

Intervention

by Craig Roth

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I got a call from Fiona last night. She asked that I come down this evening, to meet at Penny's place. "It's an Intervention, Al," she said, which told me everything I needed to know about what the meeting would be about.

Penny had hurt her leg in a biking accident a month ago, and had fallen into some destructive habits that had hampered her recovery, mainly eating Lor-Tab like candy and downing a case a beer a night instead of the water her body needed. The combination of those had caused mood swings and other problems that only served to alienate her friends and land her back in the hospital. Add to that the responsibility the group had committed to in the rededication ceremony last month (just four days after the accident), and we all knew this was coming.

The thing that puzzled me, as I was driving the twenty miles to the neighboring town where most of the group lived, is that I thought I'd solved Penny's problem last week using the Gauntlet. She had sworn off beer and was keeping herself hydrated. Doing the intervention now was a bit redundant, although nobody knew precisely why Penny had changed her habits and I didn't want to seem unsupportive, so I was heading down.

I got there, and walked up to the door. As I was let in, I noticed the living room was already full. Everyone was in there, including Penny. She was sitting on the couch, foot resting on the coffee table to keep her leg elevated. Beside her was Amy, looking better than I had seen her in days, although her expression was serious. Gary, one of Fi's roommates, was also on the couch.

Continuing the circuit as I scanned the room, Tammy was in the recliner, looking a little sad. Then there was Seth in one of the smaller chairs, another surprise since he lived a couple *hours* drive to the south. He was sitting between Haley, Fiona's other roommate, and Lori, a girl who worked with Penny who had been hanging around the group for a couple weeks. Matt, after letting me in and closing the door, had taken a seat next to Penny. That left Fiona, the nominal leader of our little group, who stood in the center of the room.

I should give descriptions before I continue. Me first: My name is Alan Reed (I go by Al). I am just under six feet tall, dark blonde hair, a little out of shape, hazel eyes, and wear glasses. Penny is about my height, with shoulder-length straight black hair and a full figure. Amy is 5' 8", has much shorter hair that she's growing out (auburn this month), with brown eyes, pale skin and some freckles on her nose. Gary is a little taller than me, with glasses and sandy-blonde hair. Tammy is a slender, blue-eyed blonde who doesn't look old enough to have the two teen-aged kids she does. Seth's hair is also blonde, but much longer (he keeps it in a ponytail). Haley is an extremely busty redhead, while Lori is very skinny with short, brown hair. Matt is about 6' 3", with darker, long hair (also in a ponytail). Finally, Fiona about 5' 2", heavy-set, with long, thick, black hair.

Everyone was quiet as I paused to decide where to sit, and I cringed inwardly. 'Am I late?' I thought.

"You're right on time," said Fi, as if reading my thoughts. Then: "Before you sit down, could you do something for me?"

"Sure," I replied easily. "What?"

She gently took my left arm by the wrist and raised my hand between us. She met my eyes, with that look that goes all the way to your soul. "Could you take that off until this is done?"

My eyes must have become the size of saucers at that request. Although I kept the Gauntlet on my left hand, it was supposed to be invisible. Even I couldn't see it, though its power was always tangible to me. There was no use denying it to her, I respected her too much. But, as my stomach unclenched, the question remained: "How...?"

For just an instant, I could tell she was about to say, "Sucks dealing with a witch, don't it?" which was a line she used a couple times on Tammy's 17-year-old daughter when she was house-sitting and caught her lying. Then she said, "It might have a lot of direct influence over people to keep them from seeing it, but I can see the more oblique, more roundabout effects. I know it's there.

"This meeting isn't about Penny," she continued. "She no longer needs an intervention, as you well know. But the fact that she arrived at that change of heart outside of her own free will has to be addressed. Matt could've sucker-punched you when you came in and we could have tied you up and taken it off you while you were out. But we need to talk rationally. What do you say?"

It was nice to see that the respect I felt was mutual. Grateful for that, I nodded and released the strap holding it to my wrist, sliding it off my hand and placing it on the table. The others leaned in to get a look at the now-visible item. It was quite simple-looking, a metal trapezoid with a strap for the wrist connected to the narrow side and loops for the ring and middle fingers on the other. A number of glyphs and symbols had been scratched in the surface.

Amy picked it up, looking at it more closely.

Penny sort of gave it the hairy eyeball in that cute way she does. "So. This is what you used to control my mind?"

I sighed. "Sort of. I just placed a suggestion."

"And now, the taste of beer makes me want to puke!" She gave me a hard look. "That's bullshit. I used to like beer!"

"Where...?" Amy started, but Penny wasn't finished yet.

"It's not just beer, either," she jumped back in. "I know if I try any other kind of alcohol, I'll get sick, too."

I gave a guilty shrug. "It was the only thing I could think of that would alter your behavior without changing your personality."

Fiona's eyebrows raised a little. "Could you do that."

"Do what?"

"Completely change someone's personality."

I hesitated. "...I...I think so. I hope not."

"Where the hell did you get this?" Amy said, finally getting tired of waiting for an opening.

I sat down and told them.

* * *

Over the last few months, I had been studying this big, leatherbound book I discovered in a used book store. The clerk let me have it for a song, saying it was a mage's notebook written in some sort of code. I think it creeped him out. I bought it as a prop for a role-playing game, then started to examine it more closely. Whatever language it was in, it seemed to start making sense to me. The book detailed rituals for invoking the decans, thirty-six words that God apparently

spoke to create the world. The rituals were long and involved, and were accompanied by details on results and repercussions of such invocations.

I used the book to create the Gauntlet, I explained, mainly as a thought exercise. I didn't fully believe the stuff in the book was real, but I thought I could add some authenticity to the games I run by being able to accurately describe rituals the players would witness. The properties of the Gauntlet, however, were of my own design.

I am 30 years old, and have never been in a serious relationship with a girl. This is not for lack of trying, just that almost every woman I try to get close to decides they like me "as a friend." It's really frustrating, and probably the main reason I developed my hypnotism/mind control fetish. I wanted those girls to want me as more than a friend. (There was also the frustration-fueled fantasy of enslaving girls I was mad at or who snubbed me in a particularly stuck-up way, making them do humiliating things they'd never do and believe it was their idea, etc.. Needless to say, I didn't go into that part with the group.) Thus, the Gauntlet.

The Gauntlet is a focus, concentrating a group of decans specifically optimized for the control and manipulation and memory, personality, and consciousness.

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Amy set the Gauntlet back on the table. She'd looked decidedly uncertain since I got to the part about making girls want me "as more than a friend." I couldn't blame her, really. A couple years ago, she and I had gotten as close as two people could get without actually going on a date or doing more than hug. She had been in an abusive relationship, and we'd conspired to get a house together away from her boyfriend. Shortly before things exploded between them, she confided that she was in love with me. I said I felt the

same. Then she left him and, in a move that puzzled me no end, shut me out of her life.

For close to a year, I was out of communication with her, cursing and pining for her at the same time. I got back in contact with her last year, and we'd made peace. She told me about the events that led up to her tearing my heart out, and how karma had basically bit her on the ass for what she'd done. I listened (with, admittedly, a bit of well-concealed glee), and then did what I had intended to do when I called her up: I forgave her and let her go. We had become good friends over the last year, although she tended to fall into similar patterns: She had just gotten out of another abusive relationship which ended in that boyfriend getting arrested. I do love the girl, but she sure could pick 'em.

The peace she had on her face that I saw when I came in was still there, so I wasn't too worried about it.

The rest of them had looks ranging from shock and wariness to (in Lori's case) speculation.

"There was something you said," Fi started, "before we went on the subject of how you made the thing..."

I looked at her.

"I hope not, 'you said?" she reminded me. When I couldn't meet her eyes, she continued, "You... 'altered' someone?"

I nodded.

* * *

It was right after I'd created the Gauntlet. I wasn't sure if it would work. Hell, I hadn't seen any evidence that *any* of the stuff in the

Tome was real, although it did square with a lot of the things I had read on mysticism and such. I wore it out when going to my favorite restaurant, and asked for a table that Donna was working.

Donna was a waitress there that I'd had a crush on. I had been trying to get a date with her for a while, but stopped recently when I found out (via a mutual friend) that she was already in a relationship. I had contented myself with just trying to cultivate a friendship with her.

As fate would have it, her current boyfriend was there that night as well. I didn't know this at first, not for certain. I got a good hint from the Gauntlet when she took the food to his table, just before coming by to take my order.

I was watching her, studying her a little, I guess (she's a very beautiful woman). And as she set the plate there, in front of him, I sensed a slight surge from her, of what? Familiarity? Satisfaction? Maybe a touch, as their eyes met, of a promise of more intimate contact later tonight?

I scanned (I guess that's the best word for it) him, too, in that instant. Similar familiarity and satisfaction, along with something else. His table far enough away that I couldn't hear what they said over the music.

She said something (feeling expectation, a stronger promise). He replied (a lie, and with a different expectation). I couldn't see her face, but sensed a slight pout (belying the greater disappointment she felt). Then she came over to me.

"Hey, stranger," she started off, "ain't seen you for a while."

I shrugged. "Eh. Busy. You know how it is." I tried another scan, and got a bit deeper. She was like an open book.

"Tell me about it," she replied. She had been working two jobs (this one, and as a dancer over on the Beach), as well as ballet school and her relationship with Ted, she didn't really have the time to just sit down and relax, although with his cancelling on tonight, she might have that chance (slight resurge of disappointment). "What would you like to drink?"

"Sweet tea, please."

"Are you ready to order, or do you need more time?" She was thinking of just working her full shift, and telling Pam not to worry about covering for her as she asked. If she took off as planned now, in an hour she'd be back at her place, bored and alone.

"I know what I want," I grinned. Then thought, 'Aw, what the hell, take the time off. You already have it covered. You can still find something fun to do.'

She blinked as that thought "occurred" to her, then grinned back. "Okay, shoot."

"The Rocky Top Chicken, and could you swap out the beans with brandied apples?"

She nodded. ('Those are good.') "Fries okay?"

"Uh-huh," I nodded back. As she wrote that down, I glanced over at the other table where the guy had started eating, and I tried to read him. His thoughts were on the food, and on the girl he was meeting tonight, a brunette named Gail. There was also a bit of worry over being caught by Donna. This all flashed in my mind at that glance. It wasn't like I had a flood of information, I just **knew**. I also picked up where he would take Gail, to avoid Donna if she were to decide to go out by herself.

Later, while I was waiting for the food to arrive, Ted paid his bill and got up to leave. As he passed my table, I said, "Ted."

He stopped and looked at me, puzzled. "Yes...?" He didn't know me.

I turned to look at him, then specifically read him as I asked, "Do you know Donna?"

He blinked. "Yeah." He'd been screwing her for the last several months. She was a real firecracker in bed. He'd take her out and tell her things she'd like to hear, but he had no intention of making any permanent commitment to her. As far as he was concerned, she was just a stripper, a whore. If this thing with Gail turned into something serious, he'd dump Donna, but not until then (She was *really* good in bed).

I blinked then, suddenly very pissed. And, very quietly, said, "Go. Forget we talked. Take Gail to the place you planned to while you were eating." I started to turn back to the table, and as he started leaving, added, "Be completely honest with Gail and Donna regarding your relationship with them if they ask, but don't consider your answers unusual."

I sat at the table after he left, seething more and more over his casual disregard for Donna's feelings. I got myself under control before Donna brought my food.

I had a plan...

* * *

"So, you met Donna after work, and took her to the same place that Ted took Gail?" Fiona asked.

"Oh, yeah," I replied, but I was *not* smiling. "And Donna confronted him. It got amusing when Gail asked who Donna was, and Ted said not to worry, it was just the girl he's fucking until a serious relationship came along."

Seth, Mark and Gary closed their eyes and said, "Ouch," almost in unison. Tammy's and Penny's jaws dropped, then they both bristled in sympathy for Donna or Gail. Haley's eyes got big as she covered her mouth, and Lori guffawed. Amy's jaw dropped, too, but she added, "Oh, my God. Al, that's *mean*."

Fi knew where I was going with this. "And how did Donna handle that?"

I sighed. "Well, she joined Gail in dumping her drink over Ted's head. I escorted her out, but it was quickly obvious that she was crushed. Before she emptied her glass on him, he tried to explain what was going on, but that just made things worse.

"I took her home. She tried to put on a brave face, but I could see she was starting to rationalize and the whole episode had planted this seed of mistrust. I spent the night with her, talking to her, doing what I could to root out that poison seed in her mind."

"So you made a bad situation worse by rewriting more of her mind?" Penny asked.

"NO!" I jumped up. "Jesus, no! The closest I came to messing with her mind was using the Gauntlet to read her mind, finding what direction her thoughts were heading, and then using that to say what was necessary to steer her away from the destructive paths. We talked all night, but by morning she was pretty much 'over' Ted.

"I saw what effect indiscriminate alterations can have, and I **don't** want to destroy lives." I looked at Penny. "I never intended for this to

be a permanent suggestion. I just wanted you to stop drinking long enough for your leg to heal!"

Penny sort of grimaced, then looked at Fiona. "We were talking yesterday..." Fi started.

"Me and Fiona," Penny interjected.

"...and she had come to that conclusion on her own."

"I figured the Goddess was kicking me in the ass for not treating my body like a temple. I came to this conclusion in the hospital. About a day before you did your whammy." Penny explained.

I sat back down. "Oh, shit. I'm *sorry*, Penny." Then I thought of something. "Wait a minute. How did you know you my suggestion was in effect if you didn't drink?"

Penny rolled her eyes. "It was a really strong suggestion. I get nauseous at the smell of booze."

"Oh. Um. I can remove it right now, if you like?"

Both Gary and Seth moved forward as if to block me from picking up the Gauntlet.

"Just a second..." Seth said.

Gary added, "We're not finished yet."

I hadn't actually reached for it, but was a little taken aback. "...What?"

"Penny's not the only person here who's been zapped by that thing," said Gary.

All the girls except Fiona looked confused. Mark did, too. So this was something only Seth, Fi, and Gary were privy to.

I stood there, trapped in an ethical dilemma for a couple seconds. I tried to dance around it. "She's the only one who I 'zapped,' as you put it, without permission..."

"Oh, really??" Gary replied. Then he turned to the girls sitting on the couch. "Did you give him permission to mess with your mind, Amy?"

Amy sat back. "WHAT!?" For a second, she couldn't decide who to look at, me or Gary. Then she rallied, coming to her feet. "No, I did NOT! Why do you think I've been fucked with?"

I knew exactly what Gary was talking about, but I wasn't going to say anything. I mean, how do you tell someone you think they've been manipulated because they haven't been acting neurotic and insane for the first time since you've known them?

Gary realized exactly what kind of minefield he'd stepped into, and suddenly looked very uncomfortable. I smirked slightly, as if to say, *You brought this shit up. You navigate through it.*

Unfortunately, Amy caught my look, and rounded on me. "You *did* do something, didn't you!? Didn't you!? What did you do?"

I looked at her. Closely. The peace was almost gone. If I didn't tell her, she'd be second-guessing everything she did for the rest of her life, wondering if what she was doing was by her own choice or by my manipulation. I sighed. "Alright." I made as if to move around the coffee table. "Hold onto the Gauntlet for me, and I'm stealing your seat."

I moved beside Amy. "Sit down." I looked into her eyes. "Hon, what

was the one thing that you felt you most needed to do in the last week that you felt this group would frown on?"

She shook her head, eyes still hard.

Another sigh from me. "This would be easier with the Gauntlet, but the other way doesn't allow for hidden mechanations." I looked at the rest of the group to explain: "It will be obvious what I'm doing." Then I turned back, grabbed hold of her head, and said in a booming voice that shook the windows, "**REMEMBER, AMY!!!**" right into her forehead.

I collapsed, the whole world becoming a grey mist.

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I slowly faded back in, and I felt a hand on my cheek, another on my forehead. "He's okay," I heard Fiona say.

"Urgh," I stated intelligently.

"How's Amy?" was the next thing she said, and that brought me back with a snap.

"What's wrong?" I mumbled weakly, opening my eyes. I was laying on my side on the coffee table. Amy was sitting right in front of me, face buried in her hands. I tried to sit up, but I was *so* weak.

"I'm okay," Amy cried softly. "It's okay. Just hurts like hell."

"Aw, baby, I'm sorry," my breathing was ragged, and it felt like my voice wasn't even getting out of my throat.

Amy brought her face out of her hands. Her eyes were teared up. "Shut up, Al. Just lay there." Her voice was matter-of-fact, but there

wasn't any malice there.

Penny spoke up. "What do you remember?"

Amy laughed, but there wasn't much humor in it. "What don't I remember? Jesus! It's like my whole life just happened two seconds ago." She wiped her eyes. "Shit! There are some things I really didn't need to remember."

"Do you remember what Al did?" This from Fiona.

"Yeah." She sighed and composed herself. Grabbing a pack of Marbs off the table, she lit one while collecting her thoughts. "Um, it was about three days ago." She looked around at the faces of the group. She didn't know where to start. "He helped me do something. Something private..."

I had gotten a bit of strength back. "You can tell them, Hon. What's done is done." I managed to sit up, and took her free hand. "They're not going to hate you, or be angry with you. I'm the one on trial here," I added with a smile.

She sort-of glared at me while taking a drag from the cigarette. "Fine," she finally said, blowing the smoke downward to keep from hitting anyone in the face. "I cleared the air with Dan."

Seth nodded. Gary blinked, then looked like a lightbulb went off in his head. Fiona pursed her lips, and kept a neutral expression while Amy continued. Only Lori was surprised that the big secret was that Amy talked to her latest ex-boyfriend.

"I knew none of you wanted me talking to him, but there were things I needed to say, as well as things I needed to hear from him."

I continued. "I asked her a *supposedly* hypothetical question: If I

could supply a way where you could clear the air with him, with no repercussions from the group, would you take it? She said yes."

"Next thing I know, he's driving me over to the house." We all knew she meant the house where the two of them had lived, where he still lived, now that he was out on bail. It was five doors down. "Then..." And she fumbled for words for how to continue.

I supplied the rest: "I walked in first, to prepare Dan. Then Amy came in..."

"And I poured my heart out."

I nodded. "Dan, too. They said everything that needed to be said."

"We must've talked for, like, twelve hours. Sometimes, we were screaming. I'm surprised you didn't hear us."

"Actually," I said quietly, "neither of you said a word."

Amy did a double-take. "Whoa. What!?"

"I made a direct link between your minds. The two of you needed to talk privately. A link allowed you to talk without my listening in. It also *really* accelerated communications. That twelve hours you mentioned was actually ten or fifteen minutes." Amy sat back, stunned, as I continued.

"I set up the link so that the two of you would release it when everything that needed to be said was said. After I felt it sever, I removed the conscious memory of the conversation from your and Dan's minds, but made sure that subconsciously you would both know what had been said and would be able to move on with your lives.

"Of all people, I know the importance of letting go and saying goodbye to someone who meant the world to you, that you can't be with any more." I ran my fingers through Amy's hair. "I wouldn't wish what I went through, a couple years ago, on my worst enemy, much less someone I loved."

She gave me a hug. It felt good.

* * *

"So," I said after Amy released me (hey, *I* wasn't about to stop hugging, I let her choose how long was long enough), "Where does this leave us?"

Fiona picked up the Gauntlet and stepped toward the center of the room. "Come here."

I got to my feet, still a little shaky, but I was recovering quickly. I stood in front of her, and focused on her face.

She looked at the Gauntlet, then at the faces of the others in the group, gauging their feelings on the matter. Finally, she said, "You have been messing with things you don't really understand, but I can tell you've been trying to keep a lid on some of the wilder things you could do." I nodded. "However, I'm worried that you may be getting addicted to this thing." She held up the Gauntlet.

That made me blink. "Huh?"

"You say you had no plans to use it on anyone here, but you wore it here anyway. Why?"

"To facilitate communication. I don't have to make full mind links between people to cause people to understand what others *mean* to say. I've been using that on myself for the last few weeks, to be sure

I don't misunderstand other people's meanings." I looked a little sheepish. "It *is* something of a security blanket."

She nodded. "I don't want to see you wearing this all the time. You now know I can see it even when it's invisible, so I can check up on you." She smiled when she said that. I grinned, too.

"Whoa!" Lori was on her feet. "You're just going to give it back to him? How do we know he won't make us forget this whole thing? He could manipulate you into not noticing its effects anymore. You should at least use it to keep him from ever using it on any of us."

Fi glanced back at me. "We'll trust him." And, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Amy cross her arms and smile (smirk?) at Lori, suggesting a different outcome if *she* were the one with this kind of power.

I was flattered, and gratified, by the trust they had, *once again*, shown me. I actually started to get a little choked up.

"I would *suggest*," Fiona said as she held the Gauntlet out to me, "that you put that book in a secure place."

I step back without taking it from her. "Hold that thought. I'll be back in about an hour," and I ran out to my car.

* * *

About eighty minutes later, I walked back into Penny and Matt's house carrying a "Wilson's Leather" bag, which I set on the coffee table in front of Fi.

"There's the Tome and a notebook I used when making up the Gauntlet. I think you can keep it safe," I said smiling.

Fiona looked at Amy. "Just like we said."

Amy laughed as she said, "Yup!"

I rolled my eyes. "So I'm predictable. Bite me," which got a laugh from Haley, Tammy and Penny.

Fiona had held onto the Gauntlet the whole time I'd been gone. As she handed it to me, she said, "This thing might be a lot more powerful than you guess."

"Oh?" I slid it on my hand.

"When I suggested you put the book someplace safe, I was thinking I'd like to take a look at it. And you ran to bring it here..."

"I brought it here," I replied as I hooked the wrist strap, "because I trust you. You didn't manipulate me. The Gauntlet is keyed specifically to me. No one else can use it."

As Fi got a relieved look on her face, I said, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starving. That 'remember' thing really took a lot out of me."

Penny called from the kitchenette, "Dinner's almost ready. I started it while you were gone."

There were general good feelings all around as we all went out to fill our plates. Tammy had to leave because she had to get up early, and Lori bowed out at the same time. I don't know the name of the dish Penny made, but BOY, was it good.

After we ate, Fi couldn't hold back any longer, and grabbed the store bag to look at the book. Taking the Tome, the bag floated to the floor. Fi and I both did a double-take at the bag.

"Didn't you say you had a notebook in there as well?" Fi asked.

"I thought so," I replied. "I just grabbed the bag when I went up to the house. I thought I put it in there after the last time I used it. It's probably back at the house. I'll bring it down later."

"I hope you're right..."

