Mother.

Then Mother came out of the door.

The Maul holding the coat blinked up at her. She was not the tired woman they'd seen inside a moment before. Her eyes were wide, pupils the sharp points of a hunter as she bared her teeth at the black suited figures in front of her. The Maul holding Lisbet paused with the needle just touching her skin, a tiny drop of blood forming where the point began to tear into her. He squinted at the Mother, who was suddenly very, very hard to see. She seemed somehow connected to the second Ward.

The Wrinkled Man frowned in his room. He could see the Ward was filling with power, power lost to him, but that was the least of the concerns. He could see the power flowing into the Mother...the Mother whose child was being threatened.

Then he was only seeing through one set of eyes, as she had shoved the forks in her hands, still soapy with dishwater, into the eyesockets of the Maul holding the coat. With a wordless cry it lifted its hands up to its ruined sockets, turning and stumbling down the block, a muffled scream like seashells scraping together coming from its throat.

The second Maul lasted a moment longer, but only because the Mother reached out to snap the needle away from Lisbet first. He let go of the girl, and reached out to grab the tiny woman who glowed with such power it made him wince.

She broke his arm in three places before twisting his head 180 degrees and, as he fell, kicking his ribcage into a flailed chest. As had happened in the coffee shop, this did not stop him. She was holding a sobbing Lisbet, still feeling that strange and glowing strength flowing through her, and she saw the pieces of his chest begin to push up, snap back into place, the head turning back up towards her. In his room, the Wrinkled Man grinned ferally.

“Stay here a moment, Honey.” She patted Lisbet’s back once, and got up and walked across the lawn to where the Missionary was reassembling himself. Along the way she picked up a croquet mallet. “Stay away from my daughters, motherfucker,” she said, and with a long circular sweep drove it into his skull, once, twice, until the skull was empty.

As she walked Lisbet up the stairs to join her sister, the crows came and began to feast on the gray delicacy spread on the lawn.

The Mother didn’t know what had come over her. But much to her surprise, of all the emotions rushing through her, which was the strongest?

She was really horny.

.....

When it finished, Sally collapsed on the floor, unable to move. Brian cradled her in his arms, picking her up and gently stretching her on the bench, where she lay like a limp and wasted rag. But a smiling rag, at that. He loosened the ropes, now nothing more than damp hemp.

“Sally. We did it. They’re safe.” He whispered to her softly, coiling the ropes respectfully next to her and reaching out to stroke her hair, dark with sweat. She looked at him, eyes wide, and this time he did not hesitate, allowing himself to fall into them, to fall and fall and never worry about where he might land.

She cried softly and reached out to him, burrowing into his shoulder, clinging to him. “Oh...love, love, love...Thank you. Thank you for not letting me stop, for not giving up on me.”

They held each other as the rooms slowly emptied, and long afterwards.

.....
“So that’s how it works, eh?” Brian looked at Sullivan as they sat on his porch.

“We don’t know what we’re fighting, we don’t know how we fight them, and we’re probably losing?”

Sullivan took a long swig of his drink. “Yep, that about sums it up.”

Brian paused, looking at his beer, then up at Sullivan. “That sucks.”

“Yep. That about sums it up. But as the man said, doesn’t matter if the game is rigged. If you don’t play, you can’t win. Besides, you can’t really complain, bucko. You made out pretty well.” He held up a hand and began ticking off the fingers.

“You saved your daughters. You hid yourself and your power from the Repressors, at least for now. You have bonded with a Focus who has, I might add, one of the hottest asses in this hemisphere. You have some sort of weird confluence of power between being a *nawashi* and the mark that Vashte gave you, which may or may not burn your dick off but sure as hell impresses every mage I know.” He looked up at Brian. “Am I missing anything?”

“Yes,” Brian sipped his beer. “I’ve still got to explain all this to my wife when she gets back from New York.”

“Oh, pshaw! You’re worried about explaining sex magic and your new sub to your wife who is returning from a week in NYC with her Master? Jeez, man, you worry too much.”

“Look, Brian, we may be losing, sure. What do you expect? We are a disorganized bunch of fuckers—literally—fighting against the inertial weight of moral apathy and chosen ignorance.”

“It’s more that that!” Brian’s voice had an edge to it. “Moral apathy didn’t try to fry my balls with an electric pompom from hell. Ignorance didn’t have its ass kicked by my ex-wife.” He grinned for a second. “I have to admit, though, I’m glad I never threatened our daughters. Damn, she really fucked him—it—up...” His expression turned serious again. “What was it, Sullivan? If things like that are after us, why aren’t we dead or—what is it? Strokin?- for the man by now?”

“I told you, Bucko, I don’t know what the fuck that whole bit about ‘Strokers’ is about. As far as why we aren’t dead yet, well, as you saw, the ‘pressors are tough, but

they can be overcome, distracted, misdirected, and sometime just plain fucked up with a croquet mallet. And we have the advantage, because our hearts are pure and we have the stench of ten.” He sniffed an armpit. “I do, anyway. I think I’ll shower before you and Francesca get started, so that there’s hot water left.” He stood and took Brian’s bottle, still mostly full. “What the hell? You got something against beer?”

“Only before a scene—er, that is, ceremony. I’ll finish it after.”

“Bullshit. I’ll finish it now.” Sullivan tilted his head back and drained the bottle. “We’re still alive, my friend, because I for one am a coward who runs away from the ‘pressors every chance I get, and keep a low profile. I would highly suggest you do the same.”

He looked up as a car pulled into the driveway, a blonde woman wearing surgical scrubs getting out. “Ah, good, looks like Francesca’s here. You’ll like her, *nawashi*. She’s quite the ropeslut, and while I wouldn’t say she’s in the KKK—” Brian winced, sensing what was coming “—she’s a wizard under sheet!”

“You read too much Heinlein as a child, Sullivan,” Brian said. “I don’t know. Yeah, we won, this round, anyway. Somehow, though, it doesn’t seem enough.” He shook his head as the woman approached him, smiling. “Holding fast isn’t enough.” Extending a hand, he smiled. “Francesca. I’m Brian. Pleased to meet you. Sullivan says we have some work to do...”

.....
Brian sat in *seiza* in the prepared room, knees folded and spread, his palm resting on each thigh, back straight and his eyes looking at the center of the room. His focus was on his breathing, slowly letting ten beats pass as he inhaled, holding for ten, releasing for ten, hanging in that state of oblivion where there is no breath for ten, before repeating the cycle. The effort of maintaining the breath discipline had cast a slight sweat across his upper body, and his skin was a soft gold contrasting with the matted black of the cotton trousers he wore. The tiny voice of his monkey mind was silent, though it couldn’t help a feeling of pride leaking out that he was no longer counting breaths, but simply feeling them.

He ignored it, and instead focused the energy of his breathing into the three neatly coiled ropes laying on the floor next to him. They reflected silver sparkles in the

candlelight, and he felt them grow in his awareness as he charged them with power through each breath

Francesca entered the room and stood in the center, her toes curling into the lush kilim rug. It was a deep maroon, woven with the symbols of the “monster foot” and “wolf’s head”, believed by the Turkish women who created it to be protection from evil. *Don’t think it’s going to help much, she thought briefly, but every little bit helps.*

She wore a silk robe, its deep azure sheen ending just over her knees. The feeling of the fabric hanging draped over her breasts had cause her nipples to erect, she noted absently, and was grateful for the simpler pleasures of life, in light of the difficult road ahead.

Her eyes relaxed their focus, letting the flickering candlelight from the room blur and stroke her perceptions with softened layers of shadow and flame. Her awareness went inward, inspecting her body with her mind’s eye. Her breathing deepened, became more regular, slowing to a fraction of its normal rate, and she felt the muscles throughout relax as she adjusted to a more efficient use of the oxygen (*with just a touch of nag champa, as well, thank you, Brian*) it drew in.

When Brian could feel her entering the surface-level meditation, he emerged from his own trance, placing both hands on the floor in front of him, first finger and thumbs meeting in a diamond shape as he bowed low to the floor, a respectful kowtow to his partner. He straightened and pivoted on his knees to face the coiled ropes and bowed again, acknowledging their part in what was to come. Reaching out, he took up one of the shorter coils, about twenty-five feet worth, and held it against his hip as he pivoted once more to face Francesca before curling his toes and smoothly rising to his feet. He stood there for a moment, letting his eyes slowly rise to hers.

Francesca felt rather than saw Brian’s eyes as they met hers, and there was a sudden physical shudder as they *linked*, and began to share their environment, aware not only of their own bodies but, for the first time, directly aware of each others, as well.

Brian kept looking into her eyes as he unwound the wrappings of the coil of rope in his hands, finally flinging out the coil to fly across the floor behind her, the tails dancing and flashing in the light as they hit the carpet. He held a fold of rope in one hand and reached up, very deliberately, to her shoulder. His hand folded over her shoulder, and

he could feel the warmth of her body permeating the smooth coolness of the silk covering it.

He held the contact for a moment, giving them both a chance to completely feel the first physical connection, then drew the shoulder towards him, turning her around. Reaching down, he pulled each of her wrists back to meet in the back. With a slight pressure against the wrists he indicated that she should keep them there, the backs resting on the curve of her buttocks under the silk. Francesca suddenly found herself hyper-aware of her hands, every waft of air seeming to caress and travel through her fingers, and realized that the sensitivity had begun. *Faster than ever before*, a small part of her noted, clinically. *I wonder if that's him, or me...or the two of us*. Then the small part was quiet as she felt the first two loops of rope slide over her hands, her wrists, gliding smoothly over the fabric of her elbows all the way to the tops of her shoulders, where they rested like straps of a backpack.

Brian adjusted both strands to cross over her trapezius muscles, and smoothed the cloth of the robe where it had been bunched by the rope. Every motion was as deliberate as his breathing, as he continued to loop the ropes down her back in pairs, each set binding her arms further back as he tightened the knots. Her shoulders were rotated and pulled back further and further as the bindings traveled down her arms, her elbows drawn together almost—but not quite—touching.

Francesca shifted the focus of her breathing to her arms, feeling the flow move up and down her spine as the energy from her breath flowed into the already charged ropes. Each set of loops, beginning with the ones on her shoulders, felt cool, somehow, counteracting the heat of her body...no, that wasn't quite right. The cold energy of the ropes complemented the lush warmth of her skin, in a burning reaction that seemed, in her mind's eye, to send steaming tendrils of reaction everywhere they pulled against her muscles.

As Brian bound the final loops around her wrists, the shifting of her torso caused her silk robe to fall open, and her awareness of the ropes was distracted by the sudden exposure of her nipples to room air, which seemed suddenly much cooler than when she'd entered. Brian sensed this, and without any break in the smooth motion reached around to the front and drew the folds of robe back over her breasts. There was no sense

of modesty or propriety in the motion, it was a simple matter-of-fact necessity done with no more or less gravity than when he slid his fingers under her hair to lay it across the front of her neck. Francesca sent a feeling of gratitude towards him, no words needed in this shared moment of consciousness, and again began to breath around and through the ropes travelling down her arms.

Brian finished the tie on her wrist, making sure the final loops were not impairing circulation, and stepped back, for a moment, to examine the *drakenfly* tie. The final tails of rope had been coiled like a tight spring along her sacrum, and the symmetry of the glowing bands added a strength and stability to the power growing as she breathed into the ropes.

He closed his eyes, for just moment, to try and feel the energies as they grew, and that's when they hit him. A wave of desolation washed over him as the tiny imperfections in the knots were magnified, the subtle imbalances in the tails, even the tiny tufted frays along the rope, all suddenly seemed to be chinks in the field of power they were building. He could feel the pain in his knees, suddenly, left from the strain of sitting in *seiza*, and it seemed to pulse with the same rhythm as he'd felt from the rope and the breath, a dull ache building. Suddenly Brian's arms seemed to acquire a hollowness, his hands a spastic tremor. He couldn't see the ropework in his mind, couldn't even open his eyes, and with a rush of white noise he felt his balance begin to tilt in the room.

Francesca felt the attack as well, but in a different form. Her power had always come from the ability to visualize herself with an objectivity that lent a self-voyeuristic thrill to the process, an added layer of mental stimulation to whatever activity she was part of. Her responsiveness to the opening of her robe had come not only from the sensation of the silk sliding across and suddenly exposing the curve of her breast, but also from her awareness of how that sudden exposure of the dark pink bud would look, the special sensuality of revealed flesh.

Now that awareness was gone. There was nothing but a growing discomfort as she lost the breath, lost the glowing contrast between rope and skin, lost any visualization of her situation, and with it the safety and security that had been building with...

Brian. The one thing she realized was still there—though she had a feeling he wasn't aware of it—was that thread of connection between herself and Brian, that had

started when their eyes met at the beginning of the ceremony. She fought the gray tide of noise that seemed to filling her head, pushing down through the fog of diminished awareness to find that glowing tendril of connection. She pulled up the sense memory of the first touch on her shoulder, magnified it until she could feel again the warmth of his hand cupping her, turning her, the dance beginning, and then sent that feeling with as much force as she could through the connection to try, somehow, to reach him...

Brian's eyes snapped open as the white noise flooding his senses was shattered by the clear crystal note of the bond of power came from Francesca. With a rush of synaesthesia the elements of the room came into focus, seeing the smells of the incense, feeling the light of the candles on his skin, the scent of blue silk and silver rope filling him, driving away the insecurities. The variances in knots and rope that had seemed like weaknesses a moment before suddenly were revealed for what they were, expressions of individuality and the powerful ephemerality of this experience. He felt his shoulders loosen as his arms again filled with the power and energy infused in the art of the rope, and taking a small step forward, he reached up and touched her shoulder again, reinforcing the connection. Her skin was warmer than before, and he took a moment to let the heat of his palm merge with it, blending their breathing as well as they both continued the cycle of feeding the energy to the *drakenfly* binding traveling down her back.

Then he turned her again to face him, her robe falling open again, soft beige skin glowing in the light in contrast to the dark sheen of her robe falling in parallel down her body. Their eyes met, and the last vestiges of fear that had come from the attack were washed away in the smile they shared. "Thanks," he said softly, and reached for the second coil of rope. She thought she could feel the frustrated impotence of the Repressors as their destructive influence was countered and then overcome by their confident sharing as the ceremony continued.

Brian held the rope in his hands a moment, considering her body and trying to see where the strands wanted to lay to let the power flow. The initial tie had been a base to build from, a grounding strength akin to the casting of a circle in a Wiccan ritual. It was a necessary part, to open her body and mind and provide a circulation of energy from which to draw for the rest of the ceremony, but the next part was in some ways more

important. Casting the circle is one thing; it's what happens within the circle that really counts. And what Brian would create with the rope, drawing its intricate design around her body and through her awareness, would give them the power and effect they needed.

Suddenly he saw it—the opening steps, at least, and deeper in his consciousness a glimpse of the final tie, the pattern. Frustratingly, there was no more than a glimpse, but it was enough; he knew where to begin.

From the front, the only evidence of the bindings flowing down her back was the two loops around each shoulder, gleaming silver bands pulling the robe apart. Brian pulled a loop of rope through each of the bands, stretching a single strand of rope just under the hollow of her throat, and began pulling the loops through, like wings appearing on either side. As he pulled the rope, he kept his eyes on hers, knowing that she was feeling the line stroking up along her thighs, the slight rise of her mons, the insides of her breasts, the first direct sexual contact hitting them both with a slight widening of the eyes, a deepening of the breath, and a thickening of the pulse. *When did I become aware of her pulse?* Brian wondered for a moment, but there it was, strong and throbbing in the curve of her neck.

He let the tails fall down along the outside of her breasts, and slowly knelt again in *seiza*. His hair softly brushed her belly, unintentionally, as he gathered the tails and drew them each around the outside of her thighs, reaching around to gather behind her. He was very careful not to touch her directly, allowing their proximity to charge the inches of air separating them with implied contact. She also didn't move at all, allowing the feeling of the ropes to heighten the connection, focusing as the lines travelled in parallel around the lower curve of her ass, their constriction pushing them up slightly, still covered by the silk but suddenly feeling more exposed and open.

Brian continued the wrapping twice around her upper thighs, and as her legs were drawn tighter together Francesca could feel her labia, thick with the beginning of arousal, pushing together. She fought the urge to shift her thighs and let them rub *Oh, yes, rub!* together. She focused instead on the breathing, more and more, letting the energy from the ropes in her arms meet and flow across the line drawing against her sternum, down the sides of her breasts, the corresponding glow of arousal from each radiating out from the stiffened nipples, and letting it circle around her vulva, the flow building and

radiating waves that excited her more. She felt the slow building of energies in her body continue to rise, slowly, the methodical pace lending a strength to the tide of pleasure that was still only hinted at, only a burgeoning promise deep in her mind.

Brian finished the wraps and fed just the tips of the tails through a simple overhand knot at the meeting of her upper thighs. He stood smoothly again, not stepping back, allowing their almost-touch to continue to charge their awareness, and brought his gaze to hers. His face held a relaxed expression, open and devoid of any lasciviousness, matching her calm half-smile. His mouth matched hers, though, as he began pulling the tails up through the knot, slowing the process and subtly pulling the ropes so that their surface occasionally brushed her mons, the friction of the tails coming through the knot causing a slight vibration in the bands cupping her ass, heightening her awareness of it. She managed to maintain composure until all but a third of the rope tails had been drawn through, and then a subtle but unmistakable shiver went through her, just for a moment. The connection between them suddenly sharpened into a pull, giving it the strength of a high-tension line.

The currents of energy began to thicken in the air between them, and she realized the sensitivity of her hands at the beginning had spread to the rest of her body, with the energy seeming to vibrate through her as it flowed around her body and through the ropes. *Time to shift the visualization*, she realized. She forced herself to divert a portion of her awareness to the target, casting out and finding, rather easily, the Senator's son twenty-three miles away. He was glowing with the raw lust of any teen, and his own particular power, reinforced by the privilege of his family, cast out from him in her mind's eye like pseudopods, hungrily grasping at the eager auras of the women at the party with him.

Brian must have caught a glimpse of her visualization, because he gave a soft chuckle as he used the tails drawing up from her crotch to loop into the rope at her sternum. "So that's the secret of you Urban Sex Mages," he murmured softly. "It all really does come down to tentacle sex?"

For a moment she was taken aback by his levity, and a small burst of anger came out of her awareness. *How dare he make light of this? We're working to—* and suddenly she gasped as he cast the tails around the back of her knees, pulling them suddenly and

breaking her balance. She felt a rush of terror as she began to fall forward, her hands bound behind her helpless to break her fall, then another rush of sensation as his skin suddenly met hers, his body pressing against her, taking her weight easily and holding her there, off balance, floating in a state between upright and horizontal.

He held her there while their breathing matched again, then continued to lower her to the floor, folding her knees with a light pressure to her legs and then helping her lift her spine until she, too, was in *seiza*, facing him. “Misdirection. Works every time,” he said with a showman’s confidence, and she was reminded that a part of his power was in his ability to manipulate not so much the rope as the audience that watched, using their power to feed into his art and increase its potency. *And in this case, he’s got an audience of exactly one, and he got what he needed.* Though her breathing had calmed, the pulse in her neck was twice as fast as before, and she felt tiny snaps like sparks bursting over her skin from the rush of blood. The ropes were clearly glowing now, pulsing with every breath.

He stood again, looking down at her as he held the tails of the rope. “Endgame. Are you ready?” She nodded, and closed her eyes, surrendering to the feeling of the connection completely, letting her awareness fade from *self* and *other* to simply the moment. Had she been capable of verbalizing, she would have thought it a grand place to be, but she was too busy being there....

Brian grounded himself, feeling his heels push into the rug, feeling his connection to the ropes he held and the energy that circulated and moved through her and the twining strands flow through his legs, his shoulders, seeming to fountain out of the top of his head...and then began to pull the tails up, in a diagonal line across his body, his empty hand travelling downward in the same diagonal, the classic *tenchi* heaven-and-earth symmetry lending its own power to the process.

As the tension increased, Francesca’s body was drawn down tighter and tighter by the ropes, her head sinking as her spine folded down over her knees. Her golden hair fell and draped her face, brushing her legs as her forehead finally came to rest on the carpet. Her breathing was deep and slow, the relaxed pace belying the tension revealed in her arms as the silver bindings held them straight and long against the curve of her back.

When she was all the way down, Brian felt the connection between them diminish, but it did not worry him. She was deep in trance now, and was working, he knew, to entwine herself with Jonathan Allenberg's psyche, to bring him into the connection. Brian simply maintained his own measured breathing, his own flow, knowing that he was still a part of her strength and providing the support and grounding she would need to find her way back.

The repressors tried to hit them again, this time with a more direct assault, a barrage of images and sensations cascading against them both. Francesca was too deep to even register it, and it broke like a helpless frothy wave against her trance state. Brian caught some of it, though, a series of twisted, banal sexual images trying to insinuate their way into his awareness of his own sex, a grinding litany of voices and suggested desires *don't you want that cunt tits would be so nice bigger rounder mouth sucks cock take it harder* trying to break his connection.

This time he felt no fear, no chance of losing his connection. His awareness of the joyful sharing now was so much better than any of the hinted debaucheries that they were helpless before it. He stood for a moment with the tails held up over her tightly bound form, basking in the shared breaths of pleasure that flowed between them, and actually laughed aloud at the now-pitiful attacks, and even was able to glimpse for a moment the poor drugged-out emitters the repressors were using to fuel their attack. He took a moment to send a pulse of the joy he had to them, a quick burst across the conduit they'd unknowingly created (*just a taste, don't worry, plenty more where that came from, just kick that habit, buddy*) and then slammed the connection down firmly and irrevocably.

He had work to do.

His movements were quicker now, but still smooth and deliberate, as he drew the rest of the rope in and around her curled form to seal the binding and give Francesca the reserves of power she would need to change the boy's (*Man's*, he reminded himself, *if it were a boy's it would not be so dangerous*) sexual awareness.

He drew the tails up over her trapezii again, laying them down along either side of the knots securing the bindings of her armes, and looped them down through the cleft in her buttocks, tying them to the bindings on her thighs and drawing them tight, knowing that the feeling of her glutes being divided would arouse her further and lend her more

power, while the energies flowing down and across her spine would continue to circulate and feed back into her work. He quickly drew the tails of the rope up again along her side and began the final sealing of the ritual, winding the ropes into themselves in tight coils that gave no exits to the energy involved.

He pulled the final coil tight into itself, and sat back in *seiza*, back where he'd started, hands this time cupped in his lap, his thumbs touching, and simply concentrated on providing a grounding support as she did her part.

Francesca was still in trance, still breathing, and her mind was twenty-three miles east, where a man barely twenty was sitting at a party, looking into the depths of a lousy beer and only half aware of the flirty babble of the woman next to him. She continued to join his awareness until she could feel everything from the chill condensation on the plastic cup he held to the smell of the patchouli on the woman next to him. She knew the faint aftertaste of the Ethiopian food he'd had for dinner, she knew the hard pressure of the bar on his elbows. She went deeper, feeling his ennui, his boredom at the ease with which he did the few things expected of him, and felt his hidden despair at the knowledge that his father and the machine he was part of had his future all planned out. She knew, along with him, that he might as well enjoy the woman next to him, let her feed on him as well, she as hungry for a taste of the entity he was part of as he was bored with it.

Francesca felt all that, and fed into it. She gave him more of the trapped feeling, more of the feeling of being bound, of being held helpless and without the possibility of movement. She let him feel her own body, overlapping it on his subconscious as a mirror to his feelings of being trapped, and amplified it, until he found his eyes beginning to fill with tears.

Then, when he was on the verge of giving in to the overwhelming feelings of despair, when his tears were just about to flow, when the thoughts of mindless sex with the woman were beginning to be replaced with images of the gun he had in the case back home...just at that point, she began to move.

It was a tiny movement, a soft flexing against the ropes that bound her, but he could feel it. He could feel the resistance of her body against the ties that wrapped her, the seeming hopeless struggle. At first that was all she could do, flex her muscles against the ropes, in some cases feeling the knots even more hopelessly tighten. *Yes, feel this.*

The struggle. The need to be free. The hopelessness of realizing that not only have you been entangled far more than you knew...but that you have let it happen to you, even encouraged it.

He felt it, and the woman cooed happily as she felt his bicep tighten under his jacket where she hung on his arm. Jonathan didn't hear her, his thoughts deep within. He flexed again involunatrily as Francesca increased her blending with him and increased her struggle.

Brian watched her hands writhing in the bonds before him, fingers twisting like sea anemones as her arms tried to flex up and down. Her back began to arch, shoulders pushing forward and back, and slowly her muscles began to find tiny places in the loops and strands where they could slip under, change position, small pockets of slack created here and there. *There is hope. There is a point to the struggle. You are life, within this binding, and you have the advantage of being able to improvise. Adapt. Overcome.* Suddenly a loop came off of one wrist, and Francesca let out a long, slow breath as her body found a release. At the bar, Jonathan also let out a slow breath, but still ignored the bustle around him. The woman had left in search of more susceptible prey, finally realizing that her charms were not being seen at all. The young man continued to stare at the surface of the bar, the rich wood grain seeming to draw his gaze and shift into a liquid flow as he continued to sense something growing inside.

Francesca's torso was twisting violently from side to side now, her wrists freed up to the elbows from the *drakenfly* binding. She had lifted her torso up halfway, but was drawn back down by the ropes across her shoulders, which slid partway down with every twist, but refused to go further. Her breathing was ragged, now, still deep but punctuated with the effort and force of her struggle. She felt a moment when it seemed that a particularly emphatic twist almost had the loop off, and she added a shake of her shoulder to try and send it further...and lost her balance, feeling again that moment of panic as she realized there was nothing to catch her as she fell to the side, her head about to hit the floor—

--until Brian's warm hands caught her shoulder and cradled the side of her head, his movement so sudden that she had not heard even the rustle as he'd slid over to her on his knees. He lowered her to the ground, gently, on her side, resting his hand there a bit longer to reinforce the connection, and brushing the hair back gently from her face before

resuming *seiza*. She sent out a wave of gratitude to him, awareness expanded to include him again, and went back to her silent blending with Jonathan.

You will fall. No matter. There are friends to catch you. She began twisting her legs as well, contracting and arching and rolling, arms drawing around to the side, trying to find knots, trying to reach through coils and exploit any tiny opening, any portion of the binding that might give any part of her skin escape. The robe had slid into disarray, and one breast pressed bare against the rope, the added sensation fueling the connection even more. *The struggle is necessary. The struggle is hard. The struggle is exciting. The struggle is Pleasure.*

She pulled and twisted and fought the isometric battle until the loops of rope were pooled around her on the floor, evidence of dozens of tiny victories by her body over the binding, the assertion of her own power. She continued to move until she was slipping against her own limbs with the sweat of the exertion. Jonathan's forehead also showed a sheen of exhaustion, belying his relaxed lean against the bar, and his eyes were completely unfocused, the beer now warm and forgotten in the cup in his hand.

The struggle is hopeless. He gave a little shudder as he felt, unconsciously, the exhaustion in her body finally give in to the pressure of the ropes. Her muscles shook with the effort, and she felt the tears in her own eyes, simply from the intensity of the exertion, as she lay there, gasping, her legs still tightly bound together around her aroused vulva, arms still pulled back harshly by the ropes, no longer in neat and kind loops but tangled and harsh and, finally, unyielding across her joints and muscles. Her breath was in shudders.

Though he could feel none of the actual physical sensation, Jonathan had no choice but to share in the final desperation of Francesca's fruitless struggle. There was no stopping the tears that came then, to him, even had he been aware of them. This strange excitement he'd felt suddenly, this wave of hope and empowerment that had so briefly bubbled up from somewhere, it had finally been revealed in brutal honesty for the inadequacy that it was, and the loss of the hope brought into sharp focus the gun, a Ruger his Dad had bought him four years before, and the inclination to load it, just like Mr. Heston himself had taught him, and lift it, looking down the barrel...

The struggle is not all. He suddenly gasped as he felt something further come into this strange half-awareness, a sudden relief to the despair, like a bright and glowing line traveling off into the uncertain darkness.

Brian had reached out and moved the hair from Francesca's cheek, before lowering his hands to the hollow between her shoulder blades. There was a tiny square knot there, the rope twining back and through and over itself, which though pulled tighter and tighter by her struggles quickly loosened under his fingers. Her shoulders were moved forward a tiny bit by the change, and her soft sigh of release was echoed in the bar by Jonathan, though he had no idea why.

Brian continued to draw the tails around and through the coils and bindings, gently letting them caress her even as they freed her, loop by loop. Occasionally he would rest his hand against the planes of her body, a hip, the small of her back, letting her feel the warmth of his hand, letting the strength of his grounding flow into her shuddering releases until the breath calmed. Her legs came free, finally, and the joy at their extension and release travelled through the connection to Jonathan who let out a sudden barking laugh at the pleasurable wave.

As the bindings loosened, though, so did the energy dissipate and the connection begin to dim. Jonathan had no idea where the feelings had originated, where the ideas were coming from, but he clearly got the final message before he was snapped back into his body, aware that his cheeks were damp, his beer was warm, and his face had a huge smile.

The struggle is not alone. So get to it, Man.

He looked at his beer, shrugging and setting it on the bar in front of him. Suddenly he didn't feel much like drinking. In fact, he felt the same sort of endorphin rush that he felt after a good run at that club, come to think of it. Always better than that synthetic trash his friend Boyd occasionally pushed on him.

He looked around and saw her. Denise McCallister was the daughter of one of the lobbyists for the Sierra Club, a lobbyist Jonathan had often heard his father deride in the pool room and saunas they'd shared. She was about his age, and he'd once inadvertently been seated next to her at an awards banquet. He'd been surprised at how much he'd enjoyed talking with her, a genuine conversation developing between them until his date

had found him, and he'd reverted to his role as Heir Apparent to his father. He could still remember her look of disappointment, and the way it had stung...until he'd buried it in a snide comment and laugh to his date as they walked away from the table.

Now she looked profoundly uncomfortable at this party, standing against the wall, watching the hoi polloi bustle around her, obviously abandoned by whatever well-meaning friends had dragged her here. Jonathan stood straight, adjusting his jacket and grounding his feet (*grounding my feet? What was that? Where did that come from?*) before walking over to talk to her.

She saw him approach, and he could almost hear the slam as her defenses came into play. She didn't even let him say hello. "I really don't feel like being made fun of right now, Mr. Allenton, and I'm sure there's lots of women here who will give you exactly what you're looking for, so why don't you just move your pretty boy face along, eh?"

He resisted the urge to snap a snide comeback, and was suddenly startled by the obscurely happy thought *What? She thinks I'm pretty?* He simply gave a little embarrassed smile, and plunged in. "I was a real ass then. You deserved a lot better, especially considering how much I enjoyed talking to you. I hope we get the chance again sometime, so that I can not make that mistake again." He held out a hand, palm up, then. "but whether or not that happens, doesn't really matter. I really was just wondering if you would like to dance?"

His sincere disingenuousness (*Did Jonathan Allenton really just apologize to me?*) took her off guard, and in shock she did what she would never have done if she'd had time to think about it: she gave him her hand, and together they walked out to the dance floor.

Twenty three miles west, Brian held Francesca as she relaxed into the endorphins left over from the ritual. They were both sweaty, exhausted, but smiling at each other with the joyful grins of two kids who had just gotten away with some great prank. "Tentacle sex?" she murmured, and giggled.

"Hey, whatever works for you, babe," he laughed back at her, and squeezed her again, their skin warm against each other in the dimming candlelight.

.....

“It’s not enough,” Brian repeated to Sullivan. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I know we did something. I couldn’t see it quite clearly, but I was enough a part of her to catch what she did, that she did something good.” They were driving back to the city, having said their goodbyes to Francesca. Sally had called from a hotel, and they were heading towards her.

“But I keep remembering the men in the black suits with their little hypodermic needles. I remember my arm caught in their grip. And you still haven’t told me what they are, since they aren’t human.”

Sullivan frowned. “Look, remember the coffee shop? How I told you that I’ve had friends, lots of friends, die?”

Brian nodded,

“Well, I didn’t enjoy that. All of those friends died because they were asking the same questions, making the same statements you’re making. And now they’re dead...or worse.” At Brian’s questioning look, Sullivan looked away. “There are worse things than death, Bucko. For all concerned.”

“So I don’t ask. I don’t tell. I do my part, I work on the rituals, I use my kink and my power to nudge a person there, to blind a ‘pressor here, but I never make waves, Brian. From what I’ve seen, that’s the quickest way to get to dead.” He frowned. “In fact, I don’t expect you to be around long, to be honest, because you, my friend, are a great big rock that is in the process of being tossed into a very small but deep pool.” He glanced back at Brian, face grim. “You want the honest truth, me boy, sure, I like you and all, I’ll help you—but really? I’m just trying to ride you out. It’s brutal, but it’s honest. Figure I owe you that.”

Brian looked out the window at the passing countryside, turning slowly to cement and industrial complexes. “Ride it out. Yeah. Me too.”

He found himself wondering if he would live to see his wife again. “Explain to me again what it is we have to do with Vashte? And how it is that Geneve is involved?”

Sullivan smiled. “Well, we could wait until she gets back, and just toss the three of you in bed together...I know Sally loves boobies, and from what I hear, your wife has—“

.....

Brian held up a hand. “Won’t happen. She’s not bisex—well, she’s had—that is, there have been a few times that—“ He stopped, giving up trying to explain. “It’s complicated. Suffice it to say, it’s not going to happen, and I’m much happier that way. But why does it have to happen? Can’t Sally and I do our thing, and Geneve and I do our thing, and never the twain shall meet?” A thought occurred to him. “You know, it’s possible that Geneve is a Focus, too...or something like that. Not in the same way as Sally...but she draws attention in a more subtle way...”

Sullivan glanced at him, and then back at the road. “Could be. I have to say, I’m certainly interested in meeting her, after hearing so much.”

“Regardless. You really have to ask why? Isn’t it obvious?” At Brian’s blank stare, Sullivan sighed. “You know, for a smart guy, you can be really dumb sometimes. Look, you and Geneve have a commitment to each other, right?” He didn’t wait for Brian’s nod. “And you and Sally have bonded in a different sort of commitment, different rules, different shape, but still a commitment, right?” Again he continued over Brian’s nod. “So don’t you think, given the nature of the sex magic you now find yourself involved in, that it’s important that the three of you have lines of support and strength, communicating the flow of power through each other for stability?” He harumphed. “Honestly, man, it’s basic Ethical Slut stuff, only with wild sex magic thrown in. Pretty obvious.”

Brian had to admit that, put that way, it was obvious. “Yeah. I suppose. I’ll call her when we get to the hotel to pick up Sally.” He gave a heavy sigh. “I hate the idea of dragging her into this world, is all.”

“Brian.” Sullivan’s voice was quiet. “She’s always lived in this world. So have you. You just never knew it. Now you get to dance on the demons of ignorance with the rest of us.” He gave a joyless grin. “Welcome to the party.”

.....

“Hi, hon. Having fun?”

“Most definitely! We made it to the Erotic Art Show! Finally!”

“Ah...very cool. Get me anything?”

“Ha, as if I could afford anything. Saw a lot, though.” Her voice lowered. “In fact, much of it was positively inspiring...I can’t wait to get home, but at the same time, just want to stay here. You know what I mean...”

“Yeah, I know exactly. In fact, I’m having a pretty...interesting time here, as well.”

“Interesting in a good way?”

“Ummm...well, mostly. It’s been very intense, and there’s a lot to tell you about when you get back—“

“Brian. You’re worrying me. What’s happened? I can tell something’s bothering you...”

“You’ll have to just wait, love, Seriously, you’re right, there are things bothering me, but none of it has anything to do with you being there. I met some interesting people, and that led to interesting things happening, and...”

Long pause. “You’re talking about Chinese Curse kind of interesting, aren’t you?”

“Partially. But not all. Some of it, in fact, is quite good.”

“Quite good, eh? What’s her name?”

“Hey!” He tried to sound offended. “You know, it could have been a ‘he’.”

“No, I know what you sound like when you have a crush on a guy. Much less sure of yourself. Is she there?”

“Not right now, no. Her name’s Sally.”

“Short for Mustang?”

“No, silly, short for salacious. And salivating. And salle-de-baine, where she is right now. You want details?”

“No, not yet. You tend to have good taste. Glad you’re staying busy while I’m gone.”

“Yeah, well, that’s part of why I called. I have a...somewhat kinky favor to ask of you.”

Gasp. “Oh, heavens, no!” Her voice muffled as she cupped her hand loosely over the receiver. “Jake! My husband just told me he has a...a...*kinky* proposition for me! Whatever shall I do?”

“You done now?”

Her voice returned to full volume. “Yeah, I suppose. Is it something fun?”

“Definitely. Not too hard, either. I want you to fuck Jake for me.”

“Hmmm. When you say fuck, are you talking strap-on? We’ve not really...”

“No, no need to do anything new. It’s not the fuck that’s important, it’s the ‘for me’ part. I need you to actively go at it with him, as hot and heavy as you can, in whatever way you like...but I need you to do it for me. Not for him, not for yourself, but keep it in your head that you’re doing it because I asked you to.”

“Oh...kay...sure, hon, whatever you like. Is this just for your own peace of mind? Or some kind of new fantasy?”

“Something like that. Remember when we were talking about getting into tantra?”

“Yeah, we could never get into the classes. This is tantric?”

“Honestly, hon, I don’t know. It might be. But I just need to...try it. Oh! It also has to be at...” He calculated furiously. “Nine p.m. your time.”

Laughter. “Oh, really? And how long, exactly, does it have to last?”

“Long enough for you to have a mind blowing orgasm. Him, too, I suppose, but it’s really important that you get off, love, and that you be thinking of me when you do.”

“You know, it’s a good thing Jake is so secure. Because I think that would give most men a complex.”

“Tell him I’ll make it up to him when you get back here, and you can fuck me while thinking of him. Hell, I’ll even turn my beard into a goatee. Don’t know how I can fake a foreskin, though...”

“Stop that!” she protested through her giggles. “You know I like them all sorts of ways. Whatever trips your trigger, hon. It’s weird...and you *will* be explaining it all to me when I get back...but I suppose, if you really need me to fuck Jake for you at nine tonight, I can bring myself to make that sort of ultimate sacrifice.”

“Thanks, love. Sally’s out, now, so I’m going to go. And know that I will be thinking of you, too.”

“She’s ok with that?”

“More than that. She’s seen pictures of you. She’ll be thinking of you, too.”

“Dammit, I’m not bisexual! She—“

“I know, I know, dear. I told her. You’re not bisexual.” He paused a beat. “Only your body is. Bye, love.” He hung up on her sputtering indignation and looked up at Sally.

“Will she do it?” the slim woman asked, her skin a ruddy pink from the terry cloth towel she was rubbing over her body.

“Of course. It’s hardly the strangest thing I’ve asked her to do. Will it be enough?”

Sally stopped with the towel over one leg, and looked at Brian with her serious silver eyes. “I don’t know. But I suppose it will have to be, won’t it?”

.....
Vashte and Sullivan sat on opposite ends of the room, nude, their bodies glistening with scented oil that reflected the flickering candlelight in organic curves. They were seated in lotus, hands in mudras, delicate threads of incense threading the air. The walls of Vashte’s ritual room were more decorated than when Brian had seen them last, sculptures inset in the wall of couples in congress with each other, a vast array of improbable poses and rubbery limbs with full lips and wide eyes.

In the center of the room, Brian knelt in *seiza*, a single coil of black rope laying next to him. He was also nude and oiled, his torso still covered with the white trceries of the mark Vashte had put onto him. He had seen, as they’d entered the room, pieces of the pattern, sections repeated in the sculptures and rugs, but never the entire pattern, never an exact match to the curves and segments and shapes that lined his body. When he’d asked Vashte, she had simply shrugged noncommittally and refused to answer. Brian suspected she was still somewhat embarrassed by the whole affair that had resulted in his power, and was doing her best to erase it by helping him now.

Now. He struggled to bring his mind back to the now, to focus on his breath, on the feeling of the air on his body, the scents wafting across the room. As his breathing deepened, he found he could sense the indrawn breaths and soft exhalations of Sullivan and Vashte, already in sync with each other. He took a moment to meld his breath with theirs.

“OM MANI PADME HUM.” Sullivan’s full baritone filled the room as he began to chant, the sound echoing impossibly in the small chamber.

“Om Mani Padme Hum.” Vashte’s dry voice replied, in some ways more powerful than Sullivan because it matched in intensity without requiring volume.

The two of them repeated the chant, over and over, creating a rhythm between them that drew Brian deeper into the trance.

.....

“So, ready for our nightly kink?” Geneve asked, swinging a leg over Jake and perching in his lap. He pressed the remote and the credits to *Alias* disappeared from the screen.

“Sure, babe, what’d you have in mind?” Jake’s voice was a rich bass, belying his small frame, and his neatly trimmed black goatee framed a smile that was never far away. “Are we going to test your ‘training’ again? Did you wash the plugs?”

Geneve blushed, just for a moment, and said, with a bit of pique, “No, I think that Brian did quite a good job of training me, as you found out last night.” She paused, then seemed to make up her mind. “But I’m glad you asked, anyway. It does have to do with him, and something he’d like *you* to help *me* with...”

She stood up and suddenly took off her shirt, her full breasts pushed up by a black velvet bra. She pushed down her jeans, too, revealing a black thong with a Felix the Cat head on it. Jake laughed. “Oh, you have the cutest pussy I’ve seen...”

Geneve smiled, her eyes taking on a glow as she again straddled her lover. “I’m glad you like it.” Reaching behind her, she unsnapped her bra. “See anything else you like.”

As his mouth descended on her breasts, she threw her head back, loving the feeling of his soft lips closing on her nipple...and thought of Brian, her husband.

.....

When Sally entered the room, she was the only one dressed, wearing a slight cotton shift thin enough to show the dark shade of her nipples through the fabric. Walking with small, measured footsteps, she crossed the room to where Vashte sat, and knelt before her. After a moment of breathing together, Vashte reached to her side without looking, and lifted a bowl filled with a shining oil.

Slowly she lifted the bowl, dipping two fingers in, and daubed each of her nipples with the slickness, then dipped between her legs, anointing her mons as well. Her hand rested on her right thigh, palm up in invitation, and Sally leaned forward, her tongue reaching out to taste Vashte’s nipples, one after another, then bowing her head down slowly and giving a slow lick to her mons. Vashte’s chant never waivered, but Sally saw the darkening flush of her skin, and repressed a smile.

Picking up the bowl, she turned and made her way to the center where Brian knelt, breathing deeply into the trance. She knelt in front of him and set the bowl next to her legs, within easy reach. For a moment they simply sat their, bathing in each other's eyes, letting the power that was now so familiar slowly simmer and rise, thickening the air around them.

After a time—no one could say how long—Sally suddenly knew it was *right*, and she dipped her two fingers into the bowl, coating them with the sweet oil. Lifting her hand, she reached up and began to trace the scars on his body with the liquid, letting her hand lightly caress each line and curve as it travelled around his nipples, down his belly, across his ribs.

As her fingers brushed him, he felt for the first time his cock beginning to stir, her light tracing causing the vessels to swell. His testes felt heavy where they rested between his legs, and as his cock lifted, they seemed to twitch at the sudden sensation of the cool air.

She had to dip her fingers in three times before she was able to complete the tracery, moving around him to his back, feeling the muscles there tensing as her fingers passed over sensitive areas and aroused him further. When she was done, the last finger trailing down his back and curling to the right, she sat for a moment, still behind him, letting her awareness envelope his presence, feeling his arousal and letting it flow into her. She felt her vulva swell, and as she adjusted herself she could feel the sudden slickness between her thighs.

She dipped her head down to where the final scar had finished its curlique, and reached out the tip of her tongue to begin to trace it back.. The oil was sweet, his skin hot and smooth, and she closed her eyes, not needing them to sense the mark of power as it covered his torso.

.....
Geneve was on her knees before Jake, resting her arms on his thighs as she massaged his penis through his jeans, feeling it grow harder and fill her hand. He had his head back, eyes closed, enjoying the ministrations of her hand as it rubbed up and down, wrapping fingers lightly under his crotch to caress his trapped testes. As she curved her fingers to let her nails graze the bulge, she felt the cock twitch in response, and she suddenly found herself unable to wait any longer. Her strong fingers opened the jeans,

pulling down the zipper and digging into the flap of his boxer briefs until his cock stood tall in her hand.

She brought her mouth close to it, inhaling the clean musk of him, letting her thumb run up from the base along the underside, wrapping her fingers loosely around the tip and pulling down, the foreskin revealing the tip glistening with pre-cum. Leaning forward, she blew gently across the tip, letting her breath cool the shining liquid, and was rewarded with a growling moan from his chest.

For just a moment she squeezed his cock as hard as she could, forearm trembling with the effort...and then moaned herself at the unyielding hardness of it, letting the strength of it overpower her. She rubbed her cheek against the tip, letting it flow down to her neck, where she rubbed it up and down, beginning to shiver as she felt its caress.

Thank you, Brian, for giving me the freedom to enjoy this...

Again she let it draw a glistening trail from her cheek down to her collarbone, then back up, and once more...holding the image of her husbands cock in her mind as firmly as the one in her hand...and then she could resist no longer, and she wrapped her lips around the tip with a devouring passion.

.....
Sally was also thinking of Brian's erection, as it lay inches from her cheek while she traced the last of the the mark with her tongue. The light oil had not coated it, had been more like a spice highlighting the connection of her lips and mouth to his flesh. She held a moment crouched down, enjoying the proximity of his cock, tempted to reach out one more time with her tongue and just taste it.

Desire. Beauty. Discipline. The words resonated within her, and she lifted her torso and met Brian's calm eyes, folding her hands into her lap.

Brian let his breathing continue to match the rhythm of the chanting avatars on each side of the room, letting the soft hot sensation of Sally's tongue fade into his skin, highlighting the pattern and drawing its energy up and to the surface, He began to let his own presence expand outward, merging his energy with Sally's as they both felt the pulse of desire slowly build with the smooth chanting.

"Om mani padme hum..."

Reaching to his side, he picked up the rope. It seemed to uncoil itself in his hand, the soft strands falling across his palm and the back of his hand with the same caress as a

lover, as he lifted it to Sally, and began to weave a pattern over the cotton shift, an ebony rope harness that pressed the material into sharp outline along her curves, encircling each breast and dipping between her legs in one single long connected strand of rope. Brian turned her body with firm pressure from his hand as he threaded the rope around her and through itself, pulling all the joints in the rope tighter and tighter, until she felt as if she could be held up by the pressure of the strands alone. Finally he drew the tails up to either hip, and wrapped each slender wrist in three loops of rope, securing them to the ropes tightly crossing her hips. He pushed her down to her knees again, joining her in a quick folding of his legs, and again they looked at each other, now having anointed each other with their fetish. She felt the ropes digging, caressing, pressing into her in so many points at the same time that she lost any hope of keeping track of the stimulation, and simply had to relax into it. Their eyes met, and after a time, a wordless question was asked, and assent given.

Reaching up behind her neck, he pulled her head down, and her open mouth took his cock in. She closed her eyes and left her body, visualizing how her bound form must look bent over his cock, mouth wrapped around it. A low, soft hum came from deep in her throat.

Sally was happy.

.....
“I think we need a little more than this,” Jake’s deep voice startled Geneve out of her absorption into the worship of his cock. “I think a little scene would be in order. I want you to scoot your knees back and put your ass in the air, like the wanton you are, and I’m going to help you imagine.”

“I’m going to let you keep on tasting my cock, keeping it in your mouth, your hands, doing what you love. But I’m also going to be reaching behind you. Spreading you. Drawing your cheeks apart, spreading your lips, opening that pussy wide.”

“And when I do that, Geneve, I want you to think about your husband’s cock driving into that pussy, at the same time that you’ve got your hands and mouth on mine.”

Geneve had her eyes closed, picturing every word he said. She moved her knees back, quickly spreading them apart at a harsh command from Jake. She cried out suddenly as his hand swatted her ass, twice, hard and punitive slaps, so startling that for a

moment she struggled to remember what he had said. She realized what it was, a moment later, and in a soft, melodious, breathy voice, said “Yes, sir.”

Her arms were stretched in front of her, both hands wrapped around Jake’s long cock, squeezing, pumping, stroking it and losing herself in its hardness. She felt his strong hands reach over her and grasp the cheeks of her round ass, pulling them apart, and the the night air seemed to rush in and caress her anus and perineum now so fully exposed. His hands moved deeper and she felt his fingers on either side of her vulva, pulling the outer labia open with a sudden firm pinch on each side. He had to move forward to do this, and she moved her mouth immediately to engulf his cock, sucking it deep into her throat and letting her tongue caress up and down its length as it filled her mouth.

Her *labia minora* felt more engorged the longer they were exposed, open like this, and she was picturing vividly Brian’s body taking her from behind, his own thick cock, wet from her own mought, ready to drive into her. She was concentrating on it, and on the cock in her mouth, so that when Jake stroked a finger up the inner surfaces of the labia, she screamed around it at the sensation. Jake smiled, and did it again, this time letting the finger rest along the length of her slit, bending the knuckle just a bit so that there was the vaguest suggestion of impending penetration. He waited for her mouth to resume its motion on his cock...and then he began to lightly tap his fingers on and around the hooded button of her clit.

She screamed around his cock again, lost to the pleasure.

.....
Sally lifted her head from Brian’s cock and knelt up again, her lips feeling swollen and full. Her mouth was small, and his cock was thick, so it was a wonderful stretching feeling for her every time she took him in her mouth. But he had lifted her hair, ever so slightly, and she instantly obeyed, moving her body gracefully within the ropes and cotton shift she wore.

She did not know what would happen next—when they’d discussed the ceremony, they had not told her of anything past this point, though Brian and Vashte had discussed it together at length while she and Sullivan had shared a cup of tea.

No matter. She waited patiently, knowing that by doing so, she was serving her master, and was therefore happy. Her mind and presence were thoroughly in the “now” state, and she felt ready for anything that might happen.

Except for what did happen. Brian rose gracefully from *seiza* in a half crouch, spinning on one knee to face Sullivan who sat in lotus, his cock jutting up like the tail end of an incense burner Sally had owned in college. Brian knee-walked over, keeping his legs under him as they swooped along the rug, and came to rest directly in front of the hairy man.

Then Brian leaned forward and kissed Sullivan, soft and full, on the lips. Bending over, he placed an equally full kiss in the palm of each of Sullivan's hands. Finally, with great dignity, he lowered his head slightly and opened his lips to take in Sullivan's cock, a formal fellating that seemed to Sally something of a cross between an erotic caress and a military salute.

Straightening, Brian looked into Sullivan's eyes, and the two of them shared a moment of intimacy brought tears to Sally's eyes. She stole a quick glance over to where Vashte was chanting, and saw the tears streaming down her face and spilling onto her erect nipples.

The beauty of the moment was so intense that Brian thought he might burst and happily die. Sullivan held his eyes for a moment longer, and then reached to his side, lifting a strange, curved knife, almost like a steel claw, and offering it to Brian.

Sally felt her stomach twist. The blade frightened her, as did all edged and pointed implements; she was known to be terrified of the tiny pinwheel, even. Surely Brian wouldn't...

He would. He carried the knife back to where she knelt in his black harness, and placed it before her, taking a moment to bow. She couldn't tell if it was a bow to the knife, or to her, or to both. He lifted it slowly, letting the sharp point and strange serrated edge fill her vision...and suddenly she was blind.

As the scarf was tied behind her head, she realized that Vashte had left her seat and moved behind her. She felt the woman's strong arms grasp her, holding her upright, and then heard the first terrifying sound along with a slight tug, just for a moment, on the sleeve of the shift.

It wasn't until the sleeve fell to the floor next to her that she realized that the knife was so sharp it had sliced directly through the sleeve. She had not even heard the fabric parting. She felt him move again, and another tug...and suddenly her left breast was half bare, the flap of cloth fluttering against her skin with a soft kissing sensation. Another tug, barely perceptible, and the breast was bare.

Shortly he had her almost completely naked, but for occasional straps of cloth and the black rope that wrapped around her. Her reduced senses were wired to such a fever pitch that they shivered with every passing air current, and she cried out when Vashte suddenly released her grip, leaving her suddenly feeling very lost and alone behind the black blindfold.

Then she felt his hand on her cheek, and knew that her Master was there. She nuzzled it, feeling it rise up and caress her, then gasping as his thumb pulled down on her lower lip, opening it and forcing her mouth, still swollen from going down on him, open just slightly, the force of it somewhere between a thrusting invasion and a deep soul kiss. She moaned again, letting her tongue creep out and just slightly touch the soft edge of his skin.

The fingers tightened behind her neck then, and just as in the club, she felt her body held immobile, suspended by his one hand at her neck.

Then she felt the tip of the blade begin to trace along the edge of the ropes, and she screamed out her fear, a rush of erotic energy surging out of both them, outward....

.....
Geneve gave a sudden gasp as a wave of sensation hit her. She was on her back, having been commanded by Jake to masturbate for him. Her fingers rested on either side of the hood of her clit, too delicate to touch directly, and she was moaning as her fingers rubbed the hood quickly between them, stroking the clit. It had been feeling good, but suddenly she had felt an extra wave of warmth and support wash over her, like a lighter version of an orgasm. Her legs, splayed out to either side, had jerked up with the sensation, and as she let them relax, she felt Jake moving up in between them. "I think you need a little bit of help here, lovely Geneve," he said. "You want my cock in your pussy while you touch yourself?"

She moaned and arched her back in answer. "Yes, please, Sir, I want your cock deep inside me. Please!"

He knelt before her, his posture almost identical to the *seiza* form Brian had assumed hundreds of miles away. Slowly he stroked the latex-clad tip of his cock up and down the length of her vulva, causing her to buck and twist, trying to capture it inside of her. At the same time she was moving her hands furiously, still suffused with the sensation that had passed over her, the familiar sensation of...

Brian. Suddenly she knew what she had felt. Somehow she'd felt the connection between Brian and whatever his lover was doing. She didn't think about the how, she simply reached out again to try and find that connection...and so was all the more open to the pleasure as Jake drove his cock deep into her wet lips. The pulse of sensation flared between them, and they both froze in a rictus of deep penetration for just a moment, backs arched away from each other, breath stopped, and in that moment, Geneve made *connection.*

.....
Brian knelt over Sally, who was trembling as he ran the blade around the ropes that bound her back, tracing the outline of the patterns into slight red scratches on her skin, the designs mirroring his own permanent marks. When the connection hit them, Brian threw his hands up in the air like a preacher invoking the holy spirit, his hand suddenly clenching the knife. In that moment, he could feel the penetration of Jake's cock into his wife, feel both her joy at the sensation and her love for both of them, from the sweet basic antinomy of loving his cock and missing Brian's at the same time to the deeper levels of the soul, where he could not verbalize but could only feel, the immense gravity of the desire, affection, and respect all rolling into one piece of attraction between souls who have chosen to share lives together.

Into this spectrum of feeling he took Sally, and could feel her trepidation at the magnitude of the feeling between them. Physically he lifted her, pushing her astride him, letting his cock gently rest against her mons, the pale color of the condom hiding the thin strip of pubic hair that led into her vulva. Her breasts pressed against him, and he wrapped his arms around her, letting her feel the way the love for Geneve was the source from which he was able to draw the love that was forming for her. He took her again into that powerful place, showing her the wonder of the woman he had married, and showing his wife the deep bond that had formed between Sally and himself, a reflection of her own submission to Jake.

Sally was crying now, openly, the joy of the moment carrying her away, but her body had not forgotten the lust in the heavy air that surrounded them, and her hips began pressing into his cock, unconsciously matching the rhythm of Jake's cock pushing into Geneve, her hands now a blur of motion as her fingers massaged her clit. Brian was able to send out a brief suggestion, and with a chuckle Jake reached down and put a slowly increasing pressure on Geneve's right nipple, pinching it harder and harder. She began to cry out, her mouth in a wide "Oh!" as she felt the energy of her orgasm build within her.

Sally's rhythm slowed as she also felt the building explosion, and she ground harder, stroking the cock more firmly up and down the length of her vulva, her own cries a coarse and rough scream growing louder with every thrust. She suddenly froze, shuddering, in mid-stroke, and Brian grabbed her bound arms and pulled her tight as she screamed out in release.

The scream travelled across the connection and was echoed in Jake's harsh roar as he thrust harder and faster, Geneve screaming "Yes! Fuck me!" over and over as her hands flew over her clitoris, her back arching up into his hands which were pinching both nipples now. With a final growling roar and triumphant scream they came together, the feelings echoing and reinforcing the glowing pleasure Sally had launched.

Brian growled on his own, half mad with arousal, and turned Sally around, using the rope harness to lower her to the floor, his hands grasping her hips as he slid into her with a quick thrust that threw her head up in a shout of pleasure and shock at the depth. He first used his hands to pull her ass back into him, driving his cock hard into her, but soon she was pushing back into him, her back arching as she screamed "Yes!" again and again.

As Brian felt the orgasm begin deep at the base of his cock, he reached out, through the connection, letting his awareness flow along it, to share the feeling of their connection as the tingling burn grew, passing through his thighs and up his center until he felt the energy explode through the top of his head, his back arching, all of the energy between Sally and himself casting his consciousness out into the lines of force their love had created.

As a result, he saw the whole thing.

.....

The Wrinkled Man frowned now nearly all the time.

His displeasure was affecting his sources, using them up almost daily now. His skin was dry and mottled with the scabs of the pieces he'd torn off in annoyed contemplation of the Troublemaker.

The failure of his Tools and the loss of his Mauls had forced him to reconsider the entire matter. He had worked hard to organize the culture to support his own physical nature, twisting the spirituality and sexuality of an entire civilization to meet his own needs. There was not a chance that this minor setback would actually threaten him.

At the same time, he had survived this long through constant and complete attention to detail. He had never let an adversary go unpunished, unchecked, and killed men and ideas with the same casual air that he would have swatted a fly, had one been able to get into the featureless white room where he sat.

This twisted Troublemaker, though, didn't fit into the picture he'd assembled of The Way Things Were. And worse, he suspected that there was far more than simply the one troublemaker behind this. He suspected that perhaps his strong infrastructure that fed him might be infested with tiny parasites, that had been crawling around behind the scenes while he was too busy to notice.

First there was this "nawashi" to deal with. Unusual in this particular area, the Wrinkled Man thought, usually they are concentrated on the coasts...and that is when he remembered. The coast.

The wife was on the coast.

Suddenly the Wrinkled Man was smiling again.

.....

Sally lay on the floor, weeping. Brian held her, his head bowed, stroking her hair. It took Sullivan a moment to realize that she was not weeping from joy, but in deep, wracking sobs of anguish. "Wait—what happened?" He looked questioning at Vashte, who was equally puzzled, and then back to Brian. "From where we were, that looked beautiful. Fuckin' hot, both you two and the couple visiting from the coast."

Brian looked up at his friend. His eyes were not sad; there were no tears. But there was a hard determination in them that had been hidden before.

“It was beautiful, Sullivan. The connection was there. That’s how I know.” He looked down again at Sally, and gave her a soft kiss on her head. “Remember how I said it didn’t seem like enough?”

Sullivan nodded.

“It wasn’t, Sullivan. They have her.”

“The bastards have taken my wife.”

FINIS

Preview of the sequel to Nawashi: Jujun

The music started, a driving anime techno-pop from Japan, with overdriven guitars riding a popping beat laid on thumping bass arpeggios. Brian let the beat carry him up the stairs to the stage, twirling and spinning the clubs through his fingers as he danced along the perimeter of the stage, getting close to the audience, making eye contact with a mischievous grin. Some familiar faces were there—Sullivan was front row, of course, his arms around Alan on one side and some woman Brian didn’t recognize on the other. He caught sight of Vashte up in the second level seating, her teeth flashing whitely somewhere between a predatory gleam and a merry grin.

Brian got them interested, catching their eyes, then centered both physically and mentally on the stage, and started juggling. As the mylar-covered pins began to travel through the air, he got the soft murmuring “ooooh…” wash up onto the stage from the crowd, and a couple of people clapped. He did a couple of double-spin throws, the pins whirling up into the reddish lights, and as they came down he suddenly swooped one up and caught it tight between his thighs. The handle jutted out phallicly and the cheers from the audience grew more raucous. He approached the mic in a lewd waddle, letting the handle waggle back and forth as though sniffing out the crowd. The laughter subsided into occasional giggles as he moved his lips closer to the stand.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I have to tell you how excited I am to be here this evening!” He gave the club between his legs an extra little thrust to emphasize the point, and the giggles got louder. Sullivan hooted loudly, pumping a fist in the air.

“Yes, that’s right, I...I...” A look of concern crossed Brian’s face, wiping away the trickster’s grin. He let his head fall, shoulders slumping, and loosened his thighs so the club fell to the floor, rolling away. He made no move to retrieve it, and let the silence grow until he could hear the hiss of the speakers.

He let it grow uncomfortable for the audience, feeling their confusion and worry grow, and just before they would have started murmuring, he lifted his head.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m really, really sorry, folks, but I just can’t do it. I had this whole raunchy juggling act set up, lots of jokes about the size of my clubs and weight of my balls...but I just can’t do it.”

He let his gaze travel over the crowd. “I’ve had—and I’m sure you’ll agree with me—a pretty amazingly crappy week.” A few nervous claps rang out, but the crowd was still uneasy from his sudden seriousness.

“I mean, I look around at what’s going on, and I find myself amazed at the union of opposites achieved by our leerless feeder and his administration. Peace through war. Fighting a deficit by cutting taxes. Sex education by enforced ignorance. Supporting our troops by cutting vet benefits.” He shook his head. “It really makes no sense, y’know?”

“But I have found a way. I have found my own path that unites the opposites, and I’m here tonight, brothers and sisters,” his voice took on a deeper, more rounded tone, approaching the evangelical. “I’m here tonight to share that way with you. You, my brother,” he pointed suddenly at Sullivan, who stuck out his tongue, “and you, my sister” he pointed at Geneve, who lifted her eyebrows and sucked harder on the lollipop in her mouth, cheeks hollowing as she pumped the stick in and out lewdly, “can also find your way on this path. It is the path of...”

“Deliverance. Thru. Bondage.” There was another nervous chuckle from the crowd. “And like so many of our esteemed President’s cabinet, I am going to borrow from the traditional values of the states in the southern portion of our country, and start

you out on this path with the phrase...” His voice lowered, and he moved his lips until they were almost touching the microphone.

“Get a rope.”