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THE PAINSTAKERS

Deezak Vir awoke facing Vivv Nazlock on a cadaver mound. Half of Vivv's head had been cleaved away. Deezak stared at the remaining gold eye beneath its blue-scaled lid and hoped his friend had died a proper warrior's death.

Slowly, Deezak went about checking himself for damage. He flexed and probed. He was missing a heel talon but all his other parts seemed to be there and working. He spread his jaws and flicked his tongue. It felt as if it had been dragged through sand.

He wondered how he came to be on the mound. His drinking companions must have thrown him there as a joke. No telling how much ferm he'd swilled before he passed out. He flicked his tongue again and salivated, thinking of the fermented blood that gave him the desire to fight but robbed him of the ability. He was lucky to be alive.

He slipped and fell to the ground as he was climbing down from the mound. When he got both feet under him he wobbled slightly, so he snapped his tail out from between his legs and whipped it around seeking balance. It took a moment but he finally steadied himself.

The blade side of his body felt light and he realized his sword was missing. Fortunately he saw it among the cadavers. He pulled it free and returned it to the scabbard that hung from his belt. The belt and scabbard were all he wore.

He tested a loose tooth with his tongue and looked around. From the blood red gloom he judged it was close to noon. The pyramid of the union hall still stood in the distance, showing that

the world had survived the shaking he gave it the night before. He decided to take up the shaking where he'd left off and headed back to the saloon.

Two of his drinking companions were still there. They laughed when they saw him stumble in through the open side of the building. He dropped into a chair at their table.

"We thought you were dead!" Kkgrivv Venir snorted. "You looked so peaceful on that mound."

Zivlak Gaul said, "Maybe you shouldn't drink so much, hatchling."

"Sss the only way I can stand you," Deezak hissed.

He signaled for a horn of ferm and the waiter rushed one over. He knew that if he was slow his blood would be vatted, and after it fermented he'd serve the customers in a far different way.

Deezak drank and his companions told stories. Kkgrivv Venir told about the time he cut five warriors in half with one swing of his sword. The night before it had been four. Then Zivlak Gaul told about his first painstaking job. "I took the pain for a human who was a car mechanic and a sadomasochist." Deezak said he didn't know what a sadomasochist was. Zivlak explained and then said he was glad when the man finally used his wrench to loosen his nuts rather than tighten them.

A whiff of doubt hung over the table at the end of the story. Zivlak sensed it with a flick of his tongue, and he drew his sword as he sprang to his feet. He swung at Deezak, who ducked out of the way, then he took aim at Kkgrivv Venir. But the old warrior was ahead of him. His blade flashed and Zivlak's hand fell to the ground. The hand still gripped the sword.

"Blast you!" Zivlak roared. He stepped back and held his arm up. The stump pumped blood. A waiter ran over with one of the tourniquets they

carried for such occasions. After he tied the arm off Zivlak swatted him away and shook his stump at Kkgrivv Venir. "It'll take a full cycle for this to grow back!"

Kkgrivv had already sheathed his sword and taken a drink from his horn of ferm. "So what?" he belched. "For a cycle you won't be able to make trouble. I did you a favor. No, two favors. By rights the severed hand belongs to me, but I'll let you keep it." The quills on the back of Zivlak's neck bristled up and dripped rage. Kkgrivv flicked his tongue and said, "Now now. Putting out scent like that is dangerous for someone with no sword hand. Calm down and finish your horn."

Zivlak muttered as he bent down and pried the talons from the hilt of his sword. He put the weapon back in its scabbard with difficulty and stuffed the hand in his belt. Then he sat and reached for his ferm with his missing hand, muttered again, and used the other.

Deezak went to the bar. He got a fresh horn, but then rather than return to the table he walked to the edge of the saloon and looked out over the Fireswept Plain.

They said the plain was the site of Moloch's first victory over the old gods. It was broad and flat and its red sands stretched to black mountains in the distance. The three-sided pyramid of the union hall looked huge even from five thousand body spans away. The pyramid was dull black stone on the outside, but inside it was magnificent. Three massive mosaics tilted together and rose to disappear in the smoke from the sacred pyre that always burned in the middle of the floor.

The expanse in front of the union hall was thick with warriors going about their business. They moved between campfires, saloons and the big, squat rivik plants. Each plant had a three-petalled purple blossom at its center and a lamp

pole beside it.

Deezak turned his attention to the announcement board near the pyramid. It was dead black at the moment but could spark to life at any time. The board was broad and tall. Its support columns boosted it to half the height of the pyramid so that warriors for thousands of spans could see it when it lit up with job offerings. Each face of the pyramid had its own board, and the three showed different jobs at different times. All through the day the plain rumbled with periodic stampedes, first here, then there, then there.

Old timers said that the boards used to be a lot busier before humans developed so many medicines. Painstaking work was abundant, and warriors used to walk around with their tails held high. Now they walked with tails dragging through the sand or tucked between their legs.

But some of the more important warriors still moved with the ancient dignity. Or so Deezak had heard. He'd never actually seen anyone of real importance because they never visited the plain, but he knew that warriors like Azazel and Beelzebub had grown quite wealthy taking the pain of the powerful.

Deezak's stomach growled. The last time he'd eaten was two days before, when he stumbled across a clutch of eggs that was hatching out behind the saloon. He ate two of the newborns and traded the third for a blade sharpening. He would search for another clutch later, but first he needed more ferm.

He returned to his table and found his drinking companions sullen, probably from the hand incident. A waiter brought him a horn, and when he lifted it to drink he saw past it to a flicker on the announcement board.

He stood up and watched as sparks began to form into words. He saw the word "cancer" and

took off running.

As he ran he split his attention between the board and the plain around him. From the board he learned that three painstaking jobs had become available—two cancers and an anxiety attack. He didn't care about the low-paying anxiety job, but with one of the cancers he could pay his bills for a full cycle and go on a hell of a binge.

Once he knew what the jobs were he began to scan the rivik plants. The lamp poles next to the ones where the applicants would be chosen would light red for the cancer jobs and blue for the lesser one. The ground rumbled beneath his feet. A thousand other warriors had joined him in running. None of them knew which poles would light up, but they wanted to be in motion, on their way in some direction rather than just standing still. A haze of red dust rose to Deezak's knees and then to his waist.

And then one of the pole lights flashed on. Deezak ran for the distant point of red. He was determined to claim one of the three petals available in the rivik blossom, but long before he got there the light went out. Then another came on, another red one. Deezak changed course. He ran hard but once again the light was too far away and blinked off before he could reach it. The third light, however, was nearby. A pole just a few paces from Deezak lit blue and he dove for one of the petals in the blossom. He butted heads with another warrior who was diving in, and the other fell to the ground. Deezak dropped into the cup of the petal and became the plant's third warrior. The light on its pole went out.

The rushing around on the plain turned into milling and the warriors who'd failed to secure a petal drifted back to whatever they'd been doing. The dust began to settle. Some fights broke out here and there but were quickly over. The warrior

that Deezak headbutted got to his feet and staggered off promising to descale him if they ever met again.

Deezak looked at the other two warriors in the blossom. When the blue light came on again the three of them would lunge at one another and swing their swords until only one remained alive. The survivor would pass out, instantly transported into the consciousness of the human needing relief from pain. Priests would carry the body of the enthralled painstaker into the union hall.

It was usually a few ticks before the lights on the poles lit up again to signal combat. Deezak had been through the process a half-dozen times and knew it was a good idea to relax before you fought. If you were too tense you might commit yourself to a strike that would present a target for your opponents. It was best to lag a little and adjust your attack as a counter to what the others did.

Deezak had been wounded twice in his blossom fights. Both times the priests in the hall tended to his wounds as he lay communing with his human. Sometimes warriors died from their injuries while they communed, and those deaths were recorded in the hall's records. Occasionally though a warrior would disappear. He'd enter the hall enthralled and then just vanish. Whenever that happened a rumor would go around that he had been selected to work with one of the more important humans, like someone from the Bush or Clinton families. And lately there was Biden, a new name somehow connected to the Obamas.

Most warriors had never associated with powerful humans. They worked with common people who, for some unknown reason, had been deemed worthy of painstaking. But saloon talk and idle speculation attributed the disappearance of the warriors to powerful people buying extra

services. They needed additional protection from pain so that they would never be able to relate to it. Otherwise they might not be willing to inflict harsh measures on those they ruled.

Whatever the case with the powerful, Deezak was thankful for the anxiety job. He didn't look forward to it—dank little minds with dank little pains bored him—but he took comfort in knowing that the anxiety would pay some bills and buy a horn or two of ferm.

The blue light flashed on and the other warriors moved. Deezak reacted. He sprang from his petal, and with a strong upward slash of his sword he gutted the first warrior. Then with a hiss and a backhand he removed the head of the second. And then he fainted.

It felt like something was entering her, something vibrating up through the floor of the big empty bathroom. First her sandals and the soles of her feet tingled, then her calves, and then she thought it must be an earthquake. She'd been through several since she came to California two years before. She looked around at the graffitied toilet stall and knew it wouldn't provide any protection if things began to fall. The solidly framed entrance to the bathroom was the place to be, so she finished up and stood to pull up her panties. But then as she let the hem of her shift fall the tremor passed. She waited, listening. There were no raised voices coming from the meeting hall. The quake must have been a small one.

Gretchen flushed the commode and sat down again on its ring seat. The tremor should have made her feel more anxious, but for some reason she felt less. Still though she wanted her chip. Her purse hung from a hook beside her, and she dug through it until she found the big white coin stamped "1 Year." She rubbed it between a thumb

and forefinger. She'd been clean for one year, two weeks and six days. Naturally she was glad, but some of the people in the support group had been clean for years and still called themselves addicts. Shouldn't there be a point where you no longer had to count time and feel guilty?

The chip fell from her hand. It rolled out the front of the stall and she opened the door and watched it bounce across the grimy tile floor. It almost made it to the sinks on the opposite wall before it tipped and fell.

She went to retrieve the chip, and when she straightened up she saw herself in the long mirror above the lavatory counter. Beyond the streaks and water spots she looked pale and emaciated. Her thin brown hair hung to her shoulders and her shift hid coffee stains in a heavy jungle pattern. In addition to the shift she wore a brown sweater with long sleeves. No matter how badly people thought of her for the way she dressed, they'd think even worse if they saw her arms.

She leaned close to the mirror and turned her head slightly, to study the wrinkles spreading from an eye. They were lengthening across the temple. She was only twenty-six but it wasn't the age, it was the mileage. She heard that a lot in the group meetings. The wrinkles were growing longer and spreading through bifurcation. She chuckled. Bifurcation, a five-dollar word. That's what they'd say if she used it in a meeting, and she'd say that her time at college hadn't been wasted even though she was wasted most of the time. She experimented with weed and wine as a freshman and tried crack as a sophomore. And then heroin. Then she quit going to class.

Her arms and legs began to itch. She went to her purse and got a cigarette. She started to light it but hesitated. It had been three days since she'd added smoking to her list of things to give up. She

should have quit long ago. She flushed the cigarette down the commode.

She paced back and forth in front of the lavatory counter and fingered her chip. Just over a year earlier she'd been arrested in an alley. Luckily for her somebody stole her stash while she was nodded out, so she was only charged with public intoxication and not possession. The court sentenced her to the meetings and routine drug testing.

At first she was angry, and she felt like her head would explode from the lack of drugs, but gradually her thoughts began to settle and clear. And she got to where she liked the structure of the meetings. The routine of being in a certain place at a certain time gave her something to hold onto.

She stopped pacing and turned the water on in a sink. As she watched it swirl down the drain she thought of her mother and how she'd lectured her on the importance of routines just before she disowned her. "The two main purposes of college," she'd said, "are to show young people how to schedule their time and how to come prepared. And obviously, young lady, you failed to learn either lesson." Following the lecture she told Gretchen to get a job and make her own way in the world. She couldn't wait to be rid of her only child's long history of anger and self-abuse. Fortunately her father wasn't so callous. He still kept in touch with an occasional phone call and made a small monthly deposit to her bank account. The money would continue, he said, as long as she didn't do "that other stuff." He couldn't even bring himself to talk about the drugs.

But the people in group didn't mind talking about them. Gretchen turned the water off and rubbed the inside of a forearm. Some of the toothless old junkies at the meetings loved to prattle on about the awful things they used to do. A lot of the

talk sounded like boasting rather than remorse, but she tried not to judge. And she tried not to be envious. One of the group members had nearly twelve years sobriety, and another had ten. Cody had one year, five months and four days.

A sense of peace came over her when she thought of Cody. He was studying for a test and couldn't make the meeting that night, but she'd see him tomorrow.

He was only twenty-two and sometimes the difference in their ages made her feel like she was taking advantage of a child. Not that he acted like one. Just the opposite. After he was arrested for public intoxication a third time he took control of his life. He was a high school dropout with no skills, so he enrolled in a trade school to learn heating and air conditioning. "And when I graduate," he liked to say, "the sky's the limit."

He was so optimistic that it was infectious, and Gretchen saw herself smiling in the mirror. Then she saw her wrinkles and the smile died. How could Cody be attracted to her? They'd been dating for three months, but still every time she thought about him she wondered when he would wake up and see her for what she really was. The lines on her face weren't wrinkles so much as cracks in her character, fissures that ran to a core of corruption. She was unworthy of anything but scorn, and Cody would realize that when she fully opened up to him. She'd told him about the drugs and the things she'd done to earn them in the bathrooms at the clubs, and he accepted that, but she hadn't told him about the two abortions. He was too young to understand what she'd gone through—the hormones, the social pressure, the muddled thinking. She didn't know how to explain all of that to him, but she needed to find a way. He deserved to know.

She went to her purse and got another ciga-

rette. She lit it but only took one drag before she thought what am I doing and flushed it. Then she flushed the whole pack.

Her arms and legs itched again. For a moment she thought she felt another tremor vibrating the floor, but that wasn't it. Something else was going on. Tears welled up from nowhere, filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. She wanted to cut herself. She dug through her purse and took out the knife. Her fingers closed around its handle so hard she heard a knuckle pop.

But she didn't hear the door to the stall open. The tap on the shoulder startled her and she spun around holding the knife up defensively.

"Bless me," Sushee said. She was Gretchen's sponsor, a huge sweet-natured black woman. "Put that away, girl." Gretchen returned the knife to her purse and Sushee said, "It looks like you're havin' a bad time." Gretchen nodded as she wiped away tears with the back of a wrist. Sushee reached out and patted a shoulder. "Well, I heard you flush the john two times and figured you was either in distress or workin' for Taco Bell."

"What? I don't understand."

Sushee pointed to a wall of the stall, to some graffiti that said "Flush twice. It's a long way to Taco Bell," and she laughed her deep, rich laugh.

Gretchen couldn't even summon a smile. Her arms itched and the spaces between her toes throbbed. That's where she used to shoot up, between her toes. In the right light she could still see some of the track marks. But that was an old secret, kept with the abortions and the club parties and the other dark things attached to her old life. There were a thousand dark secrets, so many that she was surprised she had room for a new one. A terrible one.

"Come on, hon," Sushee said, turning away. "Let's get back to the meeting."

Gretchen grabbed her purse and followed.

Deezak awoke on the stone floor of the union hall. He was stretched out on his back and looking up at the three vast mosaics that leaned in to one another above. Their red, black and gold tiles depicted battle scenes from the past down low, and it was said that they showed the future up where they were eternally shrouded in smoke.

A voice spoke through the earphones that pinched his head. The priests put the phones on you when you were brought into the hall to lie enthralled. The voice said, "And the same nanotechnology that's being injected into humans will be used to control plant cells. It will alter the process of photosynthesis. Plants will be programmed to produce other things besides oxygen and sucrose. Cyanide, for example."

Deezak ran his hands over his body but could feel no injuries from the blossom fight. He was stiff though. He turned his head with difficulty and saw the massive pyre of burning bodies in the middle of the floor. Countless others like him were laid out around it. Priests moved here and there, tending to the warriors who were communing with their humans. Deezak's was a female. She was a nervous thing but asleep at the moment.

He closed his eyes and hoped to sleep as well, but he knew he wouldn't with the voice in his ears. He wasn't sure but he thought it was the same lecture he'd heard the last time he was in the hall.

". . . and few will ever be aware of the cellular manipulation. The primary function of human government now is to deny the existence of advanced technologies that are being used to depopulate the world. Even doctors are kept ignorant, so that they'll be unable to treat the new medical problems arising from the use of the technologies. People must be eliminated. Com-

puters can now outperform them intellectually, and the number of humans must be reduced to prevent the possibility of rebellion.”

Deezak couldn't imagine the human he currently inhabited, the one called Gretchen, rebelling. She was stupid and weak. The scars on her arms told him that others of his kind had been inside her, nibbling at her petty pains and pushing her to self-mutilate so that they could feed more deeply. He'd do the same even though it was against union rules. He'd seen her dirty little secret—the track marks between her toes—and maybe he'd drive her back to drugs to renew the pain they cause. Plus there was her other secret, the new one. He didn't know yet how he would exploit it but he would. Humans often thought of warriors as demons, and he would make her think that she was demon possessed.

A chorus of raw-throated battle cries erupted in the earphones. Deezak gripped the hilt of his sword, but then a voice bellowed, “Drink Xarnok's Ferm, if you can handle it!” He'd forgotten about the annoying commercials.

He relaxed and reached out to his human, but she was still asleep. He slept too, a drowsy half-sleep. The lecture talked about the stars so that's what he half-dreamed of. He'd heard stories about space travel ever since he hatched from his clutch. His ancestors used to fight with others of their kind between star systems, but then their ship was shot down over earth. Humans witnessed the battle and recorded what they saw on clay tablets. Some of the tablets still existed but were locked away in museums. The arrival of Deezak's race on earth had become the stuff of legends and folk tales.

The warriors' ship was destroyed, but they knew that their enemies would continue to look for them, so they erected an interdimensional veil as

cover. It hid them from those above and also from their new neighbors, the humans. But humans were inquisitive, and eventually they developed ways to see through the veil. The warriors were impressed by their cleverness and came up with a plan to put it to use. They knew they'd never be able to replace the ship they'd lost, but the humans—with their fresh ideas, some genetic enhancements and time to experiment—the humans might be able to devise some other form of space travel. So the warriors made the enhancements and then settled in for a long wait.

Boredom became a problem. To amuse themselves they fought, and when killing one another grew tiresome they began to explore beyond the veil. That turned ugly and the elders established rules for contact with humans. One of the rules was that warriors could no longer pass through the veil in their own bodies; they could only enter the human world by coupling with a human's consciousness.

Out of that grew the painstaking system and the union. And a return of boredom, until the Cern rush. Deezak stirred in his shallow half-sleep, remembering how he'd been cheated. The humans built a machine called a supercollider. It was located in Cern, Switzerland, and when it was first turned on it created a vast, temporary rent in the interdimensional veil. The elders allowed a horde of warriors to pass through the rent and take up residence in human bodies. Deezak couldn't go because he was doing a painstaking job at the time, a hemorrhoid job. He was still mad at the elders for not notifying all warriors in advance about the Cern opening. The powerful were told, and they'd chosen friends and family to cross over. And now the chosen ones were having fun wreaking havoc on human society. While Deezak scavenged for toothache and buttache work, many

of those who crossed over were rioting and looting and killing. Others had turned their commandeered humans into prostitutes. Even those who'd landed in the bodies of judges were having fun, adding to the world's mayhem by releasing violent criminals from prison as fast as they could.

At first this mayhem meant a lot of additional painstaking work for the warriors who'd been left behind. Anxiety and mental distress jobs were everywhere, but then people became accustomed to the distress. Cruelty and criminality came to be expected, and as often as not now the lack of bad news caused mental anguish. Humans had been conditioned to expect the worst.

Deezak heard something and opened his eyes to see priests throw a couple of bodies onto the pyre. The flames rose higher, and the mosaics on the walls seemed to move. One of them showed his ancestors fighting beside their fallen ship. They wore red suits and their horned helmets shot golden lightning into the sky. The glittering bolts disappeared in the smoke that was cupped above.

The lecturing voice had been silent for a few ticks, but it resumed and said, "The humans' leaders plan to fan out across the galaxy. They've already built spacecraft for that purpose, but before they use them they want to achieve immortality. And they believe they're on the verge of doing so by transferring their consciousness into machines. We are their partners in this enterprise. They know that none of their advances would have been possible without our help, so they want to repay us by letting us travel with them. That's the reason for the Cern project. The humans intend to let vast numbers of us through the veil so that we can help them flood the universe with immortal consciousness. And you will all be part of the flood, warriors. Those who miss the first launch will follow in the second, or the third or others. And together we will

rise in waves to once again traverse the spaceways.”

Heroic music had begun near the end of the pep talk. Deezak assumed it was meant to generate an emotional response, and it did, with its deep, dark chords swelling to a full-throated battle cry. He felt pride in his race’s achievements, in their struggles to. . . “Drink Xarnok’s Ferm, if you can handle it!”

“Ssssszzz!” Deezak hissed. He scraped the earphones off his head and started to rise, but then he settled back and thought about the pep talk. In the saloons where he drank, he and others often wondered if the stuff about the later waves was a lie. Why would the warriors who’d escaped give a damn about those who hadn’t crossed over? They wouldn’t. The wave talk was probably meant to get the stay-behinds to behave.

Deezak felt the quills on the back of his neck push against the floor. He wanted to lash out but had to restrain himself in the presence of the priests. But he could vent his anger on his human, and he willed her to wake as he was enveloped in hate scent.

Gretchen lurched out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. The apartment was small so it wasn’t far. She slapped the light on, fell to her knees at the commode and dry heaved. She wanted heroin. The skin between her toes tingled, begging for the touch of the needle.

She thought back over her life as a junkie and wondered how many times she’d skinned her knees puking into commodes. Dozens? Hundreds? It was like something didn’t want her to be happy, as if some force of nature or supernatural force kept pushing her down.

She went back to her bed and sat on the edge of it, in the light from the bathroom. She thought about calling Sushee but it was too early.

Her stomach growled. She went to the kitchenette but didn't see anything in the fridge that appealed to her. Her stomach churned into a knot. It had been acting funny ever since the meeting the day before. Maybe it was morning sickness. That would account for the urge to vomit. She'd had morning sickness during one of her other pregnancies, and this time . . . Cody. She'd known she was pregnant for three days but still hadn't told him. What would he say?

She grabbed a butcher knife from a drawer and returned to the bedroom, to the edge of the bed. She sat dragging the back of the knife's blade across the inside of a forearm. The bumping of the blade over the ridges of the scars felt good. It scratched an itch, and as she scratched she thought how easy it would be to flip the blade. A quick cut, then peace. For a few moments at least. She remembered the times she'd cut herself, the feeling, like lancing a boil to relieve the pressure. Or like what barbers used to do with bloodletting. That must have made a difference or people wouldn't have done it. She dragged the blade up and down her arm and thought of barbers stropping straight razors. What did they do with the blood they drained? She pictured buckets of it slopped to hogs, horns of it raised in red-skied rituals.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table and snapped her back from whatever dark place she'd gone to. It was probably Sushee calling. She had a knack for knowing when Gretchen needed an intervention.

She laid the knife on the table and looked at the phone. It was Cody, which surprised her. He normally didn't call so early. She put him on the speaker and left the phone where it was.

"Hi," he said softly.

Gretchen smiled.

“Hi.”

“Did I wake you up?”

“No. Are you studying for your test?”

“Yeah, and I think I’m ready. I hope so.”

“You are. They won’t ask you anything that you haven’t studied, so if you think you don’t know something, well, you do. Just dig through your memory until you find it.”

She knew she was mothering him, but it made her feel good to give calming advice that calmed her in the giving. Mothering. The word reminded her of the baby inside her. Her arms itched and she rubbed the scars. Did she have scars inside from where they cut up the other babies? She started to tell Cody about the abortions but choked back the urge so she wouldn’t distract him before his test. She imagined a scalpel cutting up her baby, her new one. It wasn’t like it was a big deal. She’d done it before. It wasn’t a big deal.

“What’s wrong, Gretch?” She’d made a sound in her throat while Cody was talking about school. It was a small sound but he heard. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She sniffled and felt a tear run down a cheek.

“But it sounds like you’re crying. What’s wrong?”

“There’s . . . something I need to tell you, but it can wait.”

“No. Tell me now. You’re scaring me.”

“Well, I . . . I . . . All right. I should have told you before. It’s bad, Cody. I hope you’ll under . . .” He wouldn’t understand. How could he? But he needed to know. “I’ve had two abortions.”

The words sounded awful. In the silence after speaking they hung like body parts from the lives that Gretchen had denied. She picked up the knife from the bedside table. Blood pounded

through her head and she wanted to scream, but then Cody said, "I love you, Gretch. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Her pulse eased down. She took a deep breath and said, "Love me? Do you really?" He said yes and then something else that she didn't hear because the pounding returned. Her head filled with it and she felt the churning in her belly. She held the knife so the blade was touching her stomach and pointing in. Some force urged her to push but she fought it and then she heard herself say, "The thing is, I have to do it again. I have to get another abortion."

She didn't know how long she sat there, tensed, ears pounding, but then she blurted, "It's yours!" remembering the other times, the two guys looking trapped when she told them, stammering as they tried to think of a way out.

"Of course it's mine," Cody said softly. "You must've got pregnant the second time we slept together. Remember? I told you I felt a spark."

Gretchen heard herself screech, "You're the only one I'm sleeping with!" It seemed that a hand was clutching her throat and milking her for hysterical words. "You have to help me! The other guys never..." She choked. The others disappeared once they learned about the pregnancies.

"Of course I'll help you," Cody soothed. "I'll always help you."

Why was he being so nice to her, after all the bad things she'd done, the person she was? She blinked and realized the knife and the hand that held it to her belly were wet with tears.

"What do you mean, you'll always help me?"

"I mean I'll always be there for you, and the baby. That's what a husband does."

She was stunned. Her hand fell to her lap.

"You mean you... You want us to get..."

She couldn't finish, afraid to put hope into

words. Cody finished.

“I want us to get married, Gretch. More than anything in the world.”

Deezak Vir rose from the depths of his communing with words sounding in his head. Marriage, family... Something shifted inside him. He sat up and rubbed his stomach. The shift came again and he realized it was the lump that his human carried within her. The feeling of it still weighed heavy in his gut, but it was no longer cold. It was warming under the caress of the woman's thoughts. “Acceptance,” she whispered, “family,” and then she pictured herself holding a baby. The warmth exploded into a blaze. Fire shot through Deezak's veins. He supposed it was what humans called love, and to his surprise it felt good.

He turned his face to a passing priest, who stopped and flicked his tongue. “You're possessed,” he hissed. Deezak didn't see the blade that cut his throat.