Summary

This is a story after the end of everything, when parts of the world have come back from the ashes.
Some things did not die.
Some things abide still.
Things that were never meant to be but that can love till the end of time.

Notes

This is what I've started working on in 2010 ... and ground to a halt with earlier this year. I think I need to get some of it out there (even though I know there is 0% chance of anyone reading it) in the hope that it might help me weave together the ravelled threads of the memories of dreams.
Definitely a WIP, definitely needs re-writing. If there is anyone to read this then, dear reader, please do not be too harsh.
Warnings for typos (I'm hoping that posting here will help me find the last of them), clunky phrasing (all my fault).
Gene Bomb is made up of four stories - Lia, The Soldier's Story, How a Lover Was Made, and the Tale of the Innocent. They are not all set at the same time or written in the same tense (it made sense when I was planning it).

Will post by chapters and build the tags as I go along.
Thanks to anyone who does find this, even more thanks to anyone who bothers to read it.

Your servant,
Meretseger68
At a loose end

Chapter Summary

Lia gets a new job. Anything has to be better than going home ...

Much later, and with the benefit of hindsight, Lia Jordan thought it would have been better had she been more aware, taken more notice of the day her life changed. But Lia was rational. Instead of seeing omens and portents, instead of noting the baleful pricking of her thumbs, she saw her email account with a batch of papers submitted from the summer school historiography class. Not the most thrilling work, but it paid the bills and, if she was honest, it was a good excuse not to go back to her father after the end of her masters. Dr Pullen was no harsh taskmaster - everyone knew that the summer schools were aimed at the dilettante set rather than the apparently ‘serious’ scholars of the University’s main academic intake - and she had time on her hands to think about what she wanted to do next.

As the summer wound down, and Rachel Pullen stepped back from work before the start of an unexpected maternity leave, Lia found she was available to help Gihon Plaisir sort through the applicants for the new research post that had come up as the faculty reorganised around the temporary loss of the popular tutor. Unexpectedly, Plaisir had even asked Lia to put herself forward despite her fears that the suggestion was only because the big man was being polite. She’d finally acceded to his wishes after gentle hints had become something rather more insistent.

Though definitely the least formally experienced of the applicants she had been encouraged after seeing some of the more unusual selection criteria. In addition to the standard requirements a number of the candidates were known to type rather than just letting word processors put their ideas together, but few seemed able to respond in kind to the handwritten notes he had asked her to send out to them. Even less had fully independent driving licences. Hailing from the shambolic, blasted plains of the continental lost west Lia had been more than happy to demonstrate her ability and had enjoyed driving the big man’s unnecessarily large, and outrageously macho, off-road vehicle on errands for him around the city.

Finally realising she might have a chance Lia thought that working for the unnamed replacement would be a better option than returning home. Her father may have brought her up to be strong minded but, since going to the city, whenever she made the long journey back that very independence always seemed to cause friction between them. And now, of course, Lia also hoped that the position might offer the opportunity of spending more time with Plaisir - the imposing deputy head of the faculty of cultural history. A tall figure, he was an immediately recognisable silhouette with his long hair and flowing clothes that left only his large and, she always thought, dangerous looking hands exposed. Plaisir’s origins somewhere in the depths of Fortress Europe made him simultaneously exotic and intriguing, irresistibly alien to someone unimpressed with the men she had met in the soft and civilised city.

Intent on the screen before her Lia was only vaguely aware of people coming and going in the quiet of the library. Not wanting to work in Dr Pullen’s office since hearing the news that she was leaving, and not feeling able to concentrate in the usual domestic chaos of the shared house, Lia had retreated to the insulated calm of the Library. The availability of real books was one of the establishment’s claims to fame, and the division of the huge floors by miles of shelving brought the scale of the vast
building down to a human and manageable level. Though the building was busy all year round the impression of tranquillity and privacy had always been one of the library’s most appealing features for her.

Stretching to ease knots in stiffening muscles the woman glanced around and noticed Plaisir striding through the nearby stacks. With no fanfare, no intimation of the workings of fate, she simply smiled an acknowledgement in his direction then quickly turned her attention back to a particularly convoluted and impenetrable section on Herodotus. She had found herself getting distracted recently if she spent too much time looking at the dark haired man. Today she did not want her mind to wander and force her to keep re-reading the same dismal paragraphs. Getting a grip on her wayward subconscious she told herself that he had more than enough reasons to be in the Library, the visit was probably nothing to do with her.

“Ms Jordan.” His approach had been silent. Surprised, Lia looked up again, this time straight into eyes that today were a deep ocean blue. At first she’d thought he swapped between coloured lenses until she’d actually seen his irises change smoothly from one shade to another. His eyes were like the moods of the sea - changeable, magical and entrancing. A light azure sky in his gaze could transform into a greenish hue or, rarer, the leaden grey of an oncoming storm. She tried not to think of the days when he hid behind dark glasses, she guessed those were not good days for him. Today seemed to be a good day. “Lia I’m glad I found you. Your handset was replying with DND so I thought I might catch you in here. If you could come back to my office, I think we’ve got time to run through the red tape on your new contract and get everything signed off before I throw you in at the deep end.”

He checked the time on his anachronistic and over-sized watch. On someone else’s wrist the broad leather strap would look out of proportion, on Gihon she thought it matched the landscape. As ever, the empty twin to the wide strap circled his other wrist, peeking out from a long sleeve. “To be honest, I’d hoped for something slightly more formal but I’ve just heard that our new man has called in favours and hitched himself a lift on a military ‘copter. He’ll be here soon and I’d like it if you could go and meet him.” He smiled his big smile, the one that made his face light up, the one she liked so much. She seemed to have been on the receiving end of that smile quite a lot in recent weeks and she marvelled at the effect it had on her.

Lia’s first meeting with the professor, though she hadn’t realised it at the time, had been four years earlier. She’d been invited to interview for a place at the University following the completion of her first degree, a distance course based out of Teotihuacán Metropolitan. Given the length of the uncomfortable journey from her home she’d been determined to make the most of the experience and to visit what was claimed to be the largest single unit Library left in the world. Some said the building was sentient. Some suggested that it dreamed the books inside it. Some whispered that it had been sent mad by all the conflicting ideas of the people it held within its walls. How could she miss out on an opportunity to see the modern marvel?

Early morning and the building had been sleepy. Words scrolled languidly across its interactive surface; left to right, right to left, top to bottom as appropriate to the language. Little of it seemed to be coherent, and what she could understand of the rest was more like the hypnagogic ramblings of a deranged poet. Then a glyph appeared from one corner, and others followed - someone, somewhere, was accessing the Library’s copy of the Dresden Codex. Fascinated by the scrolling display she stood and watched, unaware of a man’s approach until he was so close he all but blotted out the sun and cast his shadow at her feet.

“Your first time?” It was summer, surely too warm for such a long coat she thought as generous folds of fabric swirled to a halt against her calf.
“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a tourist.” She blushed, feeling like a bumpkin overawed by the big city. How could anyone not be impressed by the view? She had a brief glance to the side and then looked up. He was a big man, his features indistinct in his own shade.

“No bother. It’s nice to see a body appreciating what there is to be seen. Wait till the physics lot wake up and start work, there’ll be gibberish all over the place. We civilized types have to stick together to balance out the truth with a little beauty.” She must have looked panicked, she had no idea who this was looming so close over her. He stepped back. There may have been a small bow. “Apologies, I saw that you recognised the Venus calculations and took a guess. Given the timing of your visit I guess we are looking at an interview?” She nodded. “Then I hope we’ll be seeing you for a more permanent stay. Come over and introduce yourself when you get started, you’ll find me in Cultural History.”

“Who should I ask for?” Her question was aimed at the retreating pony tail. He paused briefly and smiled back at her. His smile was dazzling.

“Oh, everyone knows me, just look for the long hair and the coat. I’m always me. Ask at the faculty office if you don’t see me around.” And he was gone and his shadow with him. By the time she’d finally made it home - with the big man and the big building inextricably connected in her mind - the offer of a place was waiting for her. And when she moved to campus she went and said hello, and he remembered meeting her and made her feel welcome. By then, however, she’d also found out who he was, and what he was, and that was as far as things had gone. Until this summer.

What had changed in the meantime?

Not a lot.

Lia was still vaguely searching but somewhat dissatisfied with the experiences she’d found in the city. Gihon’s hair was four years longer. His hands, with the big knuckles and the squared off nails, were as intimidating as the first day she met him. Maybe, she thought, maybe he seemed a little more tired a little more often. Or maybe that was just getting to know him better.

Of course she would go and meet the new man. Not for the first time she wondered if Plaisir was even aware of the effect he had, or if he discreetly chose to ignore it. How she, like quite a few others, hung on to his words as if hypnotised, trying to work out the original accent in his deep voice, hints of his unknown birthplace rolling beneath the North American acquired inflections. Logically she knew there was nowhere for her interest to go but, unlike with other men, increasing familiarity had done nothing to lessen his fascination for her.

Like most people in the city the big man’s actual age was not an open topic of conversation but she knew he had to be older than his appearance - somewhere in his late forties – and way too old for someone of only twenty-eight years. He’d become a fixture at this campus a few years before her arrival. Before that, and adding extra layers of confusion to his tones, he’d made his name in Luxor at Temple University. Before that? If anyone knew, no one said anything.

She knew there was no way she could attract the kind of personal interest from him that some of her friends were far too keen to speculate on. She knew she was too young. She also knew that her friends were pinning attributes to an image of him rather than the real man she had begun to know. And there was, of course, the crucial fact that if he was ever going to give up his celibate condition it would only be with a man, and probably only one man at that. Given the notoriously heterosexual behaviour of the object of the big man’s desires she was not surprised that their unusual relationship was one of housemates rather than lovers. (That was the official line anyway, in private she knew many people often wondered otherwise.)
So much she wanted to ask him about. So much that politesse didn’t allow to such a recent acquaintance no matter how friendly he seemed. Like others before her Lia had first assumed that the pointless fixation was to blame for his occasional melancholy moments. As she had spent more time with him she recognised that was too simple an explanation. Some days she saw hints of age, hard experience and unknown hurts from previous lives - lives that were not mentioned in this present incarnation, pasts she could not ask about.

Too soon to ask her questions, all she could do was smile back at him as she closed up her computer and rolled it back into her bag. No, never any doubt that she would be happy doing whatever he asked.

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Quicker than she could really take it in, Lia was back in the faculty building saying hello to Gihon’s fearsomely capable assistant. Petite and pale skinned, with sharp features and smouldering eyes that looked out from a tumble of sable hair, Elvira Lopéz was another European émigré. While they had met previously it had mostly been the accidental contact of people frequenting the same corridors. This formal introduction, more than anything, was what had finally convinced the woman that Gihon was serious in his offer. Elvira had been with the department for years and, everyone knew, was the person who really ran things in the faculty. Though he could clearly speak the language, the big man had little chance of winning any argument once it switched to Spanish and Elvira’s excited staccato delivery. Gihon, like others before him, had quickly learned to take advantage of her abilities and accepted the situation with good humour.

In a something of a daze Lia listened absent-mindedly while they ran through the impressively vague contract and wondered what had happened to the interview. The quietly organised corner of her mind noted that the position was being entirely funded by the Jensson Foundation, unusual but not unheard of, and that that the substantial salary meant she wouldn’t have to worry about her father withdrawing his financial support when she refused to return home. Still, getting the position had seemed easier than expected and she briefly wondered what the catch would be – at least no one would be crass to suggest anything sexual. Her voice seemed ridiculously small when she asked them why she’d been picked. The large man and his elfin amanuensis shared an amused glance before he answered her, his rumbling tones indulgent and gently mocking.

“Come on, you didn’t really think anyone else had a chance did you? I might be henpecked by this one but I do still have some say in what goes on around here. Getting the Foundation to play nice is just one of my many talents. It meant I got to decide the best candidate, and I see no reason why you shouldn’t be suitably recompensed while you put up with some of the quirks of working for the old man. Look, I pulled your files I’ve seen your work. Rachel couldn’t recommend you enough. I think you’re the right person for the job …that I also happen to like you is just an added bonus. Nothing to do with my decision. At all. Honest.” Gihon treated Lia to the big smile again; crow’s feet gained in sunnier climes crinkled the skin around a dazzling cerulean gaze. “Now, if your sense of fair play will still allow you to sign your immediate future away, we’ll go down to the car and get you on your way.”

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The transition from the cool dimness of the faculty to mid-morning sunlight left Lia blinking in the glare as she looked around for the now familiar off-roader. Under the line of trees she recognised most of the handful of cars parked up at the side of the building but there was no sign of Gihon’s usual ridiculous transport. Producing an old fashioned key fob from a pocket he triggered the remote and there was a corresponding tone from a low-slung car she’d overlooked at the kerbside. Other than recognising that it was clearly something powerful Lia had no idea what it was. Sinuous, with
long sweeping curves and flared wheel arches, it looked as fast as quicksilver, crouched like a cat waiting to pounce. The paintwork was an indeterminate red that seemed to shift from black to carmine as light and shade fell across it, tiny metallic flecks scintillating in the sunlight. She didn’t know why but the colour made her think of blood. Looking between the low car and the intimidating block of the man next to her Lia held back from asking him how he managed to fit into it to drive it. Arkhangelskeyev was shorter; maybe he’d dropped it off at the building for his friend.

“OK, you are it. I’m pushed for time and Elvira keeps reminding me that I have to be elsewhere. You’ll need these.” The fob and attached keys were placed rather daintily in her hand. Lia wondered if Gihon took as much care around other people as he seemed to do with her – sometimes she thought it was as if he was scared of breaking her if he touched her. “The Russian flight is due at midday, go pick him up from the cargo helipad and take him back to my place. This will get you through security and back out again with no trouble.” A small envelope appeared from the folds of a waist-coat so long that the full hem eddied around his booted ankles. “Don’t worry about trying to recognise him. Just park as close as you can to the pad and he will come over to you – this was always his favourite car. The apartment is expecting you. Park in the garage and take the stairs up to the main floor. You’re off for the rest of the day so take things as they come. What else, what else . . . yes, whatever he looks like and whatever he says just go with it - he’s been out of circulation for a while and he has a tendency to let himself go if he’s by himself.”

He looked at the big watch again. Lia guessed that the impending arrival was the cause of some anxiety for the normally calm man. If not checking the time, then he had been adjusting the ornate gold and platinum clasps holding the two long braids in place at his left temple. The barrette that normally held the great mass of his hair back must have been discarded as an early victim of this uncharacteristic restlessness. Looking at his extravagant tresses she was not sure if she wanted to tell him to quit the fidgeting, or just give in to the old urge to run her own fingers through the unbound thigh-length waves. The accidental brush of stray locks across the back of her hand in the Library had given her a thrill that she could still feel. She had to remind herself to concentrate.

“There is something I should really know before you turn me loose.” Distracted by some inner train of thought, he didn’t seem to realise that he’d missed anything out. She jangled the keys in her hand to catch his attention. “Whose favourite car am I driving?”

“Didn’t we say upstairs? I could have sworn I mentioned it … no, no, you’re right. I’m so sorry, forget my head if it was loose today. You’re off to collect Dave Jensson.” He pronounced the surname with distinct syllables ‘Jens-son’. At a loss, she didn’t know what to say and stared back at him while her mind freewheeled, no wonder he was acting oddly. Dave Jensson. Dave. Jensson. Reclusive, rich, feted, the founder and sponsor of the eponymous foundation that funded students and universities around what remained of the world. Dave Jensson slumming it in New York doing maternity cover? Why? How? “You still OK with that? Not a problem? I can hold the contracts for a couple of weeks while you see how things go if you want some time.”

“No problem, just a bit of a surprise. Correction … actually that’s quite a lot of a surprise.” For a moment they stood and grinned at each other. “Wow.” She imagined that internally he was saying ‘ta-daaaa!’ like an old-time magician pulling an elephant from a top hat. A very large elephant. A very small top hat. This was some impressive coup in academic circles. And she was going to be his research assistant. She wanted to pinch herself. “Hang on, how do you have Dave Jensson’s favourite car? What else haven’t you told me?”

“Well, along with everything else you might have heard about him, true or false, he also just happens to be my very oldest friend. I look after all kinds of things for him. It’s been years since we’ve actually seen each other. I thought I’d chance my luck and invite him over on the pretext of filling in for our pregnant Pullen.” The grin looked to be on the verge of turning into a giggle before he
collected himself. “I can’t really believe he’ll soon be here. Typical of the man though – must be nearly ten years and he has to go and arrive earlier than expected. You’d better get a move on – I’d prefer it if you got there before his flight gets in. So, pick him up, take him back to mine … oh, and I’ll be at the Feathered Serpent for some late lunch if you can drag him over to meet me there. You’re more than welcome to join us … but I’m guessing you might prefer to sit at your usual table with your friends and enjoy watching them stare.” This time, the smile clearly said ‘busted’. “Yes, I do know what they consider entertainment some days. It’s flattering, but I wish the little Mexican wasn’t so obvious about it, he’s been terrible since he split up with his last boyfriend.”

He motioned to her to get in the car – only two seats, leather upholstered and highly contoured. The cockpit was roomier than she had first thought. If he wasn’t in a rush maybe he could squeeze his wide frame into it after all. Five minutes to familiarise her with the controls (same basic layout as the off-roader, even down to the navigation system – “assistance not management, your fault if you do something stupid with it” had been his reminder) then Plaisir surprised her with a reassuring touch on her shoulder. The gesture was somehow very intimate. “Don’t worry about meeting him, there’s no way he won’t like you. I think you’ll get on just fine.”
Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Struan finds his experiment among the discards

Unresponsive adult bodies fill the beds in the discard warehouse. Numbers increase, numbers decrease. Some even breathe unaided, but they are not alive, they have never been alive. The warehouse has been the destination of all of the test subjects so far. Rows of hospital gurneys with monitors and life support equipment, trees of intravenous bags feeding a body on each one. These bodies are things, they have never been people. Some are missing limbs, many are missing organs. Keen to maintain the image of being a benefit to society the director has decided to use the rejected products as warm organ donors. Dead ends as far as the primary military aim was concerned, these failed ‘answerers’ are at least able to assist with one set of needs. Scientists and technicians work through this bank of rejects, in theory testing and identifying potential candidates for further experimentation, more commonly just harvesting everything useful until the donor body is no longer worth maintaining and it is sent to the incinerator.

On a rare visit to this gloomy place, Jens Struan McDonald is intrigued by one of the more unusual bodies and has it marked for investigation rather than harvest. Fully grown, it is drip fed with the same nutrient cocktail that maintains all the subjects but is stubbornly and cadaverously thin in contrast to the healthy bulk installed on most of the beds. At night, in the vast dimness of the room, lit by the glow of hundreds of monitors, Struan’s investigations are also unusual in that he just visits to talk to his silent charge, convinced that there is something different in its development. As the days pass the grey haired doctor realises that the time he is with his corpse-like friend is the time he is most at peace, the time he can allow himself to question the morality of what he had been drawn into so many years before. Not wanting any potential awareness to be disturbed by the sounds of casual disdain from technicians working on other bodies in the room Struan prefers to leave him with earphones connected to a small mp3 player while he attends to his official work.

It does not take long for the sparse night crew to get used the sight of the doctor talking through the events of the day to his silent confessor. Most of the staff have seen similar scenarios played out before and avoid direct contact with the scientists. Certain that somehow there was more to learn from one of the discards one or other of them would be protected and tested until it became clear that it was as unresponsive as the others or declined even faster and, disheartened, the scientist would retreat back to the main labs, rarely to be seen in the rooms of the vegetative accusers again.

With this one, however, the monitors do not show decay but steady and consistent vitals. Checking the monotonously predictable technician’s notes one day Struan notices a different signature and a new way of referring to the test subject from Delta iteration, row alpha, column v. This new technician has named him ‘Dave’ and immediately given him a touch of humanity. It seems to suit him. Impressed with the information appearing in the notes, Struan asks that it becomes a permanent assignment – he is interested to read more about times when ‘Dave’ seems tense or more relaxed, and keen to see how many times he appears to be cycling through different stages of sleep. Though the EEG never records any significant change to waking activity the doctor begins to hope, or imagine, that he is seeing signs of response as he speaks to his perfect confidant.
Gene Bomb: The Soldier’s Story
Unexpected delivery

Chapter Summary

Lia meets her new boss, the mysterious Dave Jensson

As promised, the contents of the envelope ensured that Lia was directed through a number of security checkpoints and allowed to park on the service road alongside a military designated helipad. Driving the big off-roader had been fun, it was much like the trucks back home, and she’d enjoyed the feeling of security and power in the large vehicle. Taking the sports car to the cargo port had been a different kind of experience again. It was only after she’d parked that she realised she was trembling all over, the exhilaration of the drive and the responsiveness of the machine, whatever it was, had been intoxicating. She was glad of the opportunity, however brief, to gather her thoughts. Lia saw why a full license had been one criteria for the job; it would have been a crime to shackle such a machine to the city’s nanny-ish driving servers.

After a short wait she heard the heavy whup-whup of a helicopter and was out of the car in time to see the approach of a squat looking twin rotor chopper from the east of the city. Though the sound was similar to flights taken from her home as it came closer she saw this was obviously a military machine. It was ugly. Missiles hung from stubby stabilising wings and the nose canon was clearly designed to take out large targets. Everything about its appearance spoke of aggression and, Plaisir’s assurances notwithstanding, she had to wonder about someone able to call in favours to arrive in something so menacing. Unexpectedly, the beast of helicopter did not land but hovered some twenty metres above the landing pad. Hair blown astray by the downdraught of the massive rotor blades she didn’t see the payload door open. It was some seconds before Lia realised a line had been thrown out and a misshapen figure was rappelling down to the landing pad; it dropped rapidly in the calm eye of the rotor backwash. A sudden ear-splitting whine of complaint from the engines and the chopper was gone before his feet touched the floor, the drop cord retracting in a blur as if they wanted to be away from their cargo as quickly as possible.

As a first impression Lia did not think much of the deformed body as it turned and made a bee-line for her. No, not her, the car. Did this explain why he shunned publicity, why his broadcast lectures had been presented through actors? Maybe this was one of Gihon’s unspoken requirements, something he thought she could deal with better than born city dwellers and their delicate sensibilities. Deformity, like age, was one of the uncomfortable subjects that people shied away from. Then, as the figure drew nearer, an arm swept across its outline to remove the obscuring radiation cloak and hood and dump them into a disposal unit at the side of the pad. Baggy over-trousers were shed off and balled up into the same unit, the counter greedily clicking up the rads as scarlet outlined footsteps were scrubbed from the surface of the pad. He paused, briefly, to let the scrubbers catch up with him and gorge on the boots that had caused them such agitation.

Without the cloak she saw that the ‘hunch’ was just a large backpack and the scarecrow figure that moved towards her was symmetrical at least. There didn’t seem to be much of him inside his out-dated black military issue fatigues. The toughened boots only accentuated the slightness of his figure. While the exposed knee highs would protect against many threats it seemed the main reason for the heavy armour was to anchor his weedy frame to the ground. She wasn’t certain what to make of his unkempt appearance. With an untidy shock of dirty brown hair and a full beard he appeared the promised picture of neglect. Only when he reached her and offered a long fingered hand in greeting
did he smile. In that flash of white she finally saw a hint of what could be an attractive man lurking beneath the detritus of rough living and hard travelling.

Gihon had casually referred to the arrival as ‘the old man’ and, indeed, everything she’d ever read about him had led her to expect to see a much older man. The man in front of her did not look old. Up close he looked - she thought about it for a heartbeat - interesting. Large dark eyes looked down at her, carrying the echo of the smile. Nice eyes. Brown. They looked like they smiled a lot. It was remarkably easy to smile back as she shook his hand and introduced herself as his new assistant.

“Hi Lia, pleased to meet you. Just call me Dave, everything else is too much bother.” His gaze flicked between her and the car behind her, the smile stayed in place. “I’m impressed; Gihon must really like you to turn you loose with my ride.”

No one stopped them to check the new arrival’s paperwork as she drove, rather carefully she would later admit, back out of the cargo port. At one of the checkpoints she was hailed by the same guard who’d let her through earlier. But all he’d asked was if she’d been able to collect her package. There was no mention of the man now sat next to her. She might not have been thrilled by his mode of transport, but whatever had been in the magic envelope spoke volumes about his ability to ignore red tape. Maybe he really was as rich as people said.

There had been no question about who would drive back. He’d dropped his pack into the trunk of the car and then himself into the passenger seat. If Gihon was happy with her driving then so was he. Anyway, he said, it had been forever since he was last in the city so he would only get lost if he drove. And then he’d cheerily admitted that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept and said he was having enough difficulty with one foot in front of the other, he didn’t want to risk the wrath of the Plaisir by trashing his own car. Excusing himself he said he needed to rest his eyes for a spell and settled back into his seat, apparently completely relaxed and quite possibly asleep. His claimed need for rest, at least, allowed her to drive without the added distraction of speaking to him.

His accent was another strange one, not the Norteamericano variations she was used to but a kind of perfect Anglic that gave her no geographic indicators where he was from. He was tall. Taller than Gihon? She wasn’t sure; it could have just been the thick soles of the boots, or his disproportionate thinness that made him seem taller. The legs stretched out casually in front of him were long and, up close, the boots were reason enough for him to want to avoid official scrutiny. Back home Lia had seen the same boots on some of her father’s men – as well as being defensive she knew that many places had banned them and their armour plate as weapons. The long, delicate looking hands she’d already noted. A word surfaced from her sometimes random memory – could he have Marfan’s? No, that was just too random, she knew she shouldn’t make a habit of skimming other people’s reading at the house; medical history was Steve’s area, not hers. And anyway, wasn’t Marfan’s one of the many genetic disorders eradicated around the time of the Collapse?

She decided to concentrate on making the drive as smooth as possible so he wouldn’t be disturbed.
Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Struan meets Helena

The message from the technician asking McDonald to meet off the record has him intrigued. Something has happened and he needs to hear it at first hand. Meeting in one of the quieter bars on the town sized site the doctor realises that maybe he should not have been surprised to discover that signature ‘H Boothe’ belonged to one of the few female nurses employed by the labs. He realises that he’s seen her before but had assumed that the elegant looking coloured woman had been a member of administrative staff as the standard lab coat gave everyone a uniform appearance. Initial pleasantries over, he is intrigued to hear what she has to tell him.

“Is something wrong with him? I’ve not seen anything odd his readouts.”

“Not wrong, not … well … look, I’ve tried to work out how to say this; I didn’t want to write it down in case it was misunderstood, or if anyone else was taking an interest in the warehouse.” Looking down at her hands, dark slender fingers intertwined, this Helena, this nurse seems uncomfortable. “Can we get Dave moved? I don’t think he should be in with the general stock.”

“Move him?” This is unexpected, he knows this might just be clutching at false hope but finds his mouth running ahead of him. “Do you see him changing too? I’ve thought that he looks to be putting some weight on recently but haven’t wanted to say in case it was just wishful thinking. If we need to I’m sure we can get him moved, but why? What’s happened?” She won’t look him in the face. “What’s wrong?”

Comprehension dawns as she tells him what has happened - and not just the one time. In case it was a random event she had tried and had been able to reproduce the same physical reaction. Though the news is couched in detached medical terms he recognises the potential for embarrassment and misunderstanding. Like other seniors in the programme Struan has heard the rumours, the scuttlebutt filtering through from other sites. He’d always assumed that such things didn’t really go on or, if they did, they were just freak events, aberrations of sick minds, just a slim statistical possibility. The thought of similar things happening at his site, perhaps even to his Delta, makes the old man uncomfortable in ways he doesn’t want to consider. Thankful for the circumspection shown by the nurse Struan says he will pay another visit to their subject before making his decision.

His experiment seems to have moved into a different, and completely unexpected, stage of development.
Lia enters their home, the Field of Reeds, and sees how they (may) see themselves.

“I’m assuming that Arkhangelskeyev is still living with our esteemed faculty head?” He surprised her with his sudden question, not asleep then.

“They share an apartment. Professor Plaisir asked me to take you back there and then see if you wanted to join him for lunch.” There was no point correcting him on the title, so long as she had been at the university there had never been an actual head of the faculty.

“I have a question. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to as I’ll find out soon enough, but, Gihon … really long hair and prone to brooding?” At first she didn’t realise that was the question but nodded to confirm his guess. “Ah, just sharing then. Poor guys. I’d hoped they would have got themselves sorted out by now. Still, they are grownups, what can you do.” His eyes remained closed and he shrugged to himself, this seemed like old ground to him. He was clearly familiar with the unusual living arrangements of Plaisir (… or had he called him The Plaisir earlier, as if it was some kind of title and not just his name? Lia quickly dismissed the slip as fatigue) and his Russian born friend.

Nothing more was said. Lia returned her attention to listening for the precisely whispered instructions of the navigation system. Not having been one of Gihon’s students she’d never been to the apartment before and only had a general idea where their destination was located. As they dropped off the access road and down the ramp indicated to her she glanced across to her resting passenger who responded with a smile. She had no idea how long he’d been looking at her, she found his silent regard … unsettling, no, something else. Something she wasn’t familiar with. She put the feeling to one side, maybe she’d think about it later.

She slowed the car almost to a standstill. The curve of the ramp had brought them to a blank wall. She checked the navigation screen again; it indicated that she still had to continue on. Carefully, and very aware of who the car belong to, she inched it forwards. The featureless wall pulled away from their approach, a clever illusion perhaps. Not just doors sliding out of the way or a shutter rolling up but an odd combination of layers peeling back to allow them ingress. Military technology? Possibly. Unnecessary in the city? Undoubtedly.

Light flooded the dark space as they rolled beyond what she thought must be bombproof layers. The directions continued all the way to a parking slot between the off roader and a smaller, much more anonymous, city car. The voice from the module instructed Lia to leave the keys in the ignition, the garage was secure. Taken aback, she did so and got out of the roadster to see another vehicle parked at the end of the row and a selection of motorbikes next to that. There were spaces for still more cars and a large, well equipped workshop area opposite the big doors now closed behind them.

Jensson retrieved his bag and headed for a heavy door at the back of the garage. He didn’t seem at all surprised by the unusual parking area and what she thought was a staggeringly casual display of wealth. Individual cars were not that common; to have four for two people (three if she counted the new arrival) just seemed wasteful. Steve and Meg had a car, but the whole house shared it with them and helped them pay the heavy license fees for the privilege using it. Lia caught up with him as the
door opened with the same complicated mechanism as the main garage doors. She didn’t see any access panel as they went through the door into a small, nondescript vestibule with three standard doors, all closed, and a wide staircase curving upwards. She looked back at the inside of the secure door – again no panel. With the affluence on display she guessed that she was seeing a very sophisticated security program in action. It was probably better than most military technology.

Music was playing quietly as they walked into the large open plan living area at the heart of the apartment; it seemed to be the background sound of the place and one that the scruffy man had expected. Rather than the sudden flood of light in the garage, on this floor the light had increased gradually as they’d ascended. There was no single visible source of illumination but, rather, it was a diffuse effect from the whole of the ceiling. The newcomer seemed happy to see familiar things as he looked around then turned and bowed to her with an unexpected flourish, “Ms Jordan, welcome to the Field of Reeds. Welcome to my home.” Again she saw his teeth were very white in contrast to the dark beard when he smiled, his canines slightly longer than was fashionable. Sharp teeth in a sharp face. “Now then, I recall a mention of lunch but I’d hate to embarrass anyone with my appearance. Could you give me some time to make myself presentable?” Without waiting for her answer he swung the bag over his shoulder and disappeared through one of the doors leading off the central space.

Left to herself she tried to take in what he had seen, what had made him immediately feel at home in the large rectangular space. Next to the staircase was a long sweep of an open kitchen, all appliances were very discreetly hidden apart from a massive range at the far end. It put her in mind of Gihon’s off roader – surely too large to be practical but it looked as if someone enjoyed using it. The table near to her was of a heavy dark wood (she touched it, real wood) and could easily seat eight, but from what she’d heard she guessed that didn’t happen very often. In the far left corner from where she stood with the staircase behind her was the inner door from the front lobby. The door seemed a long way away. The place was clearly designed for more than the pair who lived there and she wondered if they ever felt lonely in the big space.

She’d heard descriptions of the apartment from some of Plaisir’s students. Most had only briefly seen beyond the inner doors if they called to drop things off. Those that were invited in rarely made it beyond the two armchairs that faced each other a short distance from the door. The chairs looked comfortable but there was a strong hint of ‘thus far and no further’ about their placement. The big man had always protected his privacy. She had never heard anyone refer to the apartment by a name before; it must mean something to the surprisingly youthful ‘old’ man. She added it to her mental list of questions; if she was to be his research assistant she would do her best to find the answers without asking outright.

The majority of the space was taken up by a casual arrangement of sofas. Like the interiors of the cars, and unusual in the city, Lia guessed that the dark and softly shining upholstery was genuine animal leather (the faint smell immediately reminded her of home). They were the same basic design as the armchairs but their size varied from an intimate looking two-seater to something long enough for the men to lie on full length in comfort. Two might even lie together if they were feeling cosy. (Surprised at herself Lia hurriedly pushed that thought aside, maybe she was the one who was over-tired, such odd notions she seemed to be having.) Tables were dotted between these couches, some supporting lamps, some carrying data screens, and all with books. Books were everywhere. One pile - an untidy ziggurat of probably priceless volumes - seemed to mark out Gihon’s favourite space. Lia could see one of his notebooks and the familiar barrette discarded on the seat next to them. The signature white metal hair clasp was one of the few personal items visible in the room. She could see no photos, nothing else intimately connected with the two men who’d shared the same space for years; it was as if the room was waiting, the apartment paused in the gap between breaths.

Doors to the bedrooms, or so she assumed they were, were visible in the gaps between low
bookcases that circuited the living area, two opposite each other along the long walls on either side. The doors were painted with figures, a different one on each. She thought that must have been how Dave had headed so confidently to his own room. Lia recognised that the figures had to be Egyptian gods but was not familiar enough with them to work out which they were. The theme continued around the room in a frieze running above the bookcases as images of gods and kings promenaded between panels of hieroglyphs. Even the pair of square columns marking the mid-line of the room was adorned floor to ceiling with the same type of decoration. Inspecting the wall nearest to her she could make out slight variations in the lines, signs of corrections and hesitations as if a human hand had made the paintings.

“Typical of a Ptolemaic fan, his gods are all muscle and his writing is terrible.” Engrossed in looking at the exquisite figurines on the bookcases and the formalised paintings she hadn’t heard him return and she gave a little start of surprise. And another one, when she realised that the pale face full of angles and shadows looking down at her belonged the same scarecrow that she’d met at the helipad. “Don’t even get me started on his grammar.” The grin flashed again. “I take it you never did any of his Egyptology classes? Shame, he tells a good story for all that he murders the language. Here, let me introduce you.”

The door to their right showed a young man in his prime, his skin gold and his stance poised and powerful. Jensson pointed out the double crown of Egypt on the bizarre avian head as she was transfixed by its beady falcon gaze. “This is Horus, son of the dead Osiris, nephew to Seth and rightful ruler of the two lands. Depending on their background some people recognise him as the ‘Son of the Widow’ and, technically, his mother is also known as the Queen of Heaven.” He looked at her for signs of recognition, and then let it pass. “Don’t worry; I’ve no doubt we’ll get there if you want. This will be Myk’s room.”

He indicated the door to the left of the bookcase; the figure was red with a strange dog like head and straight thin tail standing stiffly from the back of a crisp white kilt. At first the pose seemed to be the same as the other gods around the walls, but she got the impression of anger and closely contained frustration behind the black snout. “This is Seth who killed Osiris in an attempt to usurp the throne and then fought with Horus over the succession. This is Gihon’s room. I know, he doesn’t seem like the bad guy, but part of the story is about how he tried to get power over Horus.” A corner of his mouth quirked up in a half smile. “Let’s just say they have some interests in common.”

He beckoned her over to the opposite doors. Immediately across from Myk’s room was another bird headed deity, this one holding a palette and a pen. Jensson described the bird as an ibis. This was Thoth who had brought writing to mankind, was an excellent card player and had won five extra days in a game with Re so a couple of the other gods could get it on. But who was also “a bit boring, a bit prissy, but necessary to keeping score between Horus and his uncle. None of us, this is the guest room.”

Finally, then, he pointed to his own door. This god at least had a human face, though his skin was dark green. In the same twisted profile as the others he was mummified, with only his green hands visible outside of the white wrappings. The hands held a crook and flail, signs of kingship to match the ornate crown on his head. “This is Osiris, the first ruler of Egypt. He became the god of the dead and, by coincidence, also of fertility as he managed to impregnate his wife after being murdered by his brother. This is one of Gihon’s little jokes. I’ve never been cut up into small pieces or lost anything quite so important to a man. Got to love the Egyptians though, theirs was one of the first and best soap operas at the birth of the West.”
Chapter Summary

Struan meets his creature. He is weak and frail, and Helena loves him immediately.

Later that evening, after ensuring there are no other experiments or visits scheduled, the gruff man gathers his thoughts. The gentle cadences of a Gregorian chant issue from the small Bluetooth speaker used soften the sepulchral quiet of the warehouse. During his first visits the sound of worship had seemed appropriate to him in this purgatory of silent flesh and he’d grown to like the unaccompanied voices. Now he is tense, uncertain what success or failure would mean.

“Now then.” A long pause. Struan was acutely aware of how awkward it had been for two adults to talk about the situation. He’d never had to do the father/son chat, what to say to someone who had never even spoken? A silent prayer to a deity he had long since lost any faith in, please let this be the right sign, let this one be the one. “Now then. We need to talk … all this lying around playing dumb can’t last much longer, we know you must be in there and we really need to find out what is going on with you.” Another long pause, the old doctor grasps a cool wrist and concentrates on the steady pulse under his fingers. “Dave, let me know you’re in there. Please, give me some sign that you are conscious, answer me.”

“What.” A breath “Would. You.” Another breath. “Like me to say?” The words are calm and clearly enunciated but said in a low voice as if the owner is not certain what sound would be produced. Struan had been looking at his wrist, hadn’t noticed the strain in the jaw before the words escaped, the briefly won struggle to control the unused mouth. He stares down into dark eyes. It is the first time he has seen them open voluntarily and he finds the effect of them unsettling in the shadows and half-light. The voice continues on – easier - every word a breakthrough, every intonation a shock. “You know, you’ve never really asked me a direct question Dr McDonald. How can I be your answerer when your questions have all been rhetorical?”

Time stretches between them as the old man tries not to gape. The cold hand turns and grasps his own.

“But you sound like me? Why do you sound like me?” He is aware of the pressure from the long narrow fingers but can’t look away from the direct gaze. Why was his own accent being thrown back at him, was this some kind of mocking?

Jens Struan McDonald, a man who has spilled many thousands of words in long weeks of one sided communication, is speechless. His test subject bares his teeth in an approximation of a smile. His perfect white teeth. His perfect, white, and rather intimidating teeth.

“Why shouldn’t I sound like you? Yours is the voice I have dreamed to, the only voice I have known for most of my … consciousness. I have tried to remember and think about everything you have said to me. And, you know, you have talked at me for so long I think I am become a reflection of you so who else could I sound like? No matter now, carry on, we can come back to that later. I was expecting to hear more about planarian worms and telomerase degradation and then maybe more views on the budget deficit before a segue into the politics of muscle cars. You are not your usual self. What is so urgent for you that decided to take a direct approach now?” The uncanny eyes close briefly and there is a hint of a frown on the unlined forehead. So much talking seems to be an effort.
“I feel I am so close to being finished. I hope this distraction is worthwhile.”

“I need to get you out of here, get you somewhere more private. This isn’t what I expected for our first conversation. Frankly the fact that you seem to be so aware has me dumbfounded. I wasn’t expecting more than a blink or a twitch … nothing like you are. Do … do you mind if I call someone?” Feeling out of his depth the doctor fumbles for his phone and dials the number saved earlier in the day. No introduction, the person at the other end clearly recognises where the call is coming from. “I need your help back here, get to me as soon as you can. Yes, it’s him.” Struan finally gets to show his discovery what a smile looks like, “Trust me. You have to see him before anyone else, oh, and see if you can bring something to dress him in, we’re moving him tonight.”

He ends the call with no goodbyes. Knowing that Helena is on her way back to the warehouse, he has to push on with what he needs to say. “Right. Yes. Talk. The person on the way in to help me - to help you - is the person who has been looking after you. You’ve heard me talk about different people, different names. I don’t know if I’ve made it clear that there are physical differences between people. I’ve probably rambled on for hours and I have no idea what basic information I might have missed. Let’s say, to start, do you know the difference between men and women?”

Struan gets a puzzled look in return, Dave is clearly trying to process an appropriate response now he has a question to work on. “I could repeat what you have told me about the definitions of how people organise themselves but I suspect you want something simpler. I remember you saying there are only males generated by the program, right?”

“Yes.”

“OK. And whatever your wife accused you of before she left you, you are also defined as a man?”

“Yes.” Struan tries not to choke on the word, suddenly dreading to think of some of the things he’s said.

“I’m guessing that this is to do with the person coming here, a friend as neither of you identified yourselves … a friend who makes you ask if I understand gender difference. The friend is a woman?” A nod in reply, this creation was just one sudden rush of surprises, not only able to respond at will but giving all the appearance of reasoning. A slight smile as the eyes close, he seems to have worked out the smiling thing very quickly. Of course he has to close his eyes, thinks the astonished scientist, none of his stimuli have included sight. “Let me think. I noticed the difference between hands first. She has warm hands, they are soft and smooth. She does not always smell the same, sometimes I thought there was someone else there but she has the same hands. You always smell vaguely like that drink you have, the one you think no one notices when you drink it at night … and you have a rough patch of skin on you left thumb where you chew at it when you are tense. You would be doing that now but I have hold of you.”

To Struan ‘Dave’ seems much too prosaic a name for this miracle.

“There have been other hands, but not recently – they were not always gentle so I was glad when you sent them away. Many of the hands have had metal rings on them so that does not tell me much about the sexes but I think it might tell me about your age. Again your left hand, you wear one ring, it is thin, almost worn away but there is no gap between it and your finger. Those other hands, the casual hands, often wore big rings with squared edges like they were new or fashions have changed over time. She also wears just one ring. It’s on her left hand, the same finger as you … so perhaps a similar age or experience. Also married then at some point? She has had experience looking after helpless things like me. She is very gentle when she washes me. She touches me and I think the feeling is nice. The last few times she touched me and it was different …”
The eyes open again; an ‘O’ of surprise replacing the dreamy smile. “Is that not meant to happen? Have I caused offence?” Truly amazing, his conversation had changed from awareness to guilt in a matter of moments. Even Struan, with a strict Catholic upbringing in tatters behind him, has to concede that that is an impressive feat.

“Well, some might call me old fashioned but I would say its proper to get to know a person, or at the very least ask their name first before something like that happens. Don’t worry, I think you’ll be just fine, my fault for not being prepared for that eventuality. OK? OK. Right, now give me my hand back. I need to get you disconnected from all these drips and bloody useless monitors before we get you out of here.”

Helena arrives to see Dave free of feeds and sensors, propped up with pillows against the raised back of the gurney, carefully sipping from a plastic drinks bottle held by the attentive scientist. All of the equipment has been pushed back from the bed, nothing to distract from the view of the miracle. Silent and serious he stares at her, then Struan and back to her. He appears to be be working something out. She sees the thin face as if for the first time – a strong brow, high cheekbones, long narrow nose, eyes open so wide she can see the whites around the iris. With the odd shadows in the room how can she see his eyes so clearly? He is bald. All the subjects were routinely shaved, but she paid special attention to that task after hearing that a powerful business man was looking to invest in the program for the benefit of mankind – or maybe just to correct a receding hair line. She knows it will only be a matter of time before the shadow visible below the scalp grows through to a rich chestnut brown to match the eyes.

The head seems out of proportion to the attenuated body below it. Oh, that poor weak body. Sitting him up has done nothing to improve the unworldly appearance of his torso. She had always been so careful to make certain he was covered up but now the rumpled sheet pools around his hips and there is no denying his difference. The stark prominence of the xiphoid process casts a protective shadow from his sternum and she imagines she can see the slow beat of his heart carried through tight, translucent skin. Relieved now about the music played to him to keep him from overhearing others in the room, she hopes no one ever repeats the cruel nickname some of the technicians had given him – Jack the Bodiless. He had always seemed so vulnerable, so frail. From her first day in the warehouse she had been drawn to him, there had been no way she could resist his particular siren song.

“Hello. You must be Helena. Dr McDonald has been explaining how you have been caring for me. He thinks he has been thorough, but he did not prepare me for how nice it is to look at you. I can genuinely say I am very pleased to see you. I would like to thank you for all your attentions … and I believe I must apologise for what this body has done. I am sorry if it has upset you or caused offence. I will try to ensure it does not happen again.” Appearing suitably abashed he drops his gaze for a long moment, only to look up again with a lop-sided grin, “well, unless you want it to happen again?”

“Men!” Laughter can be the only response. Untold billions spent to develop the Shabti program and she was looking at an emaciated chancer who couldn’t even hold a drink unassisted. Struan might look for all the world like he wanted the ground to swallow him up, but she found the hopeful glance impossibly endearing. She had no idea what they had ended up with but his smile … oh his smile and the life in his eyes were worth everything to her in that instant. Trying to not get distracted by those large doll-like eyes, she realises that they are the only conscious people in the room. “I don’t see any of the primary team around. Have you told the director?”

“No need to disturb him yet. I want some time to be sure what we have to show him, didn’t want to drag him back from his precious golfing weekend. It’s just you and me for now; this doesn’t need to
happen officially until next week. Now he is awake, I don’t want to leave him here with people he
doesn’t know. Don’t want to risk strangers seeing him. I was hoping you would be able to help get
him to my place …?” Struan’s tone is as hopeful as his charming experiment. Helena immediately
knows there’s no way she could ever refuse.

“Right, let’s be about it then. I know I am only a lowly nurse but have you considered what has to
happen at some point soon?” Two pairs of blank looks, one she could excuse but why was it the
most intelligent of people could lose the ability to do joined-up thinking at the worst time? “Think
about it. It looks like someone has nearly finished his water … someone who has never actually had
anything to eat or drink before. It might be an idea to explain the practicalities of human plumbing
while you dress him.” Throwing the bag of loose gym clothes at McDonald, and turning on her heel
before they see the amusement on her face, she leaves the two men looking at each other. “I’ll rustle
up some supplies and a wheelchair, good job I left my car at the loading bay. Don’t go anywhere
without me.”
To the Feathered Serpent

Chapter Summary

Lia takes Dave to meet Gihon and some things become obvious

Later, Lia remembered that she had rather enjoyed the walk from the apartment block. It was a pleasant stroll in the sun across the corner of the park over to the Feathered Serpent. The central location of the apartment put it in easy walking distance of the Library, the main faculty buildings and, she realised, was not too far from her own shared house. Jensson had seemed interested in the layout of the campus, asking questions about this and that building, re-orienting himself in university grounds changed since his last stay while skilfully avoiding the subject of quite when that had been. As he pointed over to the bulk of the Library, its monolithic bulk rearing up behind smaller buildings, a flash of light reflected dazzlingly off his left hand. There had been nothing on the hand as it rested on his thigh in the car, she was sure of that. But what was there now?

She was glad that she’d not told her friends of the day’s mission, or her first impressions of her new boss, while she waited for him to get cleaned up. The man who walked next to her now seemed to have little in common with the unpromising vagabond who’d dropped from the brutish Russian helicopter. He moved with a grace that had been hidden by the ugly and threatening boots. His suit, reminiscent of – but less intimidating than - Gihon’s layered robes, had a timeless and understated expensive quality. The European cut was elegant rather than fashionable, it flattered his slim frame, and the muted greys were a subtle contrast with the auburn highlighted hair that now showed a nodding acquaintance with being under control. Clean shaven his appearance was striking, his sharp features compelling rather than fitting the softer mould of recent trends. He was clearly a man who could make an arresting first impression when he wanted to. Today seemed to be one of those days.

Lia had noticed the glances of people walking in the opposite direction and the way conversations halted as faces turned to follow his passage. Curiously, he didn’t seem to notice the regard of these distracted pedestrians. Whether he was truly blind to the effect he was having or, as she had seen with Gihon before, chose to ignore it she was not certain. It was not in the woman’s character think that people might have been looking at the two of them together - or that anyone could have found anything of interest in her presence.

The Feathered Serpent was popular with university staff and students all year round. Though the campus was always busy there were still some weeks before the start of the term proper, and the atmosphere in the C-shaped bar was more of a lazy buzz than the mad crush that descended with every new academic year as freshers found their feet and started new traditions. Lia and her friends had met regularly at the same tables on the balcony for the last couple of years. They had settled on a group of tables on the wide balcony that extended from the three internal walls of the C after deciding which were most suited to their requirements – out of the busiest traffic (but not too far away to be overlooked by the waiting staff), with fine views across the park and down into a certain corner of the main court below. Though the location had initially been chosen by others in her little group she had begun to appreciate the benefits of the view over the long summer.

Lia brought Jensson into the Serpent through the open side facing the park. As they entered the stone floored courtyard at the heart of the bar they could see Gihon at his usual table. Turned slightly away from them, head down, he appeared to be reading. The reason for the mystery appointment was clear
to see. His hair was now tamed in gleaming, intricate plaits. Wherever he’d had it done it was clearly the work of some skill and effort. The two side braids were still in place, the only variation to the extravagant symmetry of his new style. The intrigued woman had never known the big man to take such care, such extreme care, in his appearance. She thought it could only have been done for a special event – or person.

A sotto voce oath escaped the man beside her as he stopped mid-stride, pulling up short at seeing the reading figure. She didn’t quite hear what he said but there was something about the way he said it, he seemed surprised … and, and what? Lia looked between them, and then her glance flicked down to confirm her sudden suspicion. She was familiar with the gold and platinum clasps on the big man’s braids and she recognised that their patterns were matched by the double ring on the new arrival’s hand. The only difference was in the choice of metals – the cold burning platinum of the beautifully complex wedding ring was what had caught the light as he had pointed to the Library earlier. Oh, she realised, probably not just Plaisir’s oldest friend then. She wondered what other understatements he had made recently and then reminded herself that Europeans, no matter how normal some of them might seem most of the time, were sometimes just too different.

Not wishing to impose on their reunion she murmured her adieu and turned toward the steps and her friends. Jensson caught her arm briefly, the shock of contact halting her withdrawal as much as his long fingers. “Do I look ok? Sorry, sorry, no, shouldn’t ask.” She was intrigued to see a sudden nervousness, a hint of rawness beneath his assured exterior. “Deep breath. I’m ok … no, no I’m not. Look at me, nervous as a schoolboy. Ha! Ten years and I’m just going to go over and say ‘hi’ like nothing has changed.” She thought she saw a brief flash of panic before he regained his calm.

“Yes, you look ok. Actually, if you’re looking for a disinterested opinion I’d say you’re looking pretty good. I see the ring on your finger; I know he wears the same in his braids. I might not know the exact meaning but I think I have a close guess. Don’t worry about the years or whatever happened, from what I’ve seen of Gihon recently I’d say that today he’s just as wound up about meeting you again.”

On impulse she stretched up and kissed him on the cheek. The observer in the corner of her mind automatically made a couple of notes. His skin was smooth and cool; she was impressed with the closeness of the shave. Whatever aftershave he used it seemed familiar but she couldn’t quite place where she recognised it from. She knew that she liked it. “Put both of you out of your misery. Really, just go over and say ‘hi’ like no time has passed. Oh, and don’t forget to breathe. I think I could quite like you, and I wouldn’t want to lose you on your first day here.” Smiling back at his lost expression she was aware of a desire to kiss him again. And not just on the cheek. Strange, she thought, it was all most uncharacteristic of her. She would never have behaved so forwardly with a New Yorker. She retreated up the steps before she could consider what the feeling might signify - after all, it wasn’t like it would mean anything to him.

The thin man stood in front of the table, looking at his friend. Of course Gihon knew he was there, the pretence of reading was nothing more than that. He was just waiting for Dave to start the conversation. “You know, it still amazes me. I go away and each time I see you again you take my breath away. It’s like that first time over again.”

“Can’t be,” the broad-shouldered man made a pantomime of checking himself before grinning back, “I’ve definitely been dressed the whole time I’ve been sat here, witnesses and everything.” They both laughed. It was a warm sound. It flowed around the courtyard. People nearby smiled and relaxed, most of them not noticing or knowing why. The years of separation were set aside in the healing and easy comfort of their laughter. Gihon rose from his seat, extending a hand to his oldest
friend. “Oh, come here you beautiful creature.” The handshake became a close embrace, neither of them wanting to be first one to let go of the other.

“People will talk.” The newcomer glanced quickly around the courtyard, reflexively noting a number of faces doing their best to look nonchalant and, whatever else, not stare at their greeting.

“I’d be upset if they didn’t. Damn, but it’s good just to see you again. You look … well, you look fucking amazing.” A large percentage of the nonchalant faces lost their struggle to a mixture of shock, surprise or prurient interest as the embrace proved to be just the precursor to a series of long, lingering kisses. The city may have worked on a façade of cool indifference to the private lives of others. Maybe two other men kissing wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow but this was Gihon Plaisir, the man who didn’t touch, the man who only wanted his Russian, and here he was closed-eyed and open-mouthed as he welcomed a stranger.

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Lia had her back to the reunion in the courtyard below as she moved between tables to join her friends. She dropped into an empty chair. “Guys, we have been so busted, the big guy spotted you leering at him months ago.” There was no response from her companions. They seemed to be agog with whatever was going on in the courtyard; she was a little scared but had to ask. “What are you staring at?”

“They are kissing.” No need to ask who Lupe was referring to.

“They are European; it’s how they say hello over there. Do me a favour and be a little less provincial would you.” She picked up a menu, ignoring the little voice that had calculated how long it had taken her to get to the table. “Have you already had lunch or were you waiting for me?”

“No, this isn’t being polite, this is real kissing. You know, real ‘take me now’ kissing. Oh, I forgot, you don’t. Who’s this one then? Where’s he turned up from and, more to the point, how is Blondie going to take it when he finds out?” While the others were reduced to incoherent expressions of amazement, and Lupe seemed to be having problems working out the correct order of inhale and exhale, Robyn, incisive as ever, cut directly to their main concerns.

“He’s my new boss; he came in from Siberia earlier today.” She turned to look back at the table holding their interest. “Oh. See what you mean.” So, she hadn’t been out on her guess. Matched in height, extreme proximity exaggerated the slightness of one and the bulk of the other. She did her best to act cool. “That, ladies and germs, is Dave Jensson, possibly also known as David Jensson-Plaisir. Or vice versa …” Each seemed to focus all his attention on the other as they kissed. They didn’t rush. It was as if all their hellos were concentrated in that intimate and gentle contact. Something inside her gave a flutter and a lurch. She didn’t realise it, but she was already lost. “Tell me, have they … oh, wow … has either of them stopped for air yet?”
Alyssa hadn’t been back to the house for some time. If she was being honest she probably wouldn’t have accepted her father’s invitation had she not been so intrigued by this breakthrough that had set the other sites participating in the Shabti program abuzz with amazement. Her father had the only conscious Delta, the first and only conscious Shabti - period. Officially on leave, she hoped to return to Site Three with insights gained from first-hand experience of the subject. There had to be something different about him, something beyond the blood and tissue samples distributed between the other sites. She had come to try and meet the Delta, to look for an essential ‘Daveness’ that could be identified and refined in the next iterations of the programme.

Typical, no one at home. Alyssa McDonald recalls all the times she had come back to empty houses as a child. Her father, the big scientist, always too busy with his work to notice his living creation growing up year by year. By habit her first stop is upstairs to dump her bag in her old room. No changes, photos of her on the walls at the important stages of her life – sports events, prize givings, graduations – nothing really personal, just those things he thought should be marked. All reminders that, on many levels, they’d never really got each other.

At least everywhere was clean and tidy. Maybe he had finally accepted the need for a cleaner to stay on top of things. Going back through the house she notices more changes. Subtle ones. No, not just a cleaner. A woman? Her father with a woman? No, couldn’t be, at least she couldn’t imagine anyone else coming back here. Still, something was not quite right. Someone was studying - all kinds of things, the piles of books in the family room were not restricted to medical research. And where had all the documentaries come from? She was not so surprised at the content, looking through the boxes they were almost all fine and worthy subjects, but history had never been his thing and since when had her father made time to watch everything ever made by David Attenborough? And astrophysics? There was something very odd going on with the eclectic mix of viewing. A woman with older children? He was often absent minded but that would be too much to forget to mention. She hadn’t bothered to check the other upstairs rooms.

As a child Alyssa and her father had communicated mostly via the medium of the fridge door. Looking for a drink to take the edge off a hot day, and thinking this might be the place to solve the mystery, she leaves the educational treasure trove behind and heads for the kitchen. She finds not individual letters, or even magnetic words, but a post-it note on the fridge door written in a rounded script like a hand getting used to forming letters – ‘If we’re not in when you get back we are down at the lake’. The post-it was signed ‘D’. We?

Following the path down through the stand of trees behind the house she comes to a sudden stop after rounding the bend into the private beach. She recognises the old plaid picnic rug but not the couple screwing on it. A thin pale man kneels back on his haunches, a coloured woman straddling him as he thrusts up and into her. He holds her down to him with hands tight on her shoulders, his face buried into her ample bosom. Alyssa doesn’t know what to do; she should go back to the house and leave them in private but finds she cannot move from the path. An uncertain voyeur, guilty and
excited at the same time, she watches them as they reach a gasping climax.

Suddenly gentle, the man lays the woman back on to the rug, reaches in between their bodies and carefully catches something as he slowly withdraws from her. A dark hand feels around the edges of the rug, finds an insulated box and drags it over to them. The rescued prophylactic is sealed in a jar marked with a biohazard warning and then put into the box like a rare and precious find. Reaching into the box again the woman puts something against the inside of his arm. Lia cannot see what they are concentrating over. A dark vial returned to the box which is then closed and pushed back out of the way. A blood sample? Laughing now, the man bends again to kiss the woman, trailing his lips over her body and finishing by nuzzling between her legs as she runs her fingers through his shoulder length brown hair. Responding to some inner impulse, he rises and strides into the clear cold water of the lake, swimming away from his erstwhile lover without a word.

The woman remains in place, head back, eyes closed, legs apart and knees bent as if unwilling to give up the feeling of him there, waiting for his return. Alyssa also waits. The pale man does not return; the woman looks to be dozing. Eventually Alyssa walks towards the rug, shoes crunching on the grainy shale of the secluded beach to announce her presence as she nears the exposed woman.

"Er … hello? Hi? Are you ok?" Stupid thing to say, of course she is ok, she looks about as ok as anyone could ever be. "I’m Alyssa McDonald. That’s my Dad’s house at the top of the path. Are you sure it’s ok for you to be here? What if someone sees you?" There had been no other car by the house. There was only a small knot of discarded clothing by the rug – was that a sarong? Where had this strange couple come from? Had her father taken them in for some reason? There were no other houses around by this part of the lake. She hadn’t thought to check his study; there was a bathroom and room enough for two extra bodies if they were happy on the old sofa bed. Was one of these ‘D’?

"Pleased to meet you Alyssa, have a seat." A languid hand pats to invite her down to the rug. "Oh, don’t worry this is about the safest place in a very safe place. I thought you must be special, to be able to wander in and get so close to the ‘product’. And don’t concern yourself about modesty, the snipers in the trees have got used to ignoring what they see. No, don’t look round, don’t look for them. It’s a game we play. I pretend they are not there and they pretend they don’t see the floorshow.”

"Snipers?” Snipers! When did the base start having security inside the perimeter?

"Yeah, gave me such a shock one day when I looked up and there was a pair of eyes staring back at me. After that I thought it best we just had sex in the open. I didn’t want himself getting freaked out by seeing someone looking at him, we never quite know how he is going to react to surprises. First time they tried to get him to fire a gun the noise scared him so much he rabbited off through the trees. Took three days for him to come back, dirty and a bit scratched up but nothing a feed and a good soak couldn’t fix. Your father isn’t too happy about all the security around the place, but Director Harrison insisted on making more of a show of protecting the investment after that.”

"Why do it outside at all? Surely there must be somewhere more comfortable you can go?”

"He likes to feel the warmth of the sun on his skin. And,” the inviting hand shaded the dark woman’s eyes as she gave the blond a significant glance, “we are working on his tan. Ok, it’s not much of a tan but at least he’s doesn’t have that blue undertone anymore. I’m Helena, by the way, his nurse.”

“So, that was the wonder of the age.” Alyssa tries to sound nonchalant as she shakes the same hand, but she is surprised to see all the pieces fall into place. Obviously really. Knowing how recently he had become active she realises the childish handwriting on the note was just that – nearly two metres tall and improbably real ‘D’ was all of six months old. Photos had accompanied the first reports, all carefully pixelated for some ridiculous notion of anonymity or respect that must have come from her
father. Her father! "Does Struan know what you are doing with him?"

"Oh yes. I know it’s not in the official reports but your father is convinced that his progress is in some way connected with sex. He became responsive after becoming, well, responsive, so to say. Struan doesn’t ask too many questions. On an abstract level he can process what is going on but he gets very uncomfortable with what he keeps calling ‘TMI’. The note that brought you down here is our way of saying ‘don’t come looking for us, we know you don’t want to know what we are doing’. We stay here to try and keep Dave as happy as possible. As far as the director is concerned, a happy Dave is a compliant Dave. So long as the product arrives at the labs and is prepared to let them do what they want when they want no one says anything."

"And are you really happy with this arrangement? However you started, nursing is not the word I would use to describe what I saw you doing.” No point pretending that she hadn’t seen the ‘floorshow’.

"Honestly?” Helena’s look of disbelief speaks volumes, but Alyssa is too distracted to pick up the response.

"Honestly – what are you getting out of this?"

"Other than great sex with a man who adores me? Feeling younger and healthier than I have done for years? Not having to go back in that warehouse and look at all those failures day after day? No, there’s clearly nothing in it for me.”

"But … he’s only six months old … that’s got to be wrong, hasn’t it?” Even with only a brief unobstructed view the pale figure had definitely looked fully mature, and was certainly a very willing – forceful even - participant in the act, but the newcomer still found the thought disquieting.

"I’ll let you try and explain that one to him shall I? Seriously, I tried to slow him down. He seemed so fragile at first I was scared of hurting him so I kept putting him off. And then … then, oh, you don’t need to know the detail but one thing led to another and, well, here we are. Look, it’s not like I’d intended any of this. Being seduced by one of your father’s experiments was hardly the most obvious thing to put on my to-do list this year. I only took the job here to keep in touch with my grandson who’s a pilot over at the airbase.”

"And there’s no downside to this?” With her world view taking a sudden lurch Alyssa takes another long appraising look at the figure next to her. This is a grandmother?

"I won’t pretend there isn’t … I told you, I am still his nurse. I take his bloods, I dress his wounds and help him get over whatever has been done to him in the name of science. He knows he is a freak and it gets him down. They want him cold and detached, more machine than man, so he tries to give them that. I’m still not sure what it is he gets from me, but I let him be human when he’s scared and lonely and in pain. Why should I deny him any happiness I can give?”

"Does he always love you and leave you?” With her beautifully taut skin and firm body, this is a grandmother? Alyssa fights an urge to touch the lustrous dark skin, it seems so youthful, so inviting.

"He heard you coming down the path. I know he didn’t want to finish so quickly but he’s still a little shy of meeting new people. I’m sure he will be back as soon as his swim tires him out and he gets cold.”

"Can I ask - what’s with the specimen box?” All she wants to ask is how this woman looks the way she does, this must be why her father asked her to come over, part of what he couldn’t say over the phone. Maybe this was the source of some of the other rumours she’d heard.
“That’s part of the quid pro quo around here. We provide samples of him in return for the appearance of a free life at the house, time for him to try to learn about the world. Officially, they say they are worried that he might become fertile so they have to keep checking. Off the record, I’m sure there’s some very unprofessional sniggering and testing of rejuvenation products going on somewhere.” A chuckle and a small conspiratorial smile, “still, they don’t have to have everything. We give them enough so they don’t think to ask for any more.” A pause as she looks around the apparently idyllic beach. “He’s right, you know, it is nice just lying here in the sun. If you don’t have anywhere else to be just now, why don’t you relax a while? I promise you are very safe here.”

With nothing else planned, and no one else to see other than her father, Alyssa agrees to stay with the older woman. Wary of the potential watchers in the trees, however, she finds that she cannot forego her rather functional sports bra and briefs. With a long civilian trans-Atlantic flight and the journey up to the base behind her she soon relaxes in the summer heat. As she begins to doze to the background sounds of the small creatures in the undergrowth her new companion sits up as if something has just occurred to her.

“There’s maybe something I should tell you before you meet him. We’re used to it, and I doubt if your father even notices it any more so he’s probably not mentioned it or bothered to include it in the reports, but Dave speaks with an accent. There’s no problem understanding him, it’s just that he sounds a little out of place around here. Actually, you might feel right at home when you do speak to him but probably best not to draw attention to it.” Odd accent, OK, she can cope with that one, but it looked like that is just the softener.

“And, well ... Struan has been taking Dave off site, trying to get him used seeing people and how they interact. Nothing major, just small trips out to local towns, supermarkets and diners mostly; they shop, drink coffee, stay quiet and no one notices them. Last week he had the mad idea of driving him down to Boston to see how he coped in a large city.” Helena looks uncomfortable. Harvard had been Struan’s old stomping ground before he joined the program full time. Harvard had been where they had lived as a family before her mother had left them and returned home. What had her father done? “I know this is probably not the news you want to hear, but it might be best to get it out in the open sooner rather than later. Something happened while they were out ... he didn’t think it through and he is really sorry, but your father tried passing Dave off as your boyfriend when they bumped into an old friend.”

“He did what?” Her voice chokes and comes out as a shocked hiss. “But ...” Mad old fool.

“I don’t know why he did it, he said he just panicked and couldn’t think why he would be in Starbucks with another Scot who looked about your age, felt like he had to create a back story or something. For an intelligent man and all, your father can be monumentally hopeless at times. It might just have been wishful thinking, a Freudian slip if you like. Course the friend had known you since you were so high ... so now Dave is a ‘phase’ you are going through.” What else? There had to be something else, Alyssa could see it. Mad, mad, old fool. “… And so we’ve all been invited over for a party at Richard Lytton’s place next weekend – your god-father is just dying to catch up with you and see whatever magic Dave must have to make you try out straight as an option and why you’ve been keeping him a secret.”

There is no way of stopping the sigh of resignation that escapes Alyssa. It is the same one used by all grown-up children disappointed and eternally embarrassed at the things parents do. This was what was so urgent, what he couldn’t say on the phone. Helena recognises the sigh from one of the last conversations she had with her own daughter - a conversation that had started happily with the news that she had met someone and would be moving in with him, and which got increasingly strained when she said that this someone was not only white (understatement) but there was something of an age difference (understatement didn’t quite cover it - he was younger that her first great-grandchild).
Still, she had kept things as close to the truth as possible and hoped that that would be enough to reduce the fall-out should her grandson ever bump into them on the base or – worse still – call unexpectedly.

“You said we’ve all been invited? How many people is ‘we’?” Alyssa’s sinking feeling gets deeper as she remembers where ‘uncle’ Richard’s estate is. “This is going to be an overnight stay. What’s the old idiot said?”

“The four of us, you’re with Dave and I’m, well, I’m really along to make sure Dave is ok but officially I’m now your father’s lady friend. Apparently Lytton had made some off-colour comment about your father finally seeing sense, and Dave being his boy toy, so he overreacted and made up two couples to avoid the suggestion.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed. Just to complete the awkwardness, we have been invited up on Friday evening, the party is Saturday and we should be back here late Sunday.”

“Two nights. Two nights, three days. Enough hospitality to risk a serious case of alcohol poisoning. No wonder the old fart wouldn’t come and meet me. Oh this is going to be so wrong.” Both of them do the sigh this time. “I guess you’d better tell me more about him then.”

Helena recognises the surrender in the tone and explains the unusual nature of her charge’s journey from helplessness, even the early stages that Struan had problems with, “you should have seen his face, complete horror and he goes running off to hide and wouldn’t come back until we were housebroken. Poor Dave. Good thing that was only a day or so.”

Alyssa has to admit that she is intrigued by the person coming through from the nurse’s description. He seems a quiet creature, devouring the world through documentaries and teaching himself to read and write away from the official eyes of the programme. Whatever else he might be he does not sound like the soldier the directors have been looking for. Deep in thought she drifts off trying to reconcile the two differing views – the gentle man described by Helena and the hoped for superman dissected, tested and probed by the programme. Her father’s place in all of this seemed unclear. What had happened to his liberal tendencies - was he trying to protect a new life or shaping it to submit to the inevitable?
Ripples in the pond

Chapter Summary

Elvira is not the first to break the news to her girlfriend.

Elvira Lopez had thought that, over all, the day had gone quite well. She was content that Gihon had selected someone already known to the university, and happy that that he had seemed so thrilled at the prospect of seeing his old friend again. Though she wouldn’t admit it to his face she had always been quite taken by the big man and organising him, whether he wanted it or not, was just her way of showing that she cared. With a heart full of a job well done she returned to her two bedroom duplex to tell her partner the good news that she’d been waiting to share for some days.

The dark haired European was beaten to revealing the news. As she stretched on the chaise longue by the big picture window (the view of the park made the apartment worth the extortionate rent) and wondered how to phrase the day’s events she was hit by a rolled edition of the latest student news flimsy. Well, she realised that it was not just news for her, but was still surprised by the speed it had been picked up by the newsletter. Someone at the Serpent had clearly had the presence of mind to aim a camera at the two men as they got re-acquainted and then their meal as they were joined by their blond housemate a short while later. “Faculty greets new tutor with open … arms” ran the headline next to the pictures, complete with a link to video footage.

The clear plastic sheet was snatched back out of Elvira’s hand, the words and the images blurring and sliding as Gielen waved it in front of her and then read out the brief passage. “A mystery arrival was spotted having lunch today at the Feathered Serpent. Hard at work on your behalf we can reveal that this is Cultural History’s new tutor, Dave Jensson. Yes, apparently this really is Dave Jensson. A man with so many qualifications he never uses any. A man rumoured to be so rich that his income is more than some small countries. A man so old … well, on this evidence there must be something in the stories of visits to Swiss clinics. Details of his teaching schedule haven’t been released yet but we expect any classes to be over-subscribed so keep an eye on the boards for news. We believe that Jensson will be living with his ‘friend’ and former colleague from Temple University, Gihon Plaisir, and our very favourite man-about-campus Mykhail Arkhangelskeyev.”

Gielen sighed and continued, clearly irritated by the tone of the remaining text. “As a responsible body the Interesting Times would never encourage speculation on what might go on behind closed doors in their fashionable Green Quarter apartment. We’d suggest visiting Unichat where we are certain the gossip boards will soon be melting with unfounded lurid stories and idle speculation no doubt only just this side of the pornographic (you know you want to).” The reader said nothing else; the look on her face was enough to let Elvira know that there was some serious making up to be done.

“Aw G, I wanted to tell you. I wasn’t certain it would come through and, up to this morning, I didn’t even know it was going to be today. I hadn’t realised that the rag would pick it up so quickly. Ignore them. You know they are bunch of kids trying to make an impression by stirring things up.” She pulled her girlfriend down into her lap and hugged her close, kissing the blue streaks in the spiked black hair. “This is a good thing isn’t it? Gihon’s happy. That nice girl Lia’s happy that she’s got the job. I saw Myk on my way over and even said he was pleased to see the old man again.”
“I do hope so. I knew Gihon in Luxor remember. It near enough broke his heart the last time Dave left. He can’t be trusted to stay … I just don’t want Gihon getting hurt again, he’s not as tough as he likes to think he is.”

“Don’t worry my sweet. They didn’t have us then - and with Lia on board there’ll be enough good sense between us to counteract whatever stupidity those males get into their heads.” Elvira’s expression dared Gielen to disagree. There could be no disagreement once Elvira had decided something would be so.
“Hello. I’m guessing you must be Alyssa. I’m Dave.” Oh, so that is the accent, yes, quite out of place in America. In some happy half-asleep place, warm and cosy, Alyssa smiles to herself, it’s a nice voice.

The hand extending out from the crouching figure drips cold water onto the relaxed body of the younger Dr McDonald and she splutters back to full wakefulness. Silhouetted against the sun she cannot see his face clearly. How long had she been asleep for? Automatically reaching to shake the offending hand she sees the cannula taped to the inside of his elbow as his long delicate fingers touch hers. An ugly marker of his experimental status, this necessity explains the speed with which the blood sample had been taken earlier. He seems to find nothing unusual in having the device fitted, or that it symbolises his status as ‘the product’ and the remarkable nature of his biology. This is all he knows. Helena may have adapted to the situation, all of it as being part of the reality of his bizarre life, but Alyssa finds his lack of shame at being the object of such scrutiny disturbing.

Not being able to see his face clearly, and not wanting to settle on the unsightly thing in his arm, she tries to find something else to focus on - and quickly decides that it is probably not such a good idea given their relative positions. Thankfully Helena has also been disturbed by the arrival of the wet figure, and her fussing as she rushes to dry him provides a welcome distraction. The spell of the summer afternoon broken they decide it is time to return to the house. Struan’s daughter is not overly surprised to find that the dark sarong, wrapped tightly against his narrow hips and doing little to provide any real modesty, is Dave’s only item of clothing. Letting him draw away from them, his bare feet almost silent over the shingle, Alyssa can’t resist asking about his spare frame.

“I think he’ll always look underweight, it just seems to be the way he is. It’s taken us a while but we’ve got him eating enough to pass for normal. He looks so much better for it compared to when he first awoke – I know you’ve seen the pictures - maybe an extra thirty-five pounds on him since then, and we’ve nearly got him up to ten per cent body fat. All the effort was going into developing the brain; the body was something of an afterthought … still, I think he’s doing a pretty good job with it.”

They follow him up the path, each lost in their own thoughts as they watch the liquid movement of the slight physique ahead of them. Taking her cue from the older woman, Alyssa refrains from commenting on the fading marks of wounds healing down the line of his spine, she can always go back to his notes to reconfirm what has been done to him. She is fascinated by what he is, certainly, but to pretend to be his lover? Though she is committed to the Shabti Programme, and has barely flinched at doing some things she would never mention to her father, this seems like it might be beyond her.

It’s not that the blond woman is overly attached to the casual girlfriends back home, but the thought of any man, of what men did, and the stupidity of women dependent on their violence for their sense of esteem has informed her view of life for many years. She was not so like her father that she forgot
about sex, not at all, she was happy to recognise the needs of the flesh but saw to them on her own terms. Knowing what her mother had turned into, that long sad decline as Margaret McDonald searched for validation from affairs that were little more than anonymous rutting, would have been difficult enough for an adult to accept. To come home early one day and see the whole sorry mess played out in living colour, her mother on all fours to service two male students had affected the adolescent girl more than she had wanted to admit.

Alyssa had decided years before to never, ever, be dependent on a man for anything and to certainly never play those slobbering, sucking, violent games of penetration and ejaculation. Uncle Richard had been a help, always a comfort. He’d been the one she’d turned to when she didn’t know how to cope with the stress of boys and expectations of the normal. He’d suggested a different path and she had never regretted her rejection of the cisgender male.

So Alyssa watches the thin man in the long skirt climb the path up to her old house. She hopes the intervening years and experience, and this new creature’s apparently submissive nature, will make the pretence easier to maintain. This Dave is not at all what she had expected to find.
The unknown known

Chapter Summary

Lia doesn't believe the stories of the man from Fortress Europe.

It was with some measure of relief that Lia returned to her accustomed seat in the Library the following day. Her friends had become quite tiresomely inquisitive about the new arrival and his relationship with Plaisir. That Lupe, Robyn and Emma from the group also lived in the same shared house meant that she hadn’t been able to get away from their questioning, and it had annoyed her that there seemed to be so little corroborated information about the apparently ‘well known’ historian. She had read some of his books (well, who hadn’t?) but his stories of the rise and fall of the decadent west had been more for relaxation rather than the more rigorous scholarship of her own studies. In the end she had shrugged and blamed the data embargo from Fortress Europe for the lack of anything more definite about him; let them do the work if they were so interested.

Centuries earlier Europe had had enough of giving to the world. Now, what was left of the world had to pay for a share of the resources hidden behind the closed borders of the inward looking continent – from the solar farms of the southern peninsulas to the wind farms of the exposed highlands, the hard-worked acres of surviving arable land and fairy tale grim wooded hillsides. Less tangible resources too had become valuable and so the data embargo had been imposed, controlling access to the memories of previous times and the finds hidden inside ruined cities. Like Lia with her friends, Europe had shrugged and turned its back. Ghosts and glowering myth filled the void left by a continent exhausted by wars and tired of responsibility.

The man she had met had come straight out of the dark, a cypher and a symbol of the withdrawn continent. He could have been everything or nothing like the stories about him. He was rich, powerful, over two hundred years old, a charlatan playing a role, a freebooter hiding behind myths of his own making, a leper, a count, a thief, a monk, a satyr, a harlequin. As the stories became more freakish she’d wondered how many of the supposedly well informed people had actually met the man with the nice brown eyes and the quiet precise voice.

Whatever the mystery she still had work to finish for Rachel Pullen; the essays on Herodotus were getting no easier to read the longer she put them off. The real world was altogether more mundane than some of the wilder theories that Lupe had gleefully relayed from the Unichat boards. She applied herself to the work before her. Better to deal with the things she could get a handle on, she was sure she would find out what she needed to know about the new man as she went along. He’d seemed easy enough to get on with. That had to be a better start than all the pointless, and distracting, speculation of her friends.

Conveniently she had parked the strange feelings from the previous day, dismissing them as a temporary aberration that she had neither the time nor the inclination to investigate further. Too much adrenaline from driving that car, nothing more. Definitely.

Lunchtime and, thankfully, the essays were behind her. Reluctant to expose herself to more of the same from her friends she avoided her inbox but returned her completed work directly to Dr Pullen’s office. Seeing the swelling belly of the outgoing teacher she immediately thought of the rake thin figure of the new arrival. The pregnancy had been a disconnected fact for her, neither good nor bad,
but seeing the growing evidence made her feel uncomfortable. She liked Rachel Pullen but this bizarre compound creature was alien and disturbing. It was as if there was something parasitical being hosted in the woman’s body. Not just hosted but welcomed. Knowing the acceptable phrases she kept her small talk brief, remembered to use the word ‘blooming’ to describe the expectant mother and was able to escape before the inevitable invite to feel the thing kicking and turning in its flesh incubator.

Elvira caught her eye as she made her polite retreat and waved her over to faculty office, quickly closing the door behind them. She didn’t seem to be quite as calm as she had the previous day.

“Jensson’s claimed some space in the Library for your research work. He’ll be back here for graduate classes but says he needs somewhere bigger for a data table to lay everything out for you. He wants to find out what kind of things interest you before settling on your program. I’ll mail you the details when the Library stops messing around and gives him what he wants. Good thing you kept out of the way yesterday, hopefully working in the Library will give you a chance to settle in with him before the rag identify you. It might be worth asking your friends if they can be discreet. As the faculty office I’ve already been snowed under with enquiries from students wanting to know when and what he will be teaching … and some with rather more personal proposals.” The secretary’s grimace of distaste was enlightening enough; Lia didn’t need or want to know any more. “Amazing what money and a bit of fame can do. Let’s hope things settle down when people realise he is just a man.”
A week of strange days later and McDonald’s Suburban rolls up the long gravel drive to Richard Lytton’s house. Cover stories have been practiced and information swapped. Struan has successfully avoided too much information but he is aware that nothing has happened between the two younger members of the party. The director had grudgingly allowed the trip as a controlled experiment and all procedures had been stopped to allow them time to prepare. Strangely, this in itself had been informative, and everyone was fascinated by the speed with which his skin had lost any sign of needle and blade. Dave had also demonstrated a remarkable skill in learning how to cope with alcohol, one poison that he had not been previously exposed to. His adaptive physiology quickly seemed to make ‘drunk’ a choice rather than the inevitable effect much to the impressed disbelief of the pair of hard drinking McDonalds.

At the wheel of the car Struan has tried to time their arrival politely late in hopes that other house guests would have already started on Lytton’s extensive wine cellar and that a merry haze will help cover up any mistakes they might make. In the last quiet moment before leaving the car it seems right to hold his daughter’s hand and wish her well. Of all of them Struan has spent the week worrying that hers will be the hardest part to play.

Warned by the gatehouse the doctor’s old friend and Alyssa’s god-father, Richard Lytton, waits impatiently for the car to come to a stop. There is little peace once the car doors are open and he begins his effusive greetings to the surprise guests of the weekend - his favourite girl (trying to sound aggrieved but smiling too much, “we need to discuss keeping secrets young lady”), her father (“You old dog, there’s me worrying you might be lonely and all the time you had this beauty hidden away”), Helena (“aptly named indeed, surely your face could launch a thousand ships”) and, finally, the slim man holding Alyssa’s hand (“Well, hello again tall, dark and heterosexual”).

As their bags disappear into the house and anonymous security spirits the car away, Lytton ushers them through to the salon and genteel introductions all round. Some of the faces belonged to people Alyssa recalled from her childhood and more recent visits to Uncle Dickie, some were new faces on older friends, a few were very recent friends. Lytton’s circle would have only the most interesting people. Being invited to one of his parties was one thing, staying the whole weekend another level again. More people would arrive the following day. The McDonalds were definitely ‘in’ as Dickie wanted the opportunity for some quality catch up time to see what he could make of the surprising and unadvertised change in her interests.

“He does know, doesn’t he?” A stage whisper from one of Lytton’s older relatives - a sweet lady who never quite got it right but who was always entertaining – and a firm grip on her elbow sees the younger McDonald cut from the pack.

“Who, what?”
“That you are a woman in comfortable shoes.” Alyssa barely lets her face slip. While poor old Nan Dyce struggles to find a diplomatic euphemism the younger woman can’t help but look to her supposed boyfriend. Rather than stating the obvious her interrogator tries again. “Your young man, he knows that you bat for the other team. You have told him.”

“Nan, don’t worry. Of course he knows. It was an old girlfriend of mine who introduced us. Actually … actually … don’t tell but …” This approach was guaranteed to make sure everyone would know in the next half hour, “she thought she’d try and make me jealous by making out with him as a way of getting me interested again. Bold as brass the minx even suggested a three way. So I kissed her. And then I kissed him.” Nan was looking a little breathless; this was the most excitement she’d had in a long time, she loved what the young people got up to. “And then I left with him.”

Nodding to the pale blue saucer big eyes Alyssa winks and circulates her way away from the old dear and towards her god-father who is busy trying to find out where Struan has been hiding Helena. Helping herself to the drink in her god-father’s hand Alyssa suddenly realises she might enjoy playing the game for a couple of days and shushes his enquiry. “Now then Uncle Dickie, you know we work in secrets. We could tell you everything – but we’d only have to kill you afterwards and that would just put a real downer on the weekend.”

And Richard Lytton laughs and the four new guests settle in for the evening, keeping small talk small and remembering to be caught every now and then in inappropriate positions appropriate to their advertised situations. Dave seems to take mixing with these strangers in his rangy stride, eliciting anecdotes without ever really saying much in return, asking opinions without putting himself in the spotlight. In all Alyssa realises that a weekend with self-centred socialites, light intellectuals and pseuds will not be as risky as she had feared, the people Dave is mixing with are flattered by his quiet attention without really questioning what he might be.

Later that evening, and still taking his role as host seriously, Lytton sees the McDonalds up to their rooms. First Struan and Helena, then further down the corridor of the guest wing to the room assigned to Alyssa and her intriguing young man. Laughing, he stops by their door, his voice hinting at conspiracy. “Sweet Pea, I thought you would want to be away from your father and his lady. Surely it’s the worst thing ever to worry about a parent hearing you have sex, or, shock horror, actually hearing the old boy on the job yourself.”

“Eurgh, Uncle Richard did you have to say that? Oh, I’m gonna be stuck with that thought now.” She sticks out her tongue, pushing Dave through the door behind her. “One day, one day I’ll get you back for that. Just be glad I’m too tired to do anything now.” They had blamed their late arrival on a delayed flight, saying that a last minute hitch at work had meant that Dave had travelled a week before she was able to come over, it was a close run thing for them to make it at all. Lytton’s grin shows no remorse, he is happy to see her happy, happier still to hear her demand that the young man strip as the door closes behind her and he returns to his other, slightly less interesting, guests.

“Did we get away with it?”

“For now. I think the others are going for it, but Dickie’s not sure what to make of you.” She sighs, relief at being away from prying eyes evident as she leans against the door and watches him unpack their overnight bags. The slim man has done as she asked even though the comment was only for effect. Dave does not look at her. She realises that he is actually very good at not looking at things, completely managing to avoid reflections of his nakedness as he moves around the small suite.

Alyssa waits for Dave to get into the colonial style half-tester then orders him to switch the light off before leaving the safety of the door. No matter how compliant and non-threatening he’d been in the
past days he was still meant to be a man and she finds herself tense and defensive by reflex. Undressing in the faux Edwardian bathroom she tries to shake herself out of her with a reminder that she is in control. She can’t bring herself to think about the private meeting with Harrison before they left the base. The director might have encouraged her to think of it as being for the good of the programme, but he was just another man putting the pressure of expectations on her.

Her voice sounds nervous to her ears as she gets into bed next to him and repeats her limits. “My body, my rules. Don’t expect me to get too close to that thing you’ve got. Whatever ideas you have I’d prefer it you kept them to yourself. Behave or you’re sleeping on the sofa and I don’t care if we are found out.”

Lying by her side, unable to reach out to her, Dave is awake for a long time, listening as she finally relaxes and falls asleep. He has had a week of being intrigued by her blondness, of wondering what her athletic body would feel like compared to the fuller figure of Helena, trying to imagine what a younger woman would taste like to a palate savouring every new sensation. Helena had tried to encourage him to express his interest, but even he knew that her support was not whole hearted. Helena had wanted him from the start, she was the start; how now to take the initiative with a woman who didn’t like what came with him being male?
Day one

Chapter Summary

Lia finds out what has been set up in the Library.

As good as her word, directions appeared on Lia’s phone a handful of days after Elvira’s understated briefing. Lia had tried to use the time constructively, getting ahead with work for Dr Pullen meant that she would be able to say goodbye before the expanding abdomen got too much for her to cope with. It also meant that she avoided seeing the increasing number of new faces that just happened to drop by on the off-chance that a) the new tutor was available for a chat, or b) that he might need an assistant, or c) that he might be willing to fund some crack-pot scheme or other, or even d) that they might catch a repeat of the reunion at the Feathered Serpent.

Lia had also spent some time doing a little research into the scope of the Jensson Foundation. Always there in the background, like at all universities, it had been part of the academic scenery for decades; just a fact of life few people ever really questioned. It was clear that there was little chance of the Library refusing to allow him the space or facilities he asked for. Given the starchy bureaucracy that kept the place on an even keel she suspected that the delay was just to save face until someone, gently or otherwise, reminded them of the small print showing where the majority of their funding, and stock, had come from.

Following Elvira’s concise message Lia arrived at the assigned study area far away from the busy central atrium of the Library. Most people tended to use the individual desks placed in the open areas between the rows of bookcases, specific areas were unusual. She was surprised to see the amount of space set aside apparently just for her and Jensson. That the space was relatively private, bounded as it was by solid backed bookcases, also probably said something about the influence of the person who had reminded the Library that it’s interest lay in compliance.

The data table was a logical item to have, though she had to admit that it was certainly larger than any she had seen before. The workstations were standard if very high specification. Any untoward noise from the monitors would be handled by the sound dampers so they would not disturb the gentle peace that pervaded the building. The sofa and easy chairs were unusual but possibly not unheard of. The installation of a small fridge and drinks station were probably what had caused the Library to balk initially. All in all, to Lia, it looked like it could be a comfortable place to work.

She wasn’t the first to arrive. Deep in conversation Gihon and Jensson looked down into the display on the large work table. Heads close together they gave no indication that they were aware of her presence behind them as they moved illuminated nodes of information across the intelligent surface. She enjoyed the moment watching them together. She had a notion they looked like complementary and contrasting bookends, two possible outcomes from a common source – one gloriously solid and the other strikingly ascetic. Today the long hair was back in one long pony-tail, a mass of temptation ten centimetres wide, constrained only by the platinum barrette. Lia wondered about the weight of the hair, fascinated by the lazy undulation of it as the big man moved and looked down at the screen.

“…extreme fragmentation of society and the rising cult of the individual. Ultimately can we blame the primacy of the teenager for the collapse of society? The arrogant importance of the needs of the one compared to everyone else, a drop in the ocean when it’s a phase but what about when it
becomes the norm? What happens when each generation carries a little bit more of that through to adulthood?"

“You are such an old reactionary some days. Just because you were never a teenager, it wasn’t all fun and discovery you know ...” Gihon’s voice had an odd note. There was a long look between the two men, a pause in which Lia imagined something important wasn’t being said. Dave was the first to drop his gaze. He turned to greet his new assistant as Gihon continued to rearrange the data below them.

“Ah, Lia … we were just talking about you. Well, not directly, we were discussing where best to start you off. Come and see.” He moved slightly away from his friend and drew her to the table, smiling at her initial dismay as she saw the amount of raw information they had been casually throwing around the screen.

And so she found herself standing in the gap where things had hung unsaid, feeling very small between the two men and their shared past. They used the table to present her with vistas of data, opinion and disputes of the pre-Collapse world. It was clear that the tall men didn’t always agree, though she guessed that academic differences would never detract from the fondness they clearly had for each other. She was flattered to be included in their debate, finding the situation slightly surreal. Though she might have hoped for more time with the big man, actually being with him and the man who had obviously been his mentor was something she decided she would have to reflect on in private. Perhaps with a drink. OK, maybe with some close friends.

The morning passed. Lia discovered that much of the material was to add depth to the archival sources the men had been working on, intermittently, for decades. This new material had been collected in long years of travel through Fortress Europe and brought back in the bulky pack that Dave had carried with him. It seemed that Jensson had little respect for the data embargo – or, rather, just enough to acknowledge the existence of the strictures. His circuitous route to the city, while tiring, had also been the easiest way of avoiding the interest of European information border control and the heavy tariffs they imposed. Both men promised they would come clean and pay the appropriate levy for any new information once everything had been sorted and assessed.

The edges of the work table soon acquired a layer of soft keyboards, loose papers, pens and even coffee cups. Lia was surprised at the relaxed way the men seemed to approach the apparently hard-won material and the very expensive table they ended up lounging against. Briefly she wondered what the authorities would make of their insouciance and then corrected herself – who was there to tell this one off? This was a different game, one they appeared to be playing for their own entertainment as much as anything else. She realised that Jensson didn’t really need a research assistant but, rather, a wrangler to try and keep him focussed. Well, she had been promised quirks, she just hoped that she would be disciplined enough to counter his rather random way of working.

One of the piles of paper buzzed. Jensson didn’t seem to notice it. Gihon studiously ignored it. It buzzed again a couple of minutes later. And then again. This time Lia thought she detected a certain temperament to the tone. The two men she was with might have had wealth and influence, but Lia wasn’t going to argue with the source of the disturbance. Wordlessly she retrieved Gihon’s phone from under the notes and pressed it into his hand. He read the message and swore, slipping the previously ‘misplaced’ item into a pocket.

“Damn. That’s paperwork calling. Gotta go or I’ll be in Elvira’s bad books again.” He waved a farewell to Lia and smiled at the thin man. “I’ll see you at home later.” He swept out of the study bay muttering darkly under his breath about people spoiling his fun.

It was as he left that Lia realised he’d been in shirt sleeves all the time she’d been stood next to him.
The long, clerical style robe was only donned as he disappeared into the main body of the library, the flourish as he swept his tresses to the outside of high collar drawing her attention too late to be able to get a clear impression of the shape he made beside her. What might be hidden behind the long clothes was a regular subject of debate on some of the more distracted Unichat boards that she sometime visited, but hadn’t been something she’d wanted to speculate on openly. She decided to keep the omission to herself. Next time, she thought, next time she would get a description worthy of reporting back to her friends. Mildly annoyed with herself she hoped that there would be a next time.

“Now then.” Uh-oh, she was still staring after the retreating back trying to find words to define the masculine shape that had been so close. She hoped she hadn’t been as obvious as she felt as she turned her attention back to the one who remained. He continued as if there was nothing to notice. “Now that it’s just us, let’s see if we can decide what we want to do with you this term.”
Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Naughty Uncle Dickie

“Mr Lytton.” Why would security be calling him at this ungodly hour of the night? “Mr Lytton, sorry to disturb you, but you said you wanted to know if Mr Jensson left his room.” Richard Lytton is suddenly wide awake in his large and lonely bedroom. “Just to let you know sir that Mr Jensson has gone the pool, he is swimming. He is alone.”

“Thank you. Oh… if you would turn off the cameras in the pool, I’d appreciate the privacy.” The security team have been rewarded for their discretion in the past, they know who pays their wages. Tonight will be no different for them.
Here be dragons

Chapter Summary

Lia begins her work. Dave introduces the idea of the dragons at the edge of the map. Not finding dragons isn't proof they don't exist.

And so they began. Like trysting lovers they would arrive separately at the Library while they waited for the hubbub surrounding his appearance at the faculty to become old news. They would meet and discuss progress, sometimes they would chat and he would ask her about her life before coming to the city. She didn’t find out much about him in return but, instead, realised that it was nice just being with him and began to relax into role of protégé. Now and then Gihon would call in to see how she was getting along and would sometimes share a cup, and sit and pass the time with them. Things seemed to be working out better than she could ever have expected.

The first lecture had been a master class in presenting and manipulating images of that brief time of hope before the world, in his words, woke up the fact that it had all gone to shit and been too distracted by its own cleverness to notice. She had sat at the back of the room impressed at how his quiet voice filled the public space and encouraged his listeners to join him in the past.

“The permanent ever present now of the internet. All we have are the leavings of the people who wanted to say something. We don’t know if they were representative of the majority, all we can be certain of is that they left an imprint and we have been able to find it. Thousands and thousands of hours of effort to leave us words and images and their survival as much chance as planning, as random in some cases as the survival of the images of the Black Land that so enthrals my esteemed colleague the Plaisir. They were loud and brash and had opinions on everything, I mean just about every little thing you can think of. And don’t even think that they were logical or consistent even with themselves.

“Take the flimsies we have today. Their very name proclaims their ephemeral nature. Unless someone pays for a permanent imprint they curl up and expire, dust just minutes after their validation runs out. We have agreed the limitation of this format. Long before the Collapse there was an analogue in something called newspapers. They only carried news for one day and it was old the day the next edition was printed. Technology ran on and things speeded up. Was news still news a day later or even half an hour later after it had first been reported?

“And with technological change we get the rise of the individual, new ways of communicating democratising the voices that could be heard. There was the birth of the blogosphere, the power of the twitterati, the change from searching for information to searching for meaning. But what to make of the permanent ‘now’ of the World Wide Web? Even the name was a misnomer. World-wide so long as you had an appropriate level of education, technical infrastructure and money to be able to afford to access it. And you were in an open country that didn’t restrict or openly monitor activity. And you were fluent in one of the common languages or had access to translation software that could convey your nuance beyond the lingua franca of the emoticon. And this thing, this internet, seemed to be a perfect reflection of the confusion of societies fragmenting and sliding further into decadence and decay.

“In that stateless non-reality how was one to decide if one position was more valid than the rest?
What was more real – the politicians, the economists, the science community, the hedge witches and Crowley wannabes, the ‘insert name here’ conspiracy theorists? And what to say about those who changed their views? How do we differentiate between one year’s terrorist and another decade’s statesman when they are the same person? Time was happening in the outside world but the sense of time was the very thing lost in the stateless present. In the external world opinions evolve, mature, are sometimes tested and superseded. Without the timestamp or corroborated references to external events that can be independently verified that internet of theirs is a strange place to us, a Grimpen Mire for the unwary traveller.

“When people first began to explore the world they drew maps to take control and quantify their experience. The maps told later people much about the educated mind set of the day. I would like to take you exploring but I would remind you of those early maps. At the edges, in the great blanks of the unknown the cartographers used to etch the legend ‘here be dragons’. Just because the maps got better over time and people never found the dragons it didn't mean that they didn’t exist. They were whatever lurked in the imagination and the fears of the time. If you begin to understand the context you will recognise the dragons.”

Ninety minutes later the applause had been genuine. His stories were not new, most of the audience had some familiarity with the subject but he swam though the information with a formidable ease, adapting his focus in response to questions from the floor. For all his opening caveats he seemed to speak with the familiarity of someone who had experienced the distant past. This skill of immediacy was what marked his work, she saw it again and again each time she transcribed and annotated his lectures. When she thought he might have gone out on a limb she would search through the material and there would be the evidence. Sometimes obvious, sometimes needing more effort, it was like he had all the raw data in his head and it was only in expressing it to other people that he could get it into a coherent shape.

Lia mainly worked on the archive, sifting the different types of documentation for common themes and features and tying it to the journals he turned over to her. The information had all been digitised but sometimes seemed so random that she feared getting bogged down or completely side-tracked in a blind alley. Some mornings he would reassure her that she was doing fine; the material was already millennia old so taking her time to ponder over it was hardly a critical matter.

Against the background of the steady organisation of information Jensson would ask her to look for and suggest items that might be useful in his graduate classes. He seemed to value the suggestions made with a fresh eye and a direct approach. The archive included many things; part of the problem with getting control of it was the range of media used to document the splintered and competing cultures of the time, the undercurrents of ‘in’ and ‘out’ and the sudden turn of speed that could leave populism passé. Genres divided and mixed, everything became fluid and sources confused in mis-quotes, re-quotes, plagiarism and obfuscation that typified the democratisation of information. She began to appreciate how it was difficult to maintain focus in the face of so much interconnectedness and accessibility.

He encouraged her questions, becoming animated explaining even the irrelevant seeming ephemera that he’d accumulated on his journeys. Whatever the grandiose sweep of his general histories he seemed fascinated by the minutiae of life in the time before the Great Fall. Free from the time constraints imposed by class schedules their afternoon meetings would sometimes encroach into the early evening and they would suddenly realise how much their day had overrun. The first time it happened he had apologised for keeping her from her real life and her friends. She had laughed and assured him there was no problem – the study area, day by day, was becoming more like home than anywhere else. It was easy to tell him that no one was dependent on her presence. She didn’t feel the
need to tell him that her friends had begun to make fun of her, commenting on how he was now ‘Dave’ and not Dr Jensson when she referred to him, slyly suggesting extra curricula activities to explain her late finishes.

Lia still met her friends for lunch and together they would keep an eye on the corner table in the lower courtyard whether there was one, two or three dining there. While her friends had been as discreet about her job as she had asked sometimes their collective imagination got the better of them. She had ended one meal by rather tersely pointing out that she had never caught a hint of anything inappropriate (or maybe even, appropriate) between the big man and his slim companion. Not wanting to give herself over to flights of fancy she refused to think about the stares and the pauses she sometimes thought she imagined between the two of them when they didn’t realise she was watching.

She enjoyed the mornings when she arrived and there was music playing. It meant that Jensson was already there. When she asked him about the constant background presence he said it helped him connect with the past, made the people more immediate to him as it reflected the things they were interested in saving. The same technologies that accelerated the fragmentation of society also provided the intimate caches of material that he had made a career of mining. The caches were not perfect. Even when source material was still viable it was often held in isolation from its original context, partially named, mis-named or mis-attributed. The motion sensitive lights had gone out in the study area more than once as she had lost herself in the mire of conflicting sources. Jensson might have liked adding to the amount of material available; the deeper Lia got the more often she felt nostalgic for the finite information that had bounded her previous studies of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures.
Alyssa wakes to find the embrace unexpected but not as traumatic as she thought it might be. Already awake, he recognises the change in her breathing and murmurs a good morning as he snuggles her closer to him. This is too close. She pulls away from his hold as she feels the pressure of him against the back of her shorts. No, never with a man.

“Have we been like this all night?” She tells herself not to be angry with him, it was just morning glory, he would be over it soon enough. She doesn’t remember being disturbed by anything, can’t recall the last time she slept so well and felt so refreshed.

“Not all night. I couldn’t sleep, got up about three and went for a swim.”

“OK.” She had no problem with that; at least he had come back to the right bed for the weekend. Turning and looking at him she sees something else – was that guilt in his eyes? “And?” It is as much a sigh as a question; she braces herself for the answer.

“I didn’t think anyone would be around. I didn’t bother with lights. It was nice with the moonlight through the windows so I just dived in. Later I hear someone else in the room and there’s your godfather. Watching me. He, erm … he seemed quite pleased to see me.”

“And you weren’t wearing anything, were you.” That was a statement not a question. Well, they had warned him – Richard and his taste for younger men had always been one of the facts of life while she was growing up. Too late to prevent the car crash, she still has to ask the question but is surprised by how uncomfortable she is with it. Other than maybe a slight loss of face what should it matter to her if he’d been intimate with Lytton? The house had known far greater indiscretions. “OK. No problem. We can deal with this. How far did you go?”

“Not far enough, apparently. I know … I know you told me, but it was a shock all the same. He asked me to join him in a night-cap, offered to help me dry off when I got out of the water and then, and then … he was on me so quickly. Are all men that aggressive? Hands everywhere. I didn’t know what to do. Soon as I could I said I was flattered but I was with you, I made my excuses and ran back up here.” He slumps into the bed, trying to disappear. “Can I have a headache for the rest of our stay and just hide here in bed?” She shakes her head and has to turn away from him again so he doesn’t see her stifle the giggle that threatens to break through. “Why me? Why should he want me? Does he go for every man who turns up here?”

“Does that matter? Oh, come on, come over here …” and she drags him out of bed and forces him to look in the full length mirror he made such a good job of avoiding the previous night “…have you ever really looked at yourself?” Facing himself in the mirror seems to be an ordeal – she has to hold his head in both hands to force him to look into the glass. “Someone needs to tell you just how attractive you are. Whatever accident was behind your design you have turned out to be a stunner. Not sure if you are pretty or handsome, I’m not really the right one to ask when it comes to men, but so much charisma – it’s like you shine. You’re tall. You have great hair. Never underestimate the
value of great hair. OK, so you’re on the thin side. Thin is a fashionable look. Thin and muscular is very popular this year I believe. And … even I have to say, in your case it certainly seems to show off your … ah … attributes quite nicely, well, you know, if I was interested in such things.”

Just the two of them together, this time she finds she enjoys staring at him. The first time she might not have been able to look at look at his maleness, somehow each day it has got easier and easier. Calm seems to radiate from his skin to her fingers and suddenly it’s difficult not to stroke the dark hair that covers his chest and trails in a neat line downwards. Standing slightly behind and to one side of him the bodies reflected back in the mirror could be any couple new to each other. He might be uncomfortable about looking at himself but he thinks it is normal for anyone to see him naked. She is not so brave, a cotton vest and shorts mark the boundaries she has set. “To answer your question, no, he doesn’t go for any random stray male in the early hours. I’ll have you know he has very high standards when it comes to men.”

She laughs, of all the things to forget to tell him. The nurse was clearly besotted by him but he didn’t have the experience to turn that into confidence. No wonder he didn’t know how to react to Lytton. Maybe that was why he was so tentative around her. For all his learning he really was an innocent.

“My God but you are in for a shock tonight. When people stare at you, and trust me they will, it will be because they want you and then, then they will stare at me and think how lucky I am. Women and men. You OK with that?” She nods his head for him. “You feel suitably reassured?” Another nod. “Good. Now get in the shower and put some clothes on that tight little arse before I forget I don’t like men.” Playfully she makes to grab for him as he skips out of the way. “Don’t be too long, I want a shower too. It must be time to face Richard and his breakfast table before he sends a search party out for us.”
Worship

Chapter Summary

Lia begins her religious education and begins her journey into Gihon's history.

At the start of another day in her new, and rather pleasant, reality Lia passed through the pink noise generated by the dampers and heard something very different in the study area. Like her first impressions of the big man it was unusual, alien ... and curiously attractive. The cadences of unaccompanied human voices swirled about her as she stood and let the beauty of the unfamiliar polyphonic singing fill her up. Eventually the sound faded away. She didn’t remember closing her eyes as she concentrated on the sounds but she must have done. She blinked, became alert again as Gihon peered at her then turned to an equally concerned looking Jensson folded up tight on one of the chairs.

“... and she’s back with us.” Gihon delicately patted her hand and guided her to sit on the sofa, sat by her side and continued to watch her carefully for a moment. “Don’t worry; the Stabat Mater Dolorosa can get people like that the first time. Sorry, should have put a warning on the door ... ah, no door, I keep forgetting that.” He smiled his apology. A soft handkerchief appeared from somewhere inside his layers of material and was put into her hand. She looked at it, not comprehending the meaning of the square of cloth. “Dry your tears. You’ll be ok in a few minutes. I guess I’ll leave the old man to explain what that was.” Then he was gone, a long fall of hair catching on her shoulder as he rose and left. Gihon didn’t notice it but Dave saw the slight shiver as he brushed passed the young woman, the unconscious way her nostrils flared to catch the hint of him in the air. He gave her a moment.

“It seems we have a new subject for the day. Slightly out of scope but I have no problem with that. We start with one voice raised in worship.” A single voice issued from speakers, words in the same unfamiliar language rising and falling, soaring as if to heaven. Jensson listened to the voice, gathering his thoughts, bathing in the crystal tones. “There is a wealth of information available. This tablet has links and all the recordings I have ever found but I will give you a quick précis before I go. Most documented music of the European early middle ages was religious, which at the time meant the Catholic Church. Starting from the Roman Rite there was plainsong and then a form known as Gregorian Chant. In the twelfth century a Prioress in an obscure part of what would become Germany wrote songs of such range and beauty many believed it to be directly inspired by God. What you are listening to now is a piece by Hildegarde of Bingen, written over two thousand years ago.

“One voice became many, the patterns more complex, but always meant to reflect the glory of the deity, to be a feather on the breath of God. This was the predominant mode of worship in the liturgy of monasteries and the churches of the day. The Mass became a compositional form with orchestrations of such finesse that they could move many to tears such as the Pergolesi you walked in on. Anyway, society changed and the liturgy with it. Orchestral and choral music continued but Gregorian Chant became marginalised and largely forgotten. There were brief revivals as the world searched for beauty to re-affirm the soul against the brutality of modernity, to find themes to evoke the past, even to re-use in sexualised variants for popular culture but it was never more than a niche, a curiosity.”
The high clear voice – Lia couldn’t tell if it was a woman or a boy – was ended with a keystroke. Jensson seemed to be weighing what to say next. A new voice began. It repeated the same song, but this was a man’s voice with a wild, rougher edge. The striving, sometimes cracked, tones reflected effort, a struggle to attain the flawless adoration of the first singer.

“One thing that happened after the Collapse was a return to faith. It was not so strong over here but in some areas of Europe it took hold as people sought meaning after the decadent west was proved to be an empty promise. The rise of new forms of fundamentalist faith dotted around in nationalistic enclaves also latched onto these early sources of worship and plainsong and chant returned in pockets of grace.” Briefly he closed his eyes. He seemed to be remembering something, his thin face haunted by the yearning evident in the wild voice. Lia shivered in the comfortable warmth of the Library. To her the voice sounded like heartbreak, not faith, in audible form.

“You know, when I first met him he was … like a work of art, a masterpiece made flesh. I recorded this some years later, decades after he’d realised that he couldn’t live the life that his home demanded of him. I can’t imagine the impact it would have had if he’d sung it as a boy, when he still tried to fit in. If they had found him in time I have no doubt his Church would have tried to take his manhood to keep the original voice intact.”

“Who?” The question was a whisper. Jensson sounded to have gone to some different present than the one they were both sharing in the Library. Lia hadn’t heard the voice before, why should she recognise it … unless … unless … Without conscious reasoning she felt the answer inside her even before he continued.

“Gihon’s route out from his home was a difficult one. He still carries some of the scars of his upbringing. I know you hear it. A man’s past can be a raw and painful place.” The man was known for laughing and cursing and his pointless lust. Sometimes even his moods. Never for exposing himself in such an intimate manner. Even as Lia wondered what the big man must have been through Jensson continued on, the revelation left as an aside - unacknowledged.

“This is the form of music I remember hearing before anything else, it would be in the background when my father would talk to me. It was playing when I was finally able to reply to him.” The woman was confused, she didn’t know what to say, or even if she was meant to say anything. The things he said to her sometimes in the privacy of their space intrigued her. She had kept his rare personal comments to herself. He raised an eyebrow as she kept her face neutral. “Oh, you must have heard that rumour or variations of it. That one, at least, is true. I was in a coma for most of the start of my life, pretty much fully grown before I could talk or walk. My father would sit with me and tell me about the outside world, thousands of words spoken to someone he just hoped was listening. He never gave up on me …” his face clouded briefly “… sometimes I used to wonder if that had been such a good idea. Still, that was a long time ago, lots of water under very many bridges since then.”

They sat peacefully and allowed the voice to come to the end of the piece, each within their own thoughts. Lia had no clue what Jensson might have been thinking, he was away somewhere in the strange world that was his past.

“I’ll leave you with this.” The woman refocused as the tablet was passed to her hands. “Read as much as you want, listen to as much as you want – if you want to go back to the Stabat Mater I’d recommend listening to the Palestrina arrangement, it’s slightly earlier than the Pergolesi that Gihon favours but I like it. Any of the Tallis is good, but you might find yourself wandering off into state politics with it when it switches from Latin to English.” A small data chip appeared in his hand, the crystalline surface shimmering briefly as he slid it into the side of the tablet. “I take it I can count on your discretion.” It wasn’t a question. “If you get tired of people worshipping God you will find a
personal folder on there with more of Gihon if you want. Everything in it is honest, in its own way, but definitely not all as good for the soul as the Hildegard of Bingen.” He patted her on the shoulder as he left. “I’ll be back later, time enough to answer questions after you’ve had some thinking space.”
Alyssa makes it to the afternoon. Catching some peace she sits on the beach, her back to the house and the sounds of more guests arriving. Lytton comes out to join her, the excited tones of old friends greeting each other reassure him that his staff can look after the latest arrivals; he is more interested in getting to the bottom of his god-daughter’s surprising relationship. Between discrete stares and the duties of a host he has considered their story and decided it is little more than smoke and mirrors.

“Hey girlie, how’s my Sweet Pea today?”

“Hi Uncle Richard. I’m just sitting. So busy getting on with getting on I guess I’d forgotten how nice it is to come back here and just sit and look at the sea.”

“You got things on your mind? Want to share with an old friend?” And what else was Richard if not the best friend she had when she was growing up?

“Not sure. Oh, what the hell. Yeah. Look, Uncle Richard I never thought I’d be the one saying this but could you lay off on my man for the weekend? He’s told me what happened last night. He’s not what I expected when we first met and, all joking aside, things are a bit complicated between us right now. Adding a gay seduction to the mix is just messing with his head … he’s … he’s …”

“A lot more innocent than he appears.” Lytton finishes her sentence. “I noticed. Unfortunately I noticed a little too late.” He shrugs and gives a rueful shake of his head before continuing. “I guess I should apologise to him but he seems to be hiding from me today. What can I say? He is absolutely captivating. I couldn’t pass up the chance of seeing what you’ve been getting hold of. And then, when I saw him I’m afraid I just went for him like a desperate old queen seeing fresh meat for the first time. Which, I soon realised, I probably was. Look, he’s very sweet and he’s adorable when he blushes … but a body like that needs a warning sign on it, or he needs to know what signals he gives out.”

They sit and watch the waves breaking on the shore, the minutes stretching around them. Of all the things to cause tension between them, she would never have guessed it would be a man.

“Do you really like him then?” Lytton was brought up to be polite, this is his nearest to please and thank you when a man caught his eye.

“Yes, Uncle Richard, I think I do. Odd, coming here has kind of helped put it into perspective for me. I guess I like him more than I first thought I would.”

“You didn’t really meet him through a friend did you? Don’t look away from me. The others might have bought it but I know when you’re lying … and I think I know why.” A wicked grin matches the twinkle in Lytton’s eye. “You bad girl. Why am I not surprised that you’ve been making the beast with two backs with one of your father’s coma boys? One of the soldiers that will never go home because his family think he’s already dead … how delightfully twisted of you.” Keeping
things simple, Alyssa just shrugs. Let Richard think what he likes, it was better than him looking for the truth. From his long standing friendship with Struan, in Lytton’s mind it was a logical assumption to make; her father had always be trying to save those the army had given up on. “Don’t worry Sweet Pea, I won’t say a word, not even to let the old fool know he’s been rumpled. I can understand it’s not the kind of thing you want broadcasting around, wouldn’t want you to get a reputation as a predatory man-eater. You know, like me.”

Their shared laughter is a relief to both of them. There is no way Alyssa can stay out of sorts with her favourite Uncle and she feels a warm, proprietary glow as he complements her on the subject of her unexpected foray into men. Playing the girlfriend doesn’t seem such a stretch after all.

With Struan busy catching up with old friends and Alyssa in gales of half-shocked laughter with her uncle on the beach, Helena and Dave take a walk in the grounds of the sprawling estate. Alone and unobserved in an overgrown summer house their voices are low and there is an edge to their conversation. Though it is one they have had before, this time the hypothetical tone is missing. While Helena is experienced enough to view changes with a certain detachment, she sees the difficulty he has trying to reconcile new desires with untrained emotions.

“And to think it was your body I was worried about hurting when we started. This would always happen, we knew it. I know you feel safe with me, but I have no hold on you. I can’t keep you to myself. However much I want to it would be the wrong thing to do. We always said we would be honest with each other; don’t think you are letting me down now you have the chance of trying new experiences.”

Disconsolate, he hangs his head on her shoulder. Despite his appearance he is still too young to have the words for his feelings and needs her comfort even as he fears hurting her. Caring fingers smooth away tears of confusion from his eyes then lift his face to hers. “I told you before, you don’t need my permission. If you want to have sex with Alyssa then ask her, be open about it – all she can do is say no. Personally I think she would be mad to turn you down but, believe me, that isn’t the worst thing that can happen in this world.” She kisses him tenderly. “And if you want to experiment with Lytton … yes, she told me … let him take the lead but please insist on being safe. We know he can’t harm you, but it will look better to be careful and … and …”

Whatever the good intentions she had started with, they are too close in the secluded bower, his lips too inviting for her to maintain her resolve. This was what had started it all. Day after day of seeing him. Day after day of touching his uncanny flesh. And the dreams that came - the dreams of his white skin contrasting against her darkness, the fantasy of what he would feel like inside her. Helena had been on her own too long. Men were just men, all disappointments after her husband. But Dave was so different, so strange, there could be no comparison. She wasn’t betraying her husband’s memory, she was dreaming of something new. In the warehouse necessary touching had become stroking. Stroking had found a response. She thought they had brought each other to life. And now? However brave her words she quails at the thought that he might never come back to her.

“Don’t ever think I will forget you. Whatever happens, if it happens at all, it may just be sex. You know there is no way I can forget my first lover.” And he slides his hands under her flowing sun-dress, strokes the inside of her thighs before his fingers snag on the cotton of her briefs. The slight tremor in his voice is matched in his fingers as he pauses. “You made we want to join the world. Your love is a sacrament.”

Away from the eyes of responsibility, many miles away from the watchers in the trees, neither of them can resist the urge for the other. Their coupling is hurried, intense with all the hopes and fears
of their excursion into the outside world. Helena pulls away from him before it is too late. If it is
going to be a sacrament she says she should receive him on her knees. In the still summer afternoon
she pretends that she doesn’t hear him sob; she delays lifting her face from his sweetest flesh until all
the strength is gone from him and she is sure he has composed himself. She wants to cry too, but will
save that for when she is on her own.
**Chapter Summary**

Lia may have enjoyed the music but she is not impressed by what she reads. Her reward is an invitation.

Lia closed the tablet a couple of hours after Dave had left her. She had wanted to hear more of the pained voice but felt that she ought to try to learn something of the faith behind the music before distracting herself with Gihon’s presence. The music itself was a glorious sound, a reflection of an old mass belief at its finest. Some of the philosophy was not so easy to appreciate, however, and she’d had to remind herself of the yawning chasm of time between Hildegard’s day and her own, the difference between duty and order and freedom, expectations and rights.

The information on the tablet was not just about music or forms of worship. The notes were Jensson’s usual tangle of sources and commentaries branching out to reflect many different possible areas of interest. Lia had started to hop from time to time, subject to subject, link to link in a search to see when society grew out of the strictures of faith. Skimming the notes she saw that she was not the first to make similar searches. Not just Jensson but time and again she saw the same scribbled hand across the virtual margins of the texts. However old the notes, it wasn’t difficult to recognise the handwriting or the tone – it seemed the big man even swore when talking to himself.

She might have been shocked by some of the hatred endemic in the early philosophy but at least she had the advantage of academic distance. Gihon … if he had grown up in a society that had adopted similar Dark Age beliefs she could understand his antipathy. He had appeared on the roll at Temple University as a finished product. Luxor was a safe place to begin if you wanted your own past to be hidden. Egypt was a land with a history so strong that a man could hide the things he didn’t want others to see, the minor details of this or that or what might have been. Bordering the closed continent Egypt, like Russia, was one of the routes out to freedom. There was nothing definite for her to build the story of his past, but his written words matched the pain in a voice that had found no home in his place of birth.

Lunch was quiet. For a change the courtyard table at the Serpent remained empty while her friends passed their time with idle chit-chat and hoped that Gihon would arrive. The previous day Dave and Gihon had strolled up together, deep in conversation. Their tone was low and didn’t carry, but the little group of watchers had noted the gestures of people who habitually spoke with their hands and guessed at some disagreement. Before Lia could be called upon to suggest a reason for their difference Myk had arrived and settled things with a few short words, taking their hands in his own and calming them both. Whatever hold the stocky Russian had over the two taller men it seemed to be complete.

When Lupe offered to buy her thoughts Lia merely said that she was tired and had little to report other than a dull day at the books. He had never understood her fascination with history, saying things were going slowly was a good way of sidestepping any further interest.

Back in the study area Lia stared at the listing on the private folder for a very long time. Twenty-seven files in all, of which fifteen were fully identified. The names of the tracks were not familiar, nothing that she recalled being played before. Curiously there seemed to be no dates on the
recordings. The files were not large - they may have been poor quality or audio only. They were nothing compared to the length of the afternoon and to the other avenues of reading that had been opened up to her. It would be easy for her to listen to his voice. In all honesty she didn’t know why she had been left with this window into their lives and briefly wondered if it was some kind of test. There had been little need for Jensson to confirm, or even mention, one of the many rumours about his origins. There was certainly no need for him to make any reference to the big man.

The scrolling patterns of characters that ran across the outside of the Library were tuned out on the interior lest they cause a distraction to staff and students alike. The same thoughts hid the long windows from the outside so that the dreams of the building wouldn’t be interrupted by the practicalities of the interior. The afternoon turned into early evening and light slanted hazily through the narrow windows. The tablet sat at the furthest edge of the data table. She’d pushed it away from her but kept looking over to it, unable to quite close it and put it aside. She still hadn’t listened to the other tracks. She’d looked up the names (of course, she was a researcher) puzzled over the lyrics where she could (who wouldn’t in the same position?) but couldn’t bring herself to play them. She knew she wouldn’t be able to un-hear them and wasn’t certain that she wanted to risk learning too much, not just about the big man but what also might be reflected on his husband. Though she wouldn’t admit it, sometimes in the dark of her room she had found herself wondering about them and just what they were to each other.

Instead she played the Palestrina, and then the Pergolesi version of Stabat Mater Dolorosa while she looked at translations. She’d heard of Latin but to hear the dead language in such an astonishing form was not something she’d expected to find. Both were very beautiful arrangements in their way, professional and very polished. Like picking at something she shouldn’t she went back to the recording of Gihon’s voice. Though it was far from perfect it resonated somewhere deep inside and moved her like a new emotion. She felt privileged that Jensson had shared it with her.

Still pondering the meaning behind the sudden openness Lia didn’t hear her mentor (surely that was all he was?) return to his usual chair behind her. As she stared vaguely at random images cycling through on the workstation screen she caught a hint of the familiar. She stretched to hide the deep breath she took to confirm her guess before turning - yes, just Dave, long legs drawn up to his chest, taking up very little space perched in his chair. Though they seemed to share the fragrance it was subtly different when Gihon wore it.

“I fear I’ve discovered more distractions with that thing.” She nodded across to the artfully abandoned tablet. “How so? You have a sudden urge to go to a blood club? I’m sure we can find one even if they are rather hidden over here.” He took in her confused look. “Ah, you didn’t go poking round the personal files then. No bother. Perhaps a good idea. What distractions have you found then?” Leaning forward he gave her his most interested face and they both politely ignored his initial comment.

“All that religious mind control, how did people cope with it? And how did they go back to it? Astonishing the connections. Oh, and I found some of Gihon’s ‘God Shaped Hole’ notes. I think I’m going to have to start over and enrol myself in some of his classes. Well, maybe if you promise he’s calmed down a bit since he first wrote the notes.” She took the plunge. “Can I ask why you left me with it?”

“The subject came up so it seemed appropriate to let it take you where it would. Gihon says you are a good kid and I trust his judgement. He must think you’re old enough for whatever you’re likely to find in here to even have considered you for the job – whether it’s his anger at random deities or fragments of his past. Actually, I never asked him, what are you – about twenty-five?”
“Old enough? I’m twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine. I’m hardly a kid.” As soon as she said it she realised the distinction of the ‘nearly’ made her sound very young. Why the sudden need to stand up for something that was little more than a number? Maybe it was just because it was impolite of him to ask. That he smiled and raised his hands in mock surrender at her tone should, she thought, have irked her more but she found it very hard to be annoyed with him.

“Fine, I’ll try and remember. But from my perspective, that still makes you a kid. An average healthy life span of a hundred and thirty, hundred and forty – that’s what you have over here? – under thirty is still quite young. I mean, it is all relative. When and where I was born you might be expected to get eighty good years and paced your life accordingly. If you’d grown up where Gihon did you could be a grandmother by now and still having children of your own and that wouldn’t be seen as unusual.”

“You know an awful lot about him.” She wasn’t certain how far she could go, was this inviting further confidences or becoming impudent? European social boundaries were not as clearly defined as those she was used to, she was wary of taking the lead in case he took offence.

“Ah, we know an awful lot about each other. Time can do that.” The acknowledgment was frustrating, it told her nothing.

“When Gihon told me I’d be working for you he called you the old man. I have to be honest and say you were not quite what I was expecting. He said you were his oldest friend but isn’t it a bit insulting to be called the old man?” There were creases around his eyes and signs of laughter in his smooth skin but old didn’t seem to be the right word for him.

“How can it be an insult when it’s a fact? I am old. Look it up in the dictionary and the definition will say ’see Dave Jensson’.” He shrugged; there was nothing to be done to alter the facts. “I am his oldest friend and, as you clearly guessed on the first day, I’m also his ‘old man’.” He raised an eyebrow. “Is that still in use? Way back when it was a colloquialism for husband. Originally from when sanctioned marriages were just between male and female, and only included two people at that. Strange,” he mused, “I’ve never really thought of Gihon as ‘the missus’. Ah, it might be best not to mention that – especially not to him. Still, what an odd thought to have after all this time.”

“I can see that.” And she smiled as she started to shut down the workstation. There was no way she was going to be able to concentrate on work after that. Whatever else, she could never imagine the big man being referred to in feminine terms, there seemed to be as little about him that could be thought of as soft and pink and fluffy as she thought about herself. Maybe she was the one with the problem of definition?

“Can I ask you another personal question?” At least he acknowledged that asking her age had overstepped the mark. Surprised she shrugged and waited for him to continue. Given what else she had learned in the day she thought this could be interesting. The question was unexpected; it started in a rush of words, slowing towards the end as he wound down to uncertainty. ‘Do you … do you eat meat? Only, I was thinking, it’s been a bit of a long day and I should really make up for keeping you so late again. Would you like to come home and eat with us rather than go back to your place? I know it’s not really the done thing anymore, but we do tend to eat meat most nights. I can ask Gihon to do vegetarian – vegan? - if that is what you’d prefer, whatever you like …?’

She stared at him. He looked uncomfortable. He fidgeted with the edge of the tablet and looked worried. Sometimes he managed to look very lost. So very charming in his earnestness, no matter how old he might be. She fought the urge to laugh and settled on putting him out of his misery.

“Come on Dr J, I’m from the middle of nowhere - of course I have no problem with meat. I guess I should thank you for the consideration. And thanks for the invite, yes, I would love to join you.”
He’d seriously thought that she would turn down such an opportunity? No chance of that, she would eat whatever they were eating; an offer to spend time back at the Field of Reeds was not something to be rejected.

Hearing his half of the call to let Gihon know that there would be an extra person for dinner, she was pleased that the highlight of her evening wouldn’t be discovering end of the week fridge surprise to make up a sad meal for one. That he turned away from her to whisper the next part of the conversation carefully into his phone she took to be him having to promise to make up for the unexpected guest. She’d not been able to work out how relationships worked in their home. Apart from that first and very public greeting there had been signs of nothing other than friendship between the two men. She hoped the evening would prove informative.
Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Uncle Dickie's party. Dave braves a suggestion.

The music is loud in the main room. If Lytton had had close neighbours they might have complained at the noise. Instead the gap between houses on this privileged stretch of coast is enough to allow him the space to do as he wants. As a younger man he had felt the need to give something back to the society that made his family rich and had spent little time at the estate. Without the boring Old World social conscience of his best friend at Harvard, Lytton had gradually reverted back to the standards of his family and returned to traditional habits. Well, as he always laughed, apart from fathering bastards on the staff. He’d done his bit for humanity, his research and drug patents helped people around the world, that they also ensured the money would never run out … that was just ‘win-win’ he always said.

He still visited his old alma mater, still played the philanthropist with his bursaries and libraries and science prizes. He had always kept himself well, kept himself fit and safe and he defied anyone to say that his funding of HIV/AIDS research was entirely self-centred. But mostly, mostly, he liked seeing people enjoying themselves. Richard Lytton enjoyed throwing parties, and if his moral compass was not quite the same as the majority what concern of his was that?

Seeing a pretty young thing in the coffee shop queue had taken decades off Lytton and put him in mind of days long gone when he used the same place to pick up students. The attraction to the slim figure had been instant. He had left his friends and gone over to chat before he realised how long it had been since he’d been so blatant in public. Stirring his latte and making conversation Lytton was struck by the accent that went with serious face and quiet voice, an accent that took him back to the days before he’d inherited the family estate. And then there was Struan, older, greyer and heavier and this young man was looking at him as if he was his only friend in the world.

Introductions made and plans agreed Lytton had watched his friend escort the slim man from the coffee shop. Not entirely convinced of what he had been told, perhaps even irked a little at his god-daughter’s omission, he was determined to play the hand and see what would happen. Even as the serendipitously named object of his lust had left through the smoked glass doors Lytton could have sworn that the look he’d given him had hinted at more than just simple friendliness. Maybe it was just his imagination, maybe it was his age. But maybe, just maybe, there was something there.

And now, with the music pulsing and the drinks flowing, what to make of the pale enigma cosying up to Alyssa? Lytton had had many men and never regretted any of them. Regret was one of the things he’d always told his god-daughter was one of God’s jokes on mankind; it did nothing but cause pain and self-doubt. He’d had him in his hands, convinced himself that he wasn’t quite as straight as Struan had made out and, certainly, surely, the strange boy-man had begun to respond to him before remembering who he was with. But Alyssa had asked him to step back. He could never deny his favourite girl. She wants the creature for herself so Lytton determines to respect her wishes however much his subconscious torments him with images of what might have been.

Someone makes a comment. People laugh. Lytton smiles with them, but has no idea what has been
said. Remembering his manners he makes his excuses to the people around him. It seems to have been a long time since he has been so fascinated with the idea of one person. That the person appears at once somehow willing but unobtainable is an unfamiliar and annoyingly enticing itch. Helping himself to too much vintage champagne he finds a quieter corner to observe the object of his unrequited desire.

And what was this slim cipher? Lytton had assumed he was a soldier but kept that thought to himself, he couldn’t imagine what sort of soldier the man could be. Instead he watched how his other guests responded to the ‘mixed humanities student’ that Alyssa introduced. Barrington, the classicist, had been impressed by his unexpected and very cultured Latin. Joyce-Joyce was intrigued by his views on economics without actually learning what they were, and Nan Dyce was all a-flutter with his interest in faith. Whatever he was he drew the eye. Seeing the drunken glances of his old friends, Lytton guesses that he’s not the only one distracted by carnal thoughts. Unlike the others, though, he doesn’t have to try to imagine what is inside the obviously new clothes worn with such casual charm.

Alyssa suspects that something happened in the afternoon between Dave and Helena. If needs have been attended to she doesn’t really want to know. Anywhere else her concern would be the risk of discovery, but at Lytton’s the blurring of moral boundaries was par for the course and she doubted if any of the other old hands here would make a comment even if they had seen anything. Trying not to think about what may or may not have happened she only gives half her attention to the conversation her boyfriend is having with Charlie Martin about the different versions of a classic science fiction movie. In agreeing that, whatever else, the voice-over had to have been one of stupidest ideas ever she sees Dave easily charm another stranger and wonders at his uncanny knack of getting on with people – that was certainly never in the specification for him.

Being so close to him again she realises that it’s not the drink, it really is being near him which makes her feel so relaxed. This is how her father and Helena are around him all the time, this is the magic spreading to the people he is paying close attention to. Just for the accident of being male she hadn’t found him attractive to begin with but now, seeing others fall under his spell, she isn’t so certain of his effect on her. How much stronger would the effect have been if she hadn’t been the way she was? She remembered how he’d looked in the mirror and had an inkling of the impact he must have had on Uncle Richard. No wonder the old boy had pounced on the innocent.

The x-rays and endless scans had shown the inside of his body in extreme detail. The blood work and tissue samples had been more than enlightening as they were distributed to the other sites to assist research. But nothing had prepared her for him being like a real person – a real walking, talking, and thinking person, and certainly he seemed to have feelings beyond anything that was required by the programme. And however accurately they could measure calcium levels in his too strong bones or the rate his taut muscles could convert glycogen to energy there was no scientific calculation for handsome. Unaccountably, she found herself smiling as she noted the glances of lust, covert or otherwise, directed to the figure beside her. She’d told him this would happen. If it was so obvious for other people then what about her?

Her glass is empty. Absently she tugs at his arm, he is her date after all, and he should be looking after her. He does not go to the bar but takes her over to one of the tall windows running down the outside wall of the room. In a reversal of the morning he stands behind her and hugs her close, bending to whisper against her ear, “Please keep smiling. I’m going to ask you something and there are people watching. Will that be ok?” Bowing lower, he nibbles at her neck, placing quick, tender kisses along the clean line of her wide jaw. He runs his hands down her arms, holds her hands tightly as his mouth returns to the same ear. “I would really like to be with you as a man tonight, to feel you, to be inside you.” He seems so very gentle with her but she realises he has asked her in public, and also arranged the pose, to control her reaction should it be negative. His knuckles lock with tension
over her fingers.

As she rests her head back against his shoulder and looks up into the hypnotic dark eyes she wonders why he needed the precautions, the answer is suddenly and blindingly simple. “Yes, I think I would like that.”

If they had started out pretending, she feels no artifice as he lifts her hands to his face and begins kissing the tips of her fingers, and there is no shame in the low moan that escapes her as he licks the inside of her wrists. The frisson of excitement feels the same as Helena had described to her. Turning to kiss him full on the mouth she thinks she understands what the nurse had meant by submitting to him. After all her fears she has no thought for anyone else and certainly no thought for the morning as her body also says yes to him. The morning could be a million years away; the night is all she wants.

The party still has hours to run - no one has been caught with the wrong spouse and, so far, there have been no gin soaked tears, declarations or confessions. The majority are still aware enough to see the young couple make their move towards the door, stopping only to say goodnight to Lytton and to thank him for inviting them. Some are close enough to hear their host ask Alyssa to be gentle with her man, and there is the usual mock shocked laughter as he winks broadly and makes a deliberately crass pass at the object of her affection. It just would not have been one of Dickie’s parties without at least one straight man being propositioned, groped or kissed by the host before the end of the night. The target of the pass takes it in his stride, laughing with his girlfriend and planting a rather inappropriate goodnight kiss on Lytton before she drags him away, declaring that she has a much better place for him to put his tongue.

Lytton finds his old friend on the patio. Struan and his lady appear to be taking in the fresh night air, enjoying a break from the noise of the party. “That’s the kids gone to bed.” Lytton suddenly feels his age as he takes a seat with them, he doesn’t notice the way Helena’s hand tightens on Struan’s. “I asked Sweet Pea to be gentle with him but I think I might have had that the wrong way around. That boy of hers kisses like something that should be banned.”
Lia eats at the Field of Reeds and is introduced to the Opener of the Waves. The walk home ends with a surprise on her doorstep.

The door to the apartment looked like the others along the corridor. Lia hadn’t noticed it when she had exited through the same door on her first visit, but the long blank run of wall was an obvious indication that the living space inside was at least twice the size of the other accommodations on the ground floor of the exclusive building. As with the unusual approach to the garage below, Dave didn’t pause at the access panel but confidently pushed the door open for her as if knowing it would open as soon as he touched it.

There were sounds of activity and warm aromas wafting across the living space as Dave took Lia’s jacket and bag. Bypassing the large sofas in the open plan space he indicated she take a seat at the heavy dining table before greeting Gihon busy in the kitchen, his back to the room. Gihon had abandoned the long pleated duster coat she’d seen him in earlier in the day. His waist was trimmer than expected, rather narrow in comparison to the wide shoulders that contributed to his bulky silhouette. However fine the material of his layered clothes the long waistcoats, robes and other coverings were all just forms of sartorial camouflage cut to hang from his overly impressive deltoids. The visible movement of biceps and triceps pushing against the liquid silk of his high collared shirt … well, his muscles looked expansive enough to exert their own gravitational field. She wondered if that subtle force of attraction had been what had first drawn the waif-like man inexorably to the big man’s orbit.

It was difficult to take her eyes off him. There didn’t seem to be anyone to notice so she made the most of the opportunity. The image of him was something she wanted to fix in her mind. She had no doubt that she would be interrogated about him when she got home. And the image was a nice one to have, all the way from his dark crown through the strong thighs that swelled against fitted trousers down to unexpectedly bare feet. She was surprised to find that the only thing unsettling about seeing the tight curve of his rear was the relaxed and familiar way Dave’s hand rested on it as they stood - too close - and seemed to be continuing the same whispered conversation that had started in the library.

“They make a lovely couple. Yes?” Trying to watch the intimate interaction between the two academics Lia was suddenly distracted by the third member of the household as he appeared from the basement and took a place at the table next to her.

“Yes, yes they do.” She had to agree with the new arrival, but the growing thing inside her didn’t want it to be so. She hoped he hadn’t notice how she had stared, how her attention had settled on the placement of a long fingered hand. She controlled the urge to sigh, aware of a third variation on that tantalising scent hiding at the edge of her senses as Myk leaned across and poured her a glass of wine. The blood red liquid swirled in the wide goblet, Lia wasn’t certain if it warned of a risk or a promise.

“Such a pity things are not so simple. It has been a long time for them. I think Gihon would be happier if … well, there are many things that could make him happier, but it is not a conversation for
now. You are Lia?” He waited until she smiled back at him and gave all her attention to the very blue eyed and alarmingly blond Russian. Mykhail Arkhangelskeyev – women’s plaything, kept man - the only straight man in the Field of Reeds? In the flesh she had to concede that he was a handsome enough brute, but she felt no urge to throw herself at him. She doubted she would ever come under that particular spell no matter how many others of her sex seemed to fall prey to it. “I’ve seen you around campus. It’s nice to get to meet you properly. Don’t worry about using the full name, Myk is good for me. And don’t worry about Gihon; he’s been hoping the old man would invite you over.”

As if on cue the big man turned and welcomed her to his table. His smile was open and friendly, and he seemed genuinely pleased to see her. Unexpectedly, his shirt was unbuttoned rather lower than was generally considered polite. This was their private space, what else might they do that would not be polite? She wasn’t sure if that was something to add to the description Lupe would demand, or if she should keep it to herself. It seemed such a waste if no one was getting the full benefit of the well-made torso glimpsed in the rare view she was being treated to.

Contrary to Gihon’s self-deprecating assertion, the meal served was neither basic nor simple and a number of the items were exotic new discoveries for the woman. The men made eating a convivial and unhurried affair – whatever else this was clearly their shared time and they were all relaxed with each other. Lia found she was unaccountably touched at being asked to join their easy company; conversations meandered here and there around studies and students and the latest gossip that wasn’t polite to admit to in public. There was no effort, she was just at home.

It was a relief to Lia to find that Myk was not as shallow as his reputation had suggested. She didn’t know why, it was just better somehow that Gihon was not just pining away for a pretty empty head. Though he looked to be about the same age as his companions something in his deference made Lia think he was the youngest of the three. Other than vaguely mentioning that he’d been Russian military before he’d left the oblast that had given him his name he gave away little of his past. And of the present he explained that he was Dave’s technician, maintaining everything from the transport below them to the servers and software that Dave and Gihon relied upon to help organise the material they discovered. One thing that he didn’t do, though it took her some time to notice, was to come on to her. He was thoughtful and attentive, quietly identifying the more unusual items on the table for her without interrupting the exchanges between the four of them, but never anything other than friendly.

Put at ease, it was not difficult to be open as the evening progressed and Lia happily ignored the warnings of her internal editor when questions turned to her. While the trio voiced surprise that she was single, not even an insignificant other in the background, they seemed content with her answer that she’d never really been that interested. She easily admitted to experience rather than involvement. She’d tried men - and women a few times - but never quite got what all the fuss was about. She’d never really found anyone interesting enough for more than a short term thing, certainly had never considered anyone as a ‘significant other’. A social fuck, sure, when the occasion presented but nothing ever to get carried away about.

Hazily she waved a glass to indicate the campus outside “…have you seen that bunch of soft arses out there? Not met a real man among them.” Having fallen into some of the rhythms of their speech she hardly noticed how she pronounced the word. It seemed appropriate for the subject. The glass was raised in salute, first to the blond man to her left, to Gihon opposite him and finally to the brown eyes smiling at her across the table. “When it comes down to it you throwbacks are about the most masculine specimens around here, the others are all boys and boys are not worth bothering with; I’ve decided I just don’t find effete man-dolls that attractive.”

She’d called them throwbacks. No! Anyone reading the student paper had seen Myk in varying stages of undress, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. She thought the other two showed the
same hints of roughness about them lurking beneath their modern clothes made to old designs. So unlike the primped and manufactured appearance of most men in the over civilised city, these seemed undoubtedly, unashamedly and naturally male. Even as they laughed at the word and claimed to be flattered by the appellation she worried that her first meal with them might also be her last. That would be a shame; she’d enjoyed herself in their company, especially looking at the sharp face and amused dark eyes opposite her. Especially him. And then she realised what else she’d said. She’d said it out loud. Idiot. Maybe they would be too distracted by the throwback comment to notice the rest.

Balls, she could always blame the wine later if she needed to. Indeed, it was a surprise when she realised how much they had drunk as yet another bottle appeared on the table. Were they as affected as she suspected she might be? Certainly many of their reminiscences included revelations and laughter at their own expense. Whatever had actually happened in the finds tent at the dig in Berlin was not explained, but the memory had been enough to reduce Gihon to breathless giggles. “That poor guy, what was his name? Your dig administrator …. Rennie something? That poor guy walking in on us when I came over for a visit …” It didn’t take long for Dave to give up the struggle to maintain a straight face, especially after Myk accused him of ‘breaking’ the frantic giggler. Their laughter was infectious even though Lia had no clue what had set it off.

As with her first visit to the apartment music had played throughout the meal, the men breaking off sometimes from what they were saying to discuss this or that track. It appeared to be a random playlist from a selection of their vast archive of pre-Collapse music; the same that had become familiar to her in the study area. As coffee cups were drained Lia saw that the long instrumental introduction on one song was one all three men recognised. They looked at each other, suddenly awkward, and they all asked for it to be skipped before the vocal started. The invisible sound system smoothly switched to a different track and they seemed to relax again. Was there something in the lyrics that made them uncomfortable, or was it because she was with them? It was the first time they seemed to realise there was a new person at their table.

“Myk, I have a suggestion.” Dave leaned forward. Lia found it hard not to stare at the base of his throat as he spoke to the man beside her; there was something her subconscious was trying to tell her, something to do with stretching across and licking. She did her best to ignore the urge, sure that it would pass. She seemed to have so many unusual urges since this man had arrived. “I'll give Gihon a hand with tidying up. Would you take Lia downstairs and introduce her to our responsible adult? I suspect that Ms Jordan will be a regular visitor, let’s make sure she’s always going to be welcome.” She heard the words but hadn’t noticed the pause and the slight nod from Gihon to Dave as they were spoken. The small gesture was mimicked a heartbeat later by the technician; the subtle movement almost hidden as he rose from the table.

Unaware of the undercurrent of conversation that had been going on about her all evening - in glances and inflections - Lia happily followed the blond man as he led her down the stairs and through one of the doors leading off the small utilitarian lobby. Behind the blank door was a short corridor which opened out into a cool room with one chair pulled up before a control console. She had no idea of the actual size of the room, floor to ceiling there was no gap between the racks to allow her to see how far back the walls were. She’d seen server rooms before, but a more accurate description would be to call them rooms with servers in them. This light filled space within a complicated array of interconnected processing units was, literally, a room inside a server.

The technician motioned her to sit in the one chair and put her hands flat on scanner panels set into the table before her. He waved a hand in front of a wide blank screen. The screen came to life with a stylised outline of some kind of dog, possibly a wolf, against a dark background.

“Ah Misha, you have brought someone to see me.” The voice was rich with honey tones, Lia
couldn’t say if it was male or female but, as it emanated from all parts of the room at once, it was warm and comforting. It was the same voice as the navigation system in the cars. In response Myk spoke back to the graphic on the screen but this seemed only to be a totem to provide a focus. Lia guessed that they could talk to the voice anywhere within the apartment. This was the brain behind the apartment – the music, the lighting, and the formidable security.

“Greetings Wepwawet. I would like to introduce you to our new friend. This is Lia Jordan. We hope she will be visiting us from now on. We would all like her to be allowed to come and go as she pleases.” He turned to the impressed woman and indicated the screen with the same formality. “Lia, this is Wepwawet. Our guardian program.”

“Greetings Lia Jordan. Welcome to the Field of Reeds. I am Wepwawet, the Opener of the Ways.” The image on the screen changed again, the logo being replaced by a lifelike image of a large grey wolf that turned from profile to look out of the screen at her. Inexplicably the image gave the impression that the wolf was smiling and Lia found that she couldn’t help but smile back. “Lia Jordan, I recognise you and allow you full access to our home. Should you need anything from me while you are here you only have to speak my name. I note you have a separate phone handset rather than an implant. I have added my access information to it. If you want to ask me anything while you are out of range then please call me. I am always here.”

“Wepwawet, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” What was she meant to say? “I guessed that someone had to be looking after these three. It is good to know that you keep them safe.” The canid face nodded to her and smiled again, pink tongue lolling from the side of the open mouth. The teeth were long and sharp. Lia thought this was one guardian that looked like it might bite back. “Thank you for recognising me. I hope we will have the opportunity to get to know each other in future visits.” She wondered how many other people had been introduced to the impressive program. Free access to the apartment was not something that she had ever even heard rumours about. This was definitely something she would not be sharing with her friends. Thinking of the teeth, it seemed a prudent approach to take.

Earlier there had been no rush to move away from the big table, they had just continued their conversation where they sat, the remains of the meal around them. When Lia and Myk returned to the main room the table had been cleared and the kitchen returned its pristine condition. Even allowing for the slight delay as Myk briefly showed her the other rooms in the basement - a utility room and gym in addition to the garage - she was impressed. Though she knew that the real work was being quietly done by hidden appliances she’d never been in any flat-share where two men, any number of men actually, had been so efficient. And they must have been quick, Dave was now checking his emails and Gihon was brushing the day’s loose plait from his hair, glossy highlights undulating down his long mane as he worked it back into one glorious mass. The big man smiled around the barrette held in his teeth as Dave insisted on walking Lia back to her shared house.

“Please, no. It’s completely unnecessary, I’m as safe as anyone, there is no need …” Even as she voiced her protestations she realised that she was hoping he’d ask her to stay. She knew there was a guest bedroom, she’d been introduced to Thoth on her first visit and had used that bathroom during the evening. Though she hadn’t consciously started out with any intentions she was honest enough with herself to acknowledge that the guest room was not where she’d hoped to spend the night. Remarks during the meal had made her think that Dave’s tastes were not as exclusive as either of his friends. She thought that was a theory she would quite like to test, especially if she’d understood Myk’s whispers that he was not sleeping with Gihon.

“I know it’s old fashioned but I don’t want you walking through the park on your own. You could be the safest person out there but I would worry if I didn’t make sure that you got back home ok.”
“And just who would look after you walking back on your own? Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re hardly the most intimidating silhouette in the dark.”

He smiled at her. A predatory glint lurked somewhere in the smile, much like the wolf she’d just met.

“Oh, I have a few surprises for anyone was foolish enough to try and pick on me. Anyway, you are assuming that I could be caught …”

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The night still retained some warmth as they set off for the shared house. As with other years recently summer seemed to be resisting the long retreat into autumn. Without saying anything specific they found their feet on the longest route through the park, skirting the lake even though it was clearly out of their way. She took the opportunity to ask him why he called the apartment the Field of Reeds. It had been easy enough for her to find the source of the name but the meaning for him had intrigued her. He replied that anywhere he was with Gihon was the closest he’d been to a perfect life; wherever it was, their home would always be the Field of Reeds. Several times after that he seemed to want to say something, but then stopped himself each time he was about to start. Briefly she wondered if he, like her, felt that he might have had too much to drink. Would a lack of sobriety be a safe excuse if something happened between them, something they might regret later?

Close to him seemed a good place to be despite her uncertainties about his situation, and she noticed that they walked in step, gradually coming closer together no matter how wide the path they walked on. Though large, the park was just not big enough for the evening and eventually they arrived on her familiar tree lined avenue. As she went toward the front steps of the old shared house he stretched out and took her hand, pulling her back towards him. The unexpected movement caused her to look up, mouth open in surprise and he bent his face to her. At last. The knot of tension that had been building in her suddenly changed.

Held in a remarkably strong embrace she was more than happy to respond to his late advance. For long moments it was as if there was nothing else in the world. With none of the hurried fumbling of the young all he did was kiss her. Warm lips pressed against hers, soft and tender, not rushing, not forcing but - oh - so exciting. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling, hoping more than anything that it was not just some drunken mistake. Open mouthed, the taste of him, flavours of their meal, the wine … something that was undeniably him. Even as her tongue answered his she recalled the image of his reunion with Gihon, that same slow and gentle passion. What about Gihon? She hadn’t known how to ask the question. What if she had come to the wrong conclusion there? She stiffened slightly. It was enough to make him stop.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.” His voice might have been low and the words contrite but she heard no real tone of apology. His hands rested, as if forgotten, on her hips. “I wanted to do that all night. I know it’s meant to be wrong of me ….” Unrepentant brown eyes looked down at her, was he looking to her for signs of approval or offence?

“Oh, don’t worry about that. That felt very right. I have to say, you feel remarkably right to me, Dr Jensson.” Vaguely embarrassed she disentangled her fingers from his thick hair, and then reached up again to try and repair the damage she hadn’t realised she had caused.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to …” Barely above a whisper, his concern thrilled her as much as his closeness.

“Oh I wanted you to - I thought that was why it took so long to get here. I wanted to but I wasn’t sure if … Sorry, I’m not very good at this, I’m always the last one to know if anyone is interested. I didn’t want to offend you by jumping in and making a mistake.”
“How could I be offended if someone as young and beautiful as you wanted to kiss me? I am flattered and …” he pulled her in to a tight embrace - she couldn’t stop the small shocked exclamation as she felt him hard against her – and whispered in her ear “… very, very honoured.”

“What about Myk and Gihon?”

“They can get their own attractive young things to kiss if they want, I’ve never stopped them.” He didn’t seem to realise what had caused her earlier confusion. How could he not be aware of it?

“But … I was worried that you … I thought you were meant to be g …?” He silenced her question with another stunning kiss before she could say the word. Whatever had happened before, how could she doubt his interest now? Words were just expectations.

“Believe me; I know what I like when I see it. I am too old to even bother keeping up with the terminology of relationships. I have two husbands because they happen to be the most remarkable creatures I’ve met. No wife doesn’t mean that I haven’t looked … just that I’ve not found her. And, if/when I do I’m sure they will cope with it just as I would if they wanted to marry again.” He broke away from her and smiled. “Too much in one go? Sorry, I forget that our ways are unusual.” And this time he did look apologetic as if just realising the chasm of experience and expectation between them. Well, she reasoned, that could be something she would just have to get used to it. Were all Europeans like this behind their high walls?

“Kiss me again.” She reached up to pull him back down to her. She didn’t care about his history. The scent of him bypassed rational thought. She couldn’t get enough of breathing him in.

“Sure? You know that your friends are watching us?”

“Oh yes. Definitely in that case.” And this time she twined herself as closely as possible around him, pleased to find that she hadn’t been mistaken about his condition. She found that keeping her fingers deep in his hair was the only way to stop her hands straying, but there was no way to restrain the unconscious movement of her hips against him. It was something he reciprocated with a thrillingly deliberate, sinuous motion. Encircled by his arms she finally got it, every nerve ending screamed understanding of what all the fuss was about. The feeling was a new-born thing wanting feeding. It didn’t seem long before she felt she had to ask the question, her voice husky with intent. “Don’t you want to come in?”

“I do, but not this time. It wouldn’t be right.” Another kiss, briefer but no less intense. “There is no need to rush.” And again. “Patience.” She wasn’t sure if his comments were for her or to himself, he seemed to be having equal difficulty in stopping. Finally, he lifted his face from hers, and his gaze was deep and serious. “You need time to decide if this is really what you want and, to be honest, I think this is also going to take me a while to adjust to. It’s been so long since … well … let’s say I’m somewhat out of practice. I know you don’t think you are, but you really are very young. I don’t want to take advantage of you … and I guess I don’t want you to think that is what I am doing.” With that he finally released his hold and gave her a light push in the direction of the waiting door. “Go on, go in. I expect little Lupe is nearly chewing through the door, he will be so frantic to hear how your night has been.”

Before finally letting her go there was the briefest touch of his lips to her hand as he wished her a good night. Then he turned away, running back down the street to disappear in the park’s gloom. So that was what he’d meant by people having difficulty catching him – he was a fleet footed shadow. She let herself into the house wondering what other surprises he would have for her. There was no surprise behind her front door. As expected Lupe was lying in wait with Robyn for backup. The slight Mexican was all but beside himself when she said nothing much had happened. Yes she went back to his place, yes they had a meal – but there were four of them - and then he walked her home,
just a kiss goodnight, surely not much more than a peck on the cheek so what was he so fired up about?

“Chica that was no peck on the cheek! Robyn had time to make drinks for us all while we waited for you to finish.” With a theatrical sigh he folded his arms and leant against the hallway wall. It was a practiced move intended to convey motherly annoyance and one she had always found amusing when used on other inhabitants of the house. She’d never been on the receiving end of it before. “Well, all I can say is that I hope you are proud of that display – you would be married by now in some places. Honestly, throwing yourself at a skinny old man like that.” They both knew that the pretence of indignation couldn’t last and his tone became conspiratorial as curiosity won out over judgement. “Oh, ok then, how was it?”

“Unbelievable. Just amazing. And … and you, less of the old, he doesn’t look old, what makes you think he feels old? He felt fine enough to me. Anyway, that turned out to be one very unexpected day … and I’ve had far too much wine so I’m off to my bed. Night guys.” Though she was thrillingly awake she gave them a yawn and a sleepy wave as she retreated up the stairs to the peace of her small room. She was determined to savour the taste of his lips on hers and the feel of his urgent hardness against her, to enjoy the feeling of being so wanted. She also needed to consider the surprising strength of her own response - a world away from anything before.

As she left them staring at the empty space made by her exit she heard Robyn mimicking the breathy voice of the University news anchor – “So, what first attracted you to the billionaire historian?”
Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Dave shows how his fulfils his purpose.

Nervous, Alyssa doesn’t know what to say as he undresses in front of her. She looks at him from the bed. She has seen him naked every day since her arrival. This time she knows something will happen and she is scared and excited in equal measure. He looks so serious. This isn’t just some casual thing for him and definitely not some random pick up in a bar for her. She realises she doesn’t want to see what she had felt against her that morning, and is not sure that she wants him to see her. Though she knows it probably won’t make that much difference to him, the blond woman switches off the light before he is done.

He sits behind her, around her – long pale legs warming the denim she wears as he unbuttons her shirt and pulls it down from her shoulders. Tiny kisses across her exposed skin make her shiver. He reaches around her and undoes the front clasp of her bra, his long hands cupping her small breasts as the material falls away, running a curious finger along the ridges of metal that run through her nipples.

“Is this ok?” Even his voice is gentle, the words a breath across her ear.

“I’ve never had a man before.” Her hand feels small against his as she encourages him to squeeze the pert flesh. This is unreal.

“I’m not a man.” And he moves around her and presses her to the bed, his fingers nimble with the buttons on her jeans as his mouth plays with one nipple and then the other, licking and sucking, savouring the new sensations. She shrugs her arms out of the shirt and bra straps. “Tell me when you are ready.” She lets him wriggle her out of the heavy indigo cloth, dragging her underwear at the same time to remove her last defence. “Tell me what you want.”

“Kiss me first.” He takes the invitation as she spreads her legs for him, exploring the folds of flesh carefully, discovering the rings and bars guarding the route into her, fascinated by the smoothness of her bare pudenda. His experience has only been with one other person but he navigates Alyssa’s pleasure as well as any woman ever has. This is unexpected. This is good. She sighs as he begins to lick inside her wetness, his tongue thrusting deep inside her. This is better than good.

“I want more.” Breathless she takes one of the hands kneading her buttocks and pushes his fingers inside her. His tongue returns to the excited nub of her clitoris and her sighs soon become a drawn out command. “Fuck me, oh, fuck me, fuck me.” What else is he there for but to answer her needs? “Yes. Oh God yes …”

Later, much later, it seems to her, the sweat cools on her body.

“Do you think they heard us downstairs?” His voice from the bathroom is quiet but clear enough over the sound of running water. No light spills out from the open door to disturb her calm, she hadn’t wanted light so he goes without.
“I think they might have heard us in the next county. Shit. I wasn’t expecting it to be so … intense.”

“Was that ok for you?” She doesn’t look at him as he slides back into bed next to her. What happened to first time sex always being a disappointment?

“Hell yes. Now go to sleep.” She doesn’t really care if he sleeps or not so long as he is still there in the morning. She thinks she might like to look at him again in the daylight and might even let him look at her. She is impressed that he had not flinched or drawn back from what he found in the dark. He had taken her as her found her – her body, her rules. She relaxes and is soon asleep, unaware of how her hand reaches out to stroke the flesh that had filled her up.
After

Chapter Summary

Lia considers herself and her change of status. Wepwawet gives her food for thought.

Heart rate back to normal and adrenalin spike over Lia suddenly realised what had happened. He certainly hadn’t seemed drunk while counselling patience and he hadn’t seemed in any doubt about what he wanted. He wanted her. There was no way he could have faked what she’d felt as he’d twisted against her. He wanted her and he was happy for her to know it. That seemed as far-fetched as … well, as far-fetched as his presence in the city anyway so why shouldn’t it be true?

While she was intrigued, eager even, to investigate what the tantalising feeling of his body hinted at she wondered what he would think when he saw her undressed. There was nothing wrong with how she was put together; she had had experience enough to know that. It was just that, whatever had been said by lovers, bed-mates – whatever she classed them as - she’d never felt entirely comfortable enjoying her body and had genuinely never understood what all the fuss was about. Would her lack of connection be so obvious to him?

Being female had always been more a way of working out what size clothes to buy and which restroom to use. Sex with women had been no more illuminating for her than sex with men. With no aversion either way she had seen her experience as just that and avoided all the confusion that people found when they got carried away with labelling. Gender, like sex, was a concept she’d never got hung up on. There were some pretty matching things in a drawer, but they were worn as infrequently as the (probably out of date) make-up and the binders and packing shorts she would try every now and then.

She’d never bothered with the knife to change how she presented. Curved or straight she had always had the view that nothing so far had ever quite been her so couldn’t see the point of the bother to change herself according to fashion or mood, certainly no reason to go as far as the gender swapping extremes Robyn had adopted. Her figure had always appeared to be on the toned, athletic side – something she’d put down to luck rather than any consistent effort. While she’d always thought that she would opt for the usual surgeries to keep age and gravity at bay she was just pleased that, so far, there didn’t seem to be any need for them.

Her non-descript brown hair was long, yes, but that was because she could never be bothered thinking about doing anything with it and only had it cut if it seemed untidy. She kept it tied back, out of the way, something that people liked to hold on to or stroke at the appropriate time. Her face was just the one that looked back in the mirror; she’d never given much thought how her strong brows framed her clear hazel eyes, or how her narrow nose drew many men’s eyes down to full lips that made her mouth seem slightly out of proportion in her heart shaped face.

He wanted her. However she moved the stress around the little sentence there was still a chasm she needed to jump to make it sound right in her head. How had she managed to attract such attention from someone so much more experienced? Maybe he was trying to make Gihon jealous, both of them jealous? No, he wasn’t that cruel a person. Was it her youth, her relative naivety? No, it wasn’t that - they’d all seemed relieved when she said she’d had a range of lovers. They’d all … shit, the other two must have known what he was thinking.
Had the evening been an interview for the position of girlfriend? Lover? Casual fuck? Definitely not the latter - she’d more than given him the opportunity and he’d not taken it. She wasn’t thrilled at being the last to know, but that was how she’d described herself so maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised to be right. She hadn’t been aware of her own feelings but they had … and they had approved. Even the guardian program had seemed pleased to see her.

Maybe it was as simple as liking her and wanting to see where that would lead? Hardly a simple option given the two men that he lived with. Separate rooms or not she knew what the speculation had been like in the aftermath of his arrival. She hadn’t gone looking for it, but had friends enough to give her a bullet point version of the conjecture. And now he wanted her. What would happen as she was drawn into their unusual household? What had that smart security of theirs been witness to over the years?

She dragged her phone from the untidy jumble in her bag – sure enough there was the outline of a wolf in the corner of the screen. She couldn’t resist thumbing the logo to see what would happen.

“Hello again Lia Jordan. May I assist you?”

“Yes, hi, er … Wepwawet?” She’d never heard a door program answer with a ‘u-uh’ affirmation sound before. Clever. Off-putting, but clever. “You started playing a song tonight. All the guys asked you to skip it. It was just before I was brought down to see you. I was wondering … could you send it to me?” A moments silence and then a beep from the handset indicated receipt of a file. Clever but not over-chatty. She could live with that. “Thank you Wepwawet, goodnight.”

“Good night Lia Jordan. Visit us again soon.” The warm contralto gave every indication of a smile. The apartment knew that she would be back.

Her bed seemed lonely. She couldn’t stop thinking about his kiss. Those kisses. She got goose bumps again just thinking about him. She wondered what it would feel like for his mouth to roam over her body, what would have happened if he was with her now. Absent-mindedly she reached back to her phone and set it to play the song that the guardian had provided. Asking for it had only been to give her an excuse to call the program but, playing it back, she realised what had made the men ask for it to be stopped. In the circumstances it was far too intimate.

The lyrics were like a promise of intent; perhaps they described an ideal they all remembered. He’d said two husbands. He knew what he liked when he saw it. And he wanted her. The plain words and the swirling music made a tantalising coda in her mind as she finally drifted away in her lonely bed. She had no doubt that he had more than fulfilled that promise with Gihon and - more surprisingly - Myk. It seemed that the same would be offered to her if she wanted it.
Alyssa wakes, unusually happy and relaxed. She leaves him in the bed and withdraws to the bathroom. Discovering that her period is early she shrugs; though she had enjoyed the experience any replay of the previous night would just have to wait. The blood was one reminder of femininity that she never liked anyone seeing but she had always balked at the idea of risking the other effects of depo provera just to be rid of one annoyance. There was no reason that things should be any different with this man shaped thing.

He appears to be still asleep when she returns from the shower, towel drying her hair as she moves around the bedroom. She can’t imagine what his dreams must be like, what thoughts filled the closed eyes hidden behind the thin sheet he has thrown over himself in her absence. Sunlight streaming through the windows catches the folds of the sheer fabric and she suddenly recalls a statue seen on a tour of Italy in her teenage years, a chapel museum in Naples and a similarly covered body. The aim of the visit had been an underground chamber and the bizarre Anatomical Machines created hundreds of years before von Hargen had toured his Körperwelten freak show. At the back of the group she’d been stopped in her tracks by the uncanny skill of a baroque sculptor, fixated by a view of a body peaceful after the torment of death. It was the last time she remembered finding a male body attractive.

She sits and wonders if it is significant that her ideal male has always been a dead man. Now here she is with someone lying so still that he could almost be dead, a man whose very life is a mystery. The sheet glides easily across his body and her eyes follow the edge of the material as his skin is exposed beneath it. He is perfect, she decides, as her hands draw the sheet towards her. And then she realises there is no way he can still be asleep. She looks back at his face, feeling a hint of guilt at being caught staring. His eyes, his beautiful brown eyes are open, drinking in the view of her. He stretches - an unnecessarily attractive undulation of muscle from top to toe - and rolls on to his side. His smile is an invitation she will not take.

“Sorry, not this morning.” He looks confused and she sees a nervous, recently made thing again not the accomplished lover of the previous night. “No, it’s not you, it’s me.” Raised eyebrows signal disbelief in the cliché. “Really. It’s me. I got my period.” Understanding shows on his face and he smiles again.

“I know.” And now it is her turn to look confused. “I tasted you last night. I thought you … oh, you hadn’t realised. Sorry, I thought that was why you wanted me to go back down on you after I came.”

“You mean we did … you did that …?”

“What’s wrong? I thought you enjoyed what we did.”

“But the blood, the blood is …” She struggles with a mixture of disbelief and disgust. She had enjoyed what he had done, everything that he’d done, his tongue lapping at her, licking her clean she
realises. He was truly a lover with no preconceptions, no idea but to do what she wanted, and whatever she wanted, apparently, was fine by him. The responsibility was unsettling.

“The blood is natural, it is life. What’s wrong with that?” And he is next to her and his arms are around her, comfort and restraint in one move. “I think you have forgotten what it was like to be natural, to just be and be happy with what you are.” She tries to pull away, who is this creature to talk about being natural? He holds her close, closer still, and looks into eyes unwilling to return his gaze. This then, is a part of his strength, the partner to the easy feeling he creates around him. “What happened to you? Who hurt you to make you dislike your body so much that you’ve done all that to yourself? I can’t say it is ugly but you seem uncomfortable with what you have done … it doesn’t sit easily with you. If anything is wrong it is that, not the pleasure that two people can have.”

“Oh, what is this, your massive experience of women and the world?” One hand is large enough to hold both her wrists close. He bends to kiss the tips of her fingers and she finds it difficult to maintain her irritation at him. Deep down she knows he has hit a mark, something she should consider, but again there is a feeling of calm just from his touch. She remembers his eyes in the night, the way he seemed to look into her soul.

“My experience of you is all I need. You can have joy with your body without caging and controlling it with those bars and studs. Are you punishing yourself for something? As for shaving, waxing, whatever you have done … it makes for an interesting sensation but you are a woman, fully grown with a woman’s needs. You are not a doll or a child.” That serious look again, what had he seen through his too old eyes? His kiss is a light touch on her lips, an acknowledgement not a demand and he releases her. “Thank you for last night. For all of last night. When you are ready, if you want to I mean, then just say and I’ll be anything you want. Your body, your rules.”

Dave and Alyssa make it to breakfast quietly, but hand in hand, a short while later. They are not the first, certainly not the last. People rise in the house as hang-overs and fatigue allow. Lytton’s breakfasts have been known to last as long as the parties that precede them and were often a time for mellow reflection, apologetic reconciliations and, quite often, strong pain-killers and hair of the dog.

Dave sips his coffee, his look thoughtful and distant as Alyssa goes to greet her father and sits with him, their heads close together. There is no sign of Helena. Lytton slides into the space opposite the slim man. He’s backed off as promised, but with the weekend coming to an end he can’t resist a little fishing. “I waited for you last night. I was hoping you might want another swim.”

“Ah. I am still flattered but other demands took up much of the night.” Dave does not look the older man in the eye, not wanting to say too much but not wishing to be impolite.

“You know she doesn’t like men.” The words are a flat statement.

“She tells me every day.” Topping up his coffee, they might have been commenting on the weather.

“So why is she with you?”

“I’m not men.” And now he smiles and to Lytton the room seems just a few degrees brighter than before. Not men, of course, that makes sense.
Late morning and it was nice to wake without an alarm. Vaguely surprised, Lia wasn’t as hung-over as she thought she should have been. It wasn’t her first waking, but was the only one she would admit to her friends. In the early hours she’d startled herself awake, in a sweat with the sheets twisted around her. It must have been the song … and the drink … and, and was that lust? Safer to blame the song.

# I'll kiss the sleep from your eyes
# I'll kiss you when the sun goes down
# I'll kiss you until sunrise

Again, her fingers had been twisting through his thick hair. Only, not out of view this time, she’d seen her knuckles white against the brown shades as she held his face against her body. Teased by his lips and excited by his tongue, she’d eventually pushed him down to the destination that cried out for him.

# And I'll kiss away your tears and fears
# And I'll kiss away those hurting years
# And I'll kiss away those cruel dark hours

She’d known it had to be a dream but, caught up in it, there was no way she had wanted it to stop before the inevitable conclusion. The feeling of the orgasm, so strong and direct as she’d thrust herself hard against his open mouth, had been so different, a world away from anything experienced before.

# I'll kiss you, kiss you, kiss you on your sex
# And I'll take you, take you, take you in my mouth
# And I'll kiss you, kiss you until heaven sends you

As her hands relaxed their convulsive grip he’d lifted his head from her trembling core. The movement of a long hand across his face seemed casual enough. That he wiped a stray pearl of something into his mouth, with every indication of satisfaction, had made her realise something was deeply skewed with the fantasy. She’d looked down herself to see not the softer contours she was familiar with but a wide, hard body with some kind of brand running down one side to the groin. The parted thighs were not an invitation to her vulva but led the way to an erection just starting to fade after her explosive release.

In the dream Lia had been deeply satisfied. In her bedroom she’d stared blankly into the darkness, disturbed and not a little surprised as moist fingers retreated in unexpected confusion. It had felt so good.

# I'll kiss you, I'll kiss you
# I'll kiss you until heaven sends you
Lia had finally slept and, in the dark, the new thing fed on the energy it had been given.

She tried to hide behind the latest news flimsy, pretending to read rather than meet the curious stares from her housemates as she ate a silent breakfast. Why did it have to be weekend? The house was still full; there was no way the others hadn’t been filled in by Lupe and Robyn. She dreaded what they might have said. A glass of some gently fizzing liquid appeared by her hand. Meg’s voice behind her indicated it would help with any hangover – whatever the cause.

They were being very patient. They didn’t push but it was soon obvious that no one was moving without hearing more about her evening. Even Steve, officially uninterested in anyone else’s love life, was sat in his study with the door open wide so he didn’t miss anything said in the kitchen. She drank the pick-me-up. It did what it was meant to do and she finally looked up from the words that had been in front of her eyes but hadn’t made any meaning for her.

“We were working in the Library and he asked if I’d like to eat with them and asked me if I ate meat.” She could see Lupe’s mouth start to curl, after her dream that was one comment she definitely needed to quash before it was made. “He was worried I might be vegetarian and didn’t want to offend me. Look I only went back to see what they were like in private.”

“And?”

“And it was a really nice evening. Gihon is an excellent cook and Myk is quite pleasant company with his clothes on. Dave really does have estates and vineyards in Europe, part of his income is from importing things we just don’t have access to here. What they drink as everyday wine I think would be quite pricy in a restaurant. I think his idea of ‘simple peasant cooking’ and mine are completely different things, definitely no Soylent Cricket for them. You know, in Egypt Gihon could go out and hunt and butcher his own meat … maybe I should take him home to my father? At least he’d approve, not like the faces you pull when I say I miss game. We had a lot of wine.”

“You said that last night … and?”

“OK, ok … the things I know you want to know. It looks like the big guy is hiding quite a nice body behind the hair and the long clothes. From seeing how tight his shirt was across his shoulders I’d say the bulk is all him and not clothes. He’s a lot more relaxed at home. He swears for punctuation and laughs a lot when he tells stories. He also gets fits of the giggles, but that might just have been the wine again.

“Him and Dave … they must have been quite a couple when they were together. I didn’t get any gory details but it sounds like they got up to all sorts of things. Now, that seems to be behind them.” She could feel Lupe winding up to a double entendre. She ignored him and looked at Robyn, trying to put off where the conversation was bound to end up. “Oh, and Gihon likes to go barefoot. They have this massive server room in the basement and the heat sink from it provides their hot water and under floor heating. Gihon says it’s too pleasant a feeling to waste. He has nice feet if feet are your thing.”

“What about him and the Russian?” It didn’t matter who asked, even Steve probably wanted to know the answer to that one.

“Again, just friends, I think. They smile and make jokes but nothing intimate going on that I could see. I told you before, they all have separate rooms. Myk is a nice guy. I was surprised. Not sure what I was expecting but he is really nice. Very quiet, but I can see it would be difficult to get a word in when those two get fired up about something. He didn’t seem at all to be the voracious womaniser
the rag makes him out to be. They have a guardian program with a personality, something brought
over from Luxor, it’s called Wepwawet and it lives in the server. However it started out Myk has
made it quite special. I think he’s a clever chap when he doesn’t have the distraction of women.”

“And … Dave? Had time to think about last night?” Despite the snide comment the previous night
she knew her housemates would probably be the most understanding audience she would get.

“Well, I’d like to … I’d like … oh shit, what if …” She felt her cheeks starting to colour. “The man
could have anyone. Trust me. Up close he’s got some kind of mojo beyond tall, dark and handsome -
and it’s not just money thank-you-very-much.” Robyn did her best to look innocent. It wasn’t a look
she was suited to. “I’ve no idea what he sees in me but I hope it’s still there when I see him again. I
definitely want to find out what else he has to offer because it would be a crime not to go further with
someone who kisses like that.”

“What if that’s his thing, what if you get him to bed and he’s a real disappointment?”

“Emma, you didn’t see the guy in action.” While it was nice of Lupe jump to her defence there was a
small part of Lia that dreaded what he might say next. “Last night was absolutely guaranteed to make
you want more. I would have had a better view if this one hadn’t insisted on being so close but, even
so, I don’t think there’s any risk of disappointment. Those street lights certainly show contours in
relief, he must - oww!” The little man yelped and glared at Robyn. “What! I’m only saying. The guy
was clearly packing.” Lia glared daggers at Lupe. Did it always have to come down to that for him?
At least Robyn’s kick had stopped him measuring anything out with his hands.

The front door announced that they had a visitor.

Not quite saved by the bell, the door calmly intoned that a Mr Jensson was calling to see if Ms
Jordan was available. All eyes turned back to her. She heard Steve’s chair creak as he leaned across
the doorway – hmm, she thought, very disinterested after all. What could be worse than the perfect
kiss that was a mistake? Perhaps to find out in person and in front of your friends. Glad that she was
up and dressed and presentable to the world she retreated to the front door and left in a swirl of
hastily-grabbed jacket before her friends could invite her caller in.

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“You didn’t have to come round. You could have just called if you wanted to talk.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Standing on a lower step than her, their faces were at the same height. “This
doesn’t work too well if we are apart.” He took her hands between his own. “And I definitely
couldn’t do this.” His kiss was sweet and tender; somewhat hesitant to begin with as if scared she
would push him away. Standing out on the stoop felt a little too exposed in daylight; Lia suggested a
walk in the park, some private space in public so they could talk without anyone giving them grief.
Turning her back on the shocked and, no doubt, salacious curiosity in the house behind her had
many benefits.

The park had been designed with wooded paths and secluded benches, ideal for people wanting time
away from the main thoroughfares. Nowhere was completely private, but the joggers and the pet
walkers, the cyclists and the pram pushers, were too taken up with their own worlds to take much
note of the thin man sitting awkwardly next to the woman who didn’t realise how attractive she was.

“I was very happy when I got back to the Field last night. You made me very happy. Then this
morning I woke up and I was worried that I’d gone too far, that I’d been too pushy.” He held her
hands, spoke to her fingers. The newly discovered part of her fluttered her heart against her ribs. The
sensible part of her was curious how someone clearly so experienced could seem uncomfortable.
He’d said it had been a long time, just how long was a long time for him? Daylight seemed to have brought guilt with it, but she could see nothing he could be guilty for.

“You weren’t pushy. I was the one asking you in, you were the one who refused.”

“I shouldn’t have been so … obvious. There’s no excuse for such a noticeable reaction. I’m sorry, I thought I made you feel pressured into inviting me in.”

“You mean you didn’t want to?” Not after stirring up all those feelings, not after that dream. She had a brief moment of panic.

“Dear God no, I mean, I did, I do want to - but I want it to be right. Last night could have been a real let down for you if we’d gone any further … and I don’t want to let you down.” He laughed, shamefaced. “If I’m honest, running through Manetho’s king list in my head was the only thing that stopped me showing myself up even more.”

What could she say to that? She had no idea who Manetho was but guessed that she should be thankful to him/her/it/them. Her turn to be honest – partially at least – but she found the words spilling before her internal censor could dam the flow.

“I dreamt about you last night. I got that blasted song stuck in my head and I dreamt about you and I had the best orgasm I’ve ever had. Only I don’t know if I really did, or it was just in the dream and everything was really messed up and I was a man and you’d gone down on me … and you didn’t need to know that. You really didn’t, and I didn’t mean to say it. Oh shit. I’m sorry. I’m all confused. I’ve not been like this before.” She hid her face against his chest. It felt nice there. He didn’t say anything. She could hear the thump of his heart, slow, steady. It was hypnotic. Then he didn’t say anything some more while he put an arm around her. She risked peeking up at him with one eye. “I was all fired up, and that song, that fucking song about all the kissing ‘until heaven sent me’. Positively pornographic.” She hid away again, not sure she could look at him, feeling very, very young. Wasn’t that what he’d said? From the brief glimpse of his face couldn’t tell if he was shocked or amused.

He closed the slight gap between them and pulled her onto his lap. She knew she was no lightweight but he made the transition seem effortless, easy. His strength was without fanfare. She allowed him to lift her face up to look at him. He smiled. He’d been smiling all along. “I think we both have things we need to get used to before we go too far too fast. Should we start with the basics? I really do like you and I would like to have you as … as my girlfriend, my lover if you would have me eventually. I don’t want to rush you. I understand if having those two back home freaks you out. It’s not the most uncomplicated of arrangements but they won’t get in the way of us if you want to give it a go. I can’t promise anything, I’m much better at the past than the future. Right now all I want is to kiss you again. Would that be ok?”

On his third circuit past them the grey haired runner cracked and shouted at them to get a room. Laughing, they abandoned the bench and returned to her house. She said goodbye to him at the door, confident that she could deal with her housemates, and sent him back to his own home to let his husbands know that he now had a girlfriend. Husbands. Though her body was screaming at her to throw herself at him, he hadn’t been wrong when he said they had things to get used to. She would trust him and the steady beat that echoed through him.
The journey home is subdued, Dave comfortable with driving the long drive back to the base and the lake house, his little haven of peace. They had said their farewells amid promises to stay in touch and demands for the youngsters to visit again the next time they were in the States. Fatigue and the thousand yard stare of the interstate withers the sparse conversation and each gradually withdraws into their own musings.

Returning her bag back to her old room, hearing Dave and Helena settling back into the study and their cosy sofa bed, Alyssa is not certain how to take the thought of him sleeping with his nurse again. Of course they’d screwed every day before the weekend at Lytton’s. Then it hadn’t bothered her so much. Then she hadn’t known what things could be like. He’d promised, he’d promised that she could have him any time … but while he waited for her it seemed entirely normal to him to return to his original habits. He hadn’t said anything about giving up Helena for her. The thought of him with the dark woman, the confidence she had in herself and the ease with which she handles him gnaws at the uncertain lover.

In an attempt at distraction Alyssa works through his case notes, comparing his labs with the Epsilons she already knew would be a dead end. She has another meeting with Harrison but has nothing to report to him, nothing definite that he has been looking for anyway. What could she say? That potentially he could offer a cure for menstrual cramps? That they had created a lover not a fighter? She avoids the beach, she doesn’t want to see his pleasure if he is not taking it with her. She is careful to knock before entering any closed door. She knows that early on her father had blundered into them, the nurse with her busy hands and greedy mouth swallowing her charge’s cock. Struan’s daughter does not want to make the same mistake. She knows that particular act is something he seems to take great delight in. It is also something she cannot even consider performing.

Each day he asks how she is, his body suggesting more meaning than the light words convey. One time he leans to kiss her but pulls back when she turns away so he contents himself with squeezing her hand and smiling his old-eyed smile. He makes no effort to touch her after that, as if afraid that contact will upset her. Finally, it seems, the stars are in the right alignment again; not only is she able to but she also feels the need to repeat her experience. The house is quiet, Struan and Helena have been called to a meeting, leaving Dave in his own little world with a book before him and Tallis playing through headphones.

Scrubbed and clean, free of her metal, she stands in the den nervous like the night at Uncle Richard’s house. In the middle of the day she has no alcohol to blame for any foolishness. Sober, she is acutely aware of the conflict between promises made by her adolescent self and the urges of that part of her so long neglected and searching for expression. Taking a deep breath she steps close and closes the book that has his attention. She has been wondering what to say to him, in the end the simplest thing is the best. She removes the headphones and takes his hand. “Come to bed with me.”
“I wish there was a way I could kiss you and make you feel better about yourself, but I don’t think I can do anything for old wrongs in your head.” Though there was no night to hide behind he had been gentle and considerate, accepting her initial ambivalence and hiding the sight of his arousal from her. She had barely touched him, had tried not to look at him, uncomfortable with the idea of having him until she was too far gone to care. Again she had begged him to be inside her, not allowing him to withdraw until she had felt him soften after his quiet passion had peaked and subsided. That he might have wanted to continue hadn’t occurred to her. Now, he lay behind her in the bed she had never shared before.

“Is that what you do?” This was it, the other unique feature of the not-man out in the open.

“I think it is ... you think it is. You suspected it the first day you met me.”

“Helena didn’t look like that before she had you did she?”

“Inside she did, and that is where it matters. I thought she was a fine looking woman when I first saw her but you are right, not quite the same as she does now. All that has happened is that she has become more of herself.” His fingers trail light patterns across the bare skin of her hip. “And what about you? What are you inside? I wish I could help you but I don’t think I can make the changes that Harrison was hoping for.” He bends to kiss away the tension that flares in her shoulders. “Oh, don’t worry; it was bound to happen. I’m glad he asked you and no one else, even more pleased that you have been willing. I don’t know what he was expecting. Maybe sex will only be a pleasure I think, somehow I don’t think we are compatible for anything else.”

“We could keep trying, you know, for science.” Once beyond the mental hurdle of his masculinity riding him had released something deep and wild within her. It scared her. Easier to think of it as a sacrifice, another thing done for the programme rather than admit the stirrings of attraction and desire that were so uncomfortable for her.

“Or we could keep trying because you like it. I think I would prefer that to be the reason.”

“That would be nice too.” Her hand joins his. She wants to believe. She wants to submit all the way like Helena had done. He is not a man, he is … not … a … man. But she is Alyssa, not Helena.
Foundation

Chapter Summary

Lia finds out about the Foundation, and a few other things that make her wonder if Dave still has his dragons.

“What do you want to look at today, have anything in mind as a starting point?” They looked down at the blood warm surface. Both of them had unrolled their laptops but had pushed the key imprinted fabric to one side to take in the massive collection of images and notes represented on the display. Their daily routine continued much as it had before, but now it was harder to settle down to work. They found themselves distracted by each other and they both enjoyed it.

His name might have carried weight in many areas but it did not stop the library staff looking at them disapprovingly if their sudden laughter travelled beyond the sound dampers before they adjusted and suppressed the sounds of their gusting happiness. He didn’t care what they thought as, and he pointed this out to the duty senior librarian in a very clear tone one evening, ultimately it was his bloody library so he could do what he bloody well liked in it.

“Do we have to work? I’d be happy just looking at you for a while.” He reached across the table and took her hand. Things had been going well, if slowly, between them. They had been out for meals, and to galleries and museums, just taking time to be together. They had listened to the breeze, looked for the change of seasons in the park. Low key. That was what he said, no pressure, just allow themselves time to get used to each other. She’d been back to the Field of Reeds a number of times but each time he’d insisted on walking her home at the end of the night. She hadn’t so much as seen his bedroom. A perfect gentleman. No, not perfect. Just imperfect enough to dazzle her with his kisses and to tell her how much he wanted her.

The notion no longer seemed so bizarre. It was getting harder to remember what life had been like without him around. And life with him around also seemed to include an intoxicating dream world of glimpsed pleasures with him and her strange male body. Still uncomfortable with what the dreams might mean she had not shared them with her friends and shied away from saying to much about them with the object of her frustration. He seemed to be in no rush to go further. His reaction continued to be one of gentle amusement and he said that maybe it was a sign that she was still coming to terms with their situation. He wanted her to be certain of what she wanted. Tantalisingly close to her but with a slight edge of reserve – of course there was nothing but wanting growing within her.

During daylight hours she tried not to let the images distract her. Night was her weakest time, her nocturnal hours disturbed by a kaleidoscope of lust and unsettling sensualities. Once, in the early hours, she’d even flicked the light on to check her left hand for bite marks – she didn’t know quite what they had been doing but she recalled jamming the tender flesh into his mouth to stifle his noise as he came. Now she twisted her fingers around his and did her best to adopt a serious tone, refusing to think about what his dream tongue had felt like licking blood from the phantom bites.

“You, Dr Jensson, are becoming a shirker. How you started the Foundation and got it so well organised is beyond me. Are you sure you are the same man and not some improbably handsome imposter?”
That’s easy, I didn’t. No, that’s not quite it. It was kind of accidental. We … I was seeing an accountant – don’t laugh, it can happen – anyway I mentioned to this guy that I had no idea how much money I had. I’ve never been that interested in wealth, it was always … just there, kind of lurking in the background, you know? So I pointed him at what I thought were all my bank accounts and left him to it. Everything went quiet for a while then one day he came round in a sweat and showed me some very hefty numbers. It was an embarrassingly large amount – far too much for us ever to get through on our own. We, er, I slept on it and after that I thought the best way to get rid of it would be to start helping to support other academics. Instant Foundation … no other backers, no else to answer to, no particular agenda to control it.”

She hadn’t really expected him to answer her question, but she had noticed his slip and correction and wondered who the ‘we’ might have been more than five decades earlier. His thumb brushed across her palm, he took no notice of her intake of breath but continued with his explanation.

“I hadn’t really thought it through, just said wouldn’t it be a good idea if people had more time and freedom to research what they wanted. I’d always been a real magpie for finding and collecting things, maybe something could be done to make the accumulation of the years available to the public. The accountant went off and did all the hard work. Damn me but he did such a good job organising everything some of the subsidiary companies turn a profit and I’ve still got more money than I know what to do with. Just can’t trust money men some days.”

“So, other than giving you a way of legitimising years of plundering the wreckage of Europe and being some vaguely socialist plan to redistribute your own wealth and avoid taxes while looking like a selfless benefactor,” Robyn’s cynicism was sometimes contagious, a hard-nosed source of suspicion and common sense, “what is the Foundation actually for?”

“So there’s no hidden cabal wanting to make the world into the image that you want?” Another one of Robyn’s insinuations rose to the surface. Lia thought it best to make the most of the opportunity and get things out into the open.

“If there is they haven’t invited me to join. I take it your friend Robyn has been having words again?” She made non-committal flustered noises and he laughed outright, he’d always found economists highly amusing. “No one is taking over the world. If anything I’m trying to get people to ask more questions, to test the ideas that governments are pushing as truths. Challenge and debate should always be supported. Some of the best people within and funded by the Foundation I disagree with, but I have to applaud them for what they do.” He shrugged. “I’ve done many things in my time but I don’t think I’m cut out for telling people how to live, shit, I can’t even get Myk and Gihon to get together and that has to be the no-brainer of the century.”

“Well, where did the money come from in the first place then? Your estates are around there but I’d make a guess on you not having stumbled across the mythical Templar treasure at Montségur.”

That produced a smile. “It was an inheritance, but not the Languedocian one. I’m actually from a small place off the map north of here. I’m American, not European, by origin. I just spent so much time in the Fortress that I might well have been born there. Plus it keeps an air of mystery, I quite like that.” He saw that he had all of her attention. “When my father was killed I was still fairly new at the whole being a person thing, hadn’t been up and about from my coma for very long at all. There was no family left to go to and I was fortunate to be taken in by one of my father’s friends. Anyway, this old boy had lots of old money, a wicked reputation for younger men, and no children of his own. After a time I think he took great delight knowing how much he would annoy his own family by
naming me as the main beneficiary of his will.”

“Oh, he … you were …” The word ‘catamite’ had come immediately to mind from her confused subconscious. Though it might have been accurate she wasn’t sure if she could say it. She found it hard to think of him as a young man. Harder still to see him with an older man.

“I was … very grateful that he took me in.” The pause and a rather sheepish half smile said ‘yes’ to the unasked question. They were still carefully tip-toeing around his sexual history. “Still, he helped me, tried showing me the folly of regret, and demonstrated that something looking like love could do just as well when you are tired and scared and on your own. Whatever else I did, I stayed with him, I was happy to. When the time came I did my mourning and made a deal with his family. I didn’t see the point in causing any bad blood. They got the real estate. I got more than enough money for a lifetime. I didn’t need it so I pretty much left everything in trust and lost myself in the Fortress. I’d never run out of money so I’d never questioned what I had. It was only when this came up with the bean counter that I realised how very lucky I’d been.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response. She noticed that he’d said his father ‘was killed’ not ‘died’. He’d kept his tone even but she thought the difference was still significant to him. He never said much about his family, the subject seemed to be an uncomfortable one. From the odd reference she’d guessed an older half-sister that he’d had some kind of strained relationship with. There didn’t seem to have been any mother, presumably she was gone long before the sickly child had grown and eventually joined the world. The scabs might have been old ones but she didn’t want to pick them directly. Lia’s next question was tangential.

“Was Jensson your family name or the man who took you in?”

“Neither. I keep those to myself, they are not for the public to be curious about. My father’s given name was Jens. Spending so long not being a real person, I was often just referred to as ‘Jens son’. It seemed to define me to most other people. When everything got a little mad I stuck with it.” She hadn’t realised a shrug could convey so many different emotions.

“Tell you what. For a bit of fun how about you see how many different rumours you can find about me. The Templar treasure one is a good one, just enough realistic sounding coincidences to make the conspiracy theorists bite, and I guess your friends have given you more even if you have been trying to avoid them. If you’re good, one day I might even tell you which ones have a passing relation to the truth and which are just a case of ‘here be dragons’.” He checked his watch and pulled his ‘duty calls’ face before getting up to leave. “Oh, and thanks for calling me handsome. Not sure about the improbable but the handsome I’ll take with me.” His lips felt welcome and familiar on hers, but the contact far too brief, and then he was gone with his usual promise to return later in the day.

She hated seeing him leave. Some days, though, that was the only way she could get any work done. She was still the same person she had always been. Even though the money might have come from him anyway she was being paid to work and not to mooncalf over the slim man who was older than he looked, stronger than he should be. She wondered what a map of Jensson would include – a continent of Gihon, the lost land of Arkhangelskeyev, tides of happiness around peninsulas of loss, foothills of pain.

In the times apart she realised that maybe he had a point in taking things slow, what dragons would she find on his map? Would they be long in the past or were they around him still?
Trust

Chapter Summary

Dave's intentions are questioned.

“Dr. Jensson … Dr. Jensson, do you have a minute?” Dave had heard the feet pattering down the corridor behind him, trying not to rush but failing. He turned to see Lupe looking nervous, the little man out of place in Cultural History’s Frayling Building. What had Lia said he did? Materials chemistry? Something along those lines. It had only been a matter of time before one of her housemates tackled him about his intentions. The question had only been which one. He had to give kudos to the Mexican for stepping out of his comfort zone to come and confront him.

“Yeah, sure. Lupe isn’t it? I’ve got a post-grad class in ten minutes, you’re welcome to them if you want, or I’m free in a couple of hours if you need more time. I’m sure Lia would be happy if you wanted to join us for lunch.” He couldn’t resist smiling as he waved hello to Elvira and motioned the man through to the tutorial room he was sharing with Plaisir. He knew Lupe would want this chat private, in his experience concerned friends generally did.

“Lia is my friend. I worry about her. I worry that you are going to hurt her and you’ll be off again and not care about the pain you’ve caused. I don’t mean to sound old fashioned but I, that is, we, her friends, want to know your intentions towards our girl.” For all his discomfort at being in unknown territory he made a good show of being protective.

“You think I’m taking advantage of her? Fooling around to pass the time? Whatever else you might think I’m not one for playing games.”

“But the way you live …”

“The way I live is the way I live. It’s no secret. You think I’ve not thought about this? That we’ve not discussed it? Believe me I have never thought of Lia as some passing fancy to be discarded when I’ve had my wicked way with her. Casual sex is easy enough to get. I think you know there’s something more than that going on here.” He paused, second guessing the next objection and thinking about how best to head off the unsaid offence. “And I’m certainly not going to mistake her for a man, or pass her around, if you think that is what she needs protecting from.” The shocked pout showed the truth of his guess. “She’s an adult. What we may or may not do is no one’s business but our own.” In stumbling tones and half-finished sentences Lia had raised the same subject the first day on the park bench. No surprise if her friends feared his intentions even if they hadn’t actually expressed it to her.

A knock at the door, the first of the post-grads had arrived early. “Lupe, I know, I know what this must look like … but it isn’t. I don’t want to rush her into anything. I want her to be certain this is what she wants too, but I could no more pretend not to want her any more than you could pretend to be straight. I understand that you want to protect her but you’re just going to have to trust her instincts on this.” He opened the door and let the early arrivals file through; the conversation was over. “I trust her.”
Dave doesn’t mind being in the dark as much as he thought he would. Even the quiet is not as bad as he had first feared. The worst is the lack of contact. He misses people; he misses certain people very acutely even though he cannot tell how long it has been since they put him in the dark. Where were Helena and his father? For surely Jens had been the father of his mind, he was the man who made him. And Helena he loved more than anything. He even misses the others he’d had when everything was fun. Some who’d been sent to him, some he’d found himself – Ginger from the Progress Bar, the cute little sniper he screwed in the hide by the lake, the secretary with the doe eyes who liked him to spank her, the anonymous ones – a variety of unknowing female flesh in the hidden search for ‘compatible’.

The one person he doesn’t miss is Alyssa. He knows exactly where she is. She is on the other side of the dark and she is the one keeping him there. She encouraged his experimentation with other women, saying nothing but seemingly mystified at his constant return to Helena’s side. The blond woman had never seemed to understand the difference between sex and the absolute submission of one to the other, the bond between him and the woman who cherished him. Helena was his safe place, his home.

There had been an attack, or was that just what she said? He couldn’t quite recall. Alyssa said she was keeping him safe. His isolation doesn’t feel safe, it feels like imprisonment. The dark followed her taking him away from the house. Big men with hard faces held him down and blindfolded him, and then there was the gag, and then the hood, and then the straps to pin him to the bed.

“I said keep him alive, he doesn’t need to be comfortable. Get him back on the drip, no need to bother with food for that one. No one talks to him. No one looks at him without my say so.” The voice in his first darkness had been the soft brogue of his father. The voice putting him back into the void had the harsher edge of ambition and hate. He had tried to be whatever they wanted, tried to please them all. But he couldn’t help whatever was in Alyssa’s head and he couldn’t make the slightest change to her body. Had his sin been to love his beautiful Helena too much?

In the dark they come and take from him. Skin and blood. Open him up, a slice of this, a piece of that, what happens if that is pushed just so? This is slow torture, not research; they had surely done enough to him before. Pain is his only company. He is glad of the dark and the hood. No one sees the torment and the tears; the gag stops his screams. He always recovers, just one of the quirks of what he is, one more thing to be investigated and, if possible, reproduced. Time goes on and he tires more easily, the recovery takes longer and that interests them too. It does not seem to interest anyone that he always feels pain.

There are long spells when he is just left to his thoughts and the confusion of memory. His care is minimal. Fluids and nutrients go in through the bruises at his elbows. Some days pairs of technicians - always pairs never alone - come in and clean him. Their fingers are gloved, their clothes are heavy, one time a stray hand brushes across the facemask of an isolation suit before the straps go back on.
They pay attention to what they are doing and never rush. In a detached way he realises that they handle him as they would an Ebola victim – or an unstable bomb.

In the dark his thoughts run the maze of recrimination and what might have been. Snatches of conversations come back to haunt him and always he yearns for Helena. What had happened? Was she safe … or ‘safe’ like him? Had he really seen the soldier make her kneel and put a gun to her head? He remembered screaming and fighting then something cold in his neck and then waking in a secure room. They were clearly putting drugs in with his fluids, different combinations that he could never quite adjust to. It was so difficult to think clearly, so hard, so very hard …

“Time was all I needed to be finished. You have all been in too much of a rush. If you normally take eighteen years to make an adult why try to recreate the same in a matter of weeks. You’ve discovered the body is easy to generate, just accept that cognition necessarily takes longer and needs proper direction.”

Who had he been talking to? Was it one of their strange family dinners, the four of them at the table together or one of his chats with Jens? Everything was mixed up. His history was a short one but events and comments jumbled in the limbo of the dark.

“You know that what is being done here is wrong don’t you. However it has been dressed up as progress for humanity the health benefits are a sop to your conscience, the main aim has always been to find an easier way to go to war. Legions of soldiers with no one to mourn them, no one to be angry about how they die. I am so sorry that you picked me from the others, in finding me you have given them better material to work with. I know you have had your doubts; you should have listened to them. What if they grow more like me but have no control over them?”

Heavy breathing, stifled moans. Full, soft lips willing to do the things the bitch never would. The feeling of kisses on straining flesh, lying under camouflage on discarded fatigues. Sex in the dark, in the daytime. That was a nice memory.

“I am only like this because you have moulded me so. These people want killing machines not philosophers, they will not allow you to affect the next generations in the same way. I am an abomination. What if the next ones are made too well? What if they can’t be stopped? What if they can’t be controlled?”

Everyone in the labs knew he was a freak. The head man, Harrison, pleased to be the first to get a smart one still flinched away from actual contact. The ones who knew kept their distance. All except Helena and Jens. Alyssa had got close, but that was the embrace of a viper found out too late. There was another who wanted to be close. An outsider, how had he met an outsider? If he worked at it he thought he might remember. If he could get his head straight. If only the pain would stop.

“We can’t retire him. He’s the nearest we’ve got to the finished article. No, no one has been able to recreate the event. All the new ones have been generated from him, he is the source. Until we can get another fluke more in line with our plans we are stuck with using him.” It was the hateful voice. That was new, was it a memory or something from the other side of the dark?

“What you are doing is wrong.” He couldn’t bring himself to look at her. This was before the dark came. After it he thought he should have had one last look to fix in his mind what she had become. What being with him had done to her. Had he done that? He didn’t mean to. Was everything his fault?

“The storm is coming. We need results not bleeding hearts and artists. Jens was a sentimental old fool. You belong to the military, you are not a person. What makes you think you should have any more say in your future than a tank or a gun?” In a moment of clarity he realised that she had said
was, ‘Jens was’. Then his father was gone too. Scornful, she didn’t seem to care what she was telling
him.

Helena smiling at him. Waking up in the morning and seeing her. Helena touching him, kissing him,
telling him everything was going to okay, it was normal. Helena showing him what his body could
do. The recollection was so strong he could almost feel her hands on him but that couldn’t be right,
there was the soldier and the gun and Dave heard himself screaming. Over and over, screaming. And
all his fault.

“Legions of soldiers with no one to mourn them, no one angry about how they die.”

“Well aren’t you a dish. You want it? You want me? You want to tell me how bad I am? Ohhhhh
yeah. I want you to tell me how bad I am. I want you …”

“It’s true that we are still hitting some dead ends, it’s not been smooth but when it’s been good it has
been amazing. I’m so impressed with what some of your children have been capable of. We have the
Theta’s now and the best of them are glorious – they are fast and strong, smart as anything and have
none of your liberal limitations. We thought we were onto a certain winner there but the early lotas
and too many the Kappas were far too much like you. We ditched most of them but hey, breaking
eggs and all that. The rest are docile enough to be fucked and be cannon fodder. Catch me in a good
mood and I might even bring in my pet Theta to show you what a real superman can do.”

“Now come on, there’s nothing wrong with being friendly. I won’t do anything you don’t want me
to … oh see, I think you like it, just a stroke, a little touch.” The outsider, there had been someone
else. The voice was deeper than the other memories associated with those feelings. That meant
something. What?

“We have even higher hopes for some of the new strains – splicing from you and the Theta’s and
even some of the Epsilon brutes that are still hanging around. I’ve heard that the Lambdas back home
are going into production, and we have recouped some of the costs by selling the early tech to the
Russians. Moscow is nearly ready to bring their first batch of Mus on stream.” He doesn’t care what
the bitch says, he wants Helena back. He just wants his Helena and for the pain to stop.

A long way from his body he hears a new voice calling him back. He doesn’t want to come back.
Reality hurts too much. Not for the first time he despairs his existence.

“Please do not respond. Another like you is coming.” The voice is modified; it must be coming from
behind one of the masks. Back in himself he tries to move away from the voice but he is held in a
strong grip. A bare hand slides across his chest under the sheet, skin against skin. There was
something important about being touched. He remembers Helena’s hand making him strong, making
him want to be. This can’t be Helena because there was the soldier and the gun.

“She wants him to hurt you. We’ve told him who you are. We’ve asked him to save you.” The filter
strips nuance from the voice but this one is higher pitched. The techs work in pairs. They have never
spoken to him before. Or have they? Is this new or part of the muddle of events? Both voices were
barely more than a whisper, exhalations so quiet he guessed that only he could hear them.

“Don’t try to move you are very weak. We are here to clean you and get you ready.” The deeper
voice again. There was one of them on either side of him. “She wants you to hurt so she’s allowed us
to reduce your sedation. Your suffering is going to be real but we need you to be aware. We have a
plan and we need you to be what you are.”

There is movement around his head. The dark does not change but suddenly there is air on his face.
It seems to be a long time since air drawn into his lungs was cool and free of the stink of the hood.
He has no idea what the technicians see but their masks cannot hide the sharp intake of breath. How long since anyone saw his face? They say nothing but begin to work as they normally do, slowly and carefully washing him down, clipping his nails, soothing pressure sores, rolling him onto cool clean sheets. This time they cut his beard close then shave his cheeks clean, taking care to run the blade under the straps holding the gag in place. One sits him up and he leans across a broad shoulder while the other cuts away sweat matted hair. They seem very professional, very detached, but he is aware of a tremor running under the heavy material he rests on. Fear or disgust, he cannot tell.

“We cannot remove the blindfold or the gag, it is too risky now. We have been told to make you ready but we cannot allow you to speak. We are not allowed to touch you.” The broad shoulders and the naked hand now gently squeezing his infolded and hidden arm belong to the higher pitched voice. It is a small rebellion indicating their intentions.

He is as clean as they can make him. A fresh hood goes back over his head and the restraints go back on at wrists, chest, hips and ankles. He can tell they are looser than before but he has little strength to test them. Whichever hand he felt bare against him is gloved again by the time the techs are ready to leave. There is a final apologetic whisper before being left to his fears. “The first time at least will be for show, you will be watched. He cannot hold back but know that he does not want to hurt you, accept what he does to you. After that it will become clear.”

The darkness stretches around him, the silence echoes in his head. He remembers patience. He remembers what his father had said once, about what had happened to some of the other Deltas. He realises maybe it would have been better to have let the outsider have him first. He waits.

A door opens. Footsteps. He does not turn to the sound. Two pairs of feet in protective suits, he recognises the same footfall of his technicians. A pair of boots, he can imagine who that is, and another so quiet it is hard to work out where he is. And it is a he, or maybe an ‘it’. A hint of something not quite blocked by the hood … a smell, a smell like his own but stronger. And he remembers why the bitch doesn’t want anyone touching him. The techs, like the ‘scientists’, were always in the suits so they would not be affected by him. One of them had risked much just to place a hand on him. The warmth of the touch had comforted him. He wonders what they had taken from the illicit contact.

“My, my, it really is Jack the Bodiless.” The bitch is back, disdain dripping in every syllable. There had been a time, he thought, that she seemed to like him. But then he had disappointed her. “I said I would bring someone to you. You can’t see him but, trust me, he is a god compared to you. He also has the advantage of never talking back because he does not speak. You two - get rid of that sheet and the lines into him. Unstrap our Jacky boy, we need him mobile … hmm … but not too mobile you never know with that one. Bind his wrists, use the wall.”

An exposed Dave is left with his hands strapped together, the long cable secured to a loop in the wall behind his head. Alyssa knows he cannot get away; this is just to drive the point home. The technicians are dismissed with a curt “Out” as she turns to the silent shape next to her. “Thanatos, oh Thanatos my lover, you know what you do with the weak ones, you know how you show them they are weak? I want you to do it to this one. I want you to show him you are my alpha and omega. I want you to show him what happens to weaklings who are not compatible.” Her voice becomes a sultry promise. Dave remembers the same tone being used on Ginger from the bar. There will be no repeat of that apparently blissful threesome. “You please me and you know what I will do to please you.”

Dave has been told to accept what is coming, the hurt is necessary. He tells himself that. Accept it,
accept it, he doesn’t want to hurt me, he has to but he doesn’t want to. It doesn’t matter what he tells himself. The gag isn’t enough to stop his screams as the huge thing, the strong thing, turns him over and forces his way into him. He has little sense of time. The new pain obliterates what is left. An instant of nerve tearing eternity and suddenly the pain changes in him. In the shattered depths inside his head he hears a child begging for forgiveness and he realises this is the voice of Thanatos. His mind whispers understanding and comfort back even as his body suffers beneath the giant that was one of his own.

The physical torment stops abruptly as Thanatos withdraws and spills himself in hot gushes across the skinny rump of his victim. Heavy breathing fills the room. Without the massive hands crushing his hips into his attacker’s groin Dave falls to the bed, bound wrists twisting awkwardly beneath him; he is scared to move. The bitch sounds excited as she surveys the damage her pet has left. Footsteps, the door is held open. “Back in here, we have blood. Sort him out and strap him down again.” Her boots clatter down the corridor and in the emaciated man’s head a child’s voice weeps the giant’s gratitude.

The silent technicians do their duty and leave him to his thoughts with no acknowledgement of what has happened. He realises they do not clean the drying ejaculate off him but, instead, efficient fingers quickly smooth it into open tears. This was what they wanted him to accept. In the dark, before sleep takes him, he recalls the effect of the first accidental spills of himself on Helena and, as the voice had promised, he begins to stumble towards understanding.
Chapter Summary

Dave reminds Lia that he's in no rush.

"Hey girl, you ok over there?" Surprised, Lia looked up from her screen. She hadn’t realised he was there, had the class finished early? No, he wasn’t early, she was late. She hadn’t noticed the passage of time as she’d filled screens of notes. It had been a morning for being lost in work after calling him to say she was having a later start that day. "You don’t have a smile for me? I thought we might go for lunch but if you’re too busy I can always ask your boss to cut back on the work. I hear he can be a real bastard." She managed a wan smile and he was immediately by her side, crouched by her chair and looking at her in concern. Tentatively he reached up and pushed stray hairs back from her face. "Seriously, you ok? You shouldn’t be here if you’re not well."

"Fine, I’m fine … just, you know, that time." She felt the admission was embarrassing to make, a weakness she could do without having or admitting. As she said it she hoped that he knew what she meant, she'd had to spell it out before and had never quite managed to adopt the 'deal with it' approach of the women with a more aggressive approach to being female.

"No need to make it sound like an apology. It’s natural. Used to be, anyway." Everything about him spoke of reassurance and understanding. Maybe this was the advantage of an older lover; there was nothing he hadn’t seen before.

"But it’s not …" she wanted to say not fair. It sounded petulant so she stopped herself. "It’s just such a fucking drag sometimes … and the timing. Oh, I could have done without this now. What must you think of me?"

"That you are just as much a throwback as me?" The lift of his shoulders matched a raised eyebrow, he’d never forgotten that she’d used the word and now he teased her with it. "Your phone is a device and not an implant. You’ve had no structural work done to change your appearance for fashion so your beauty is your own. You dislike the rhythms of your body but you allow them all the same. The University has more free-thinkers and independent types than the city but I doubt there are too many here who are as original as you." He dropped his head for a moment, as if calculating something. "Still, you should be able to enjoy your difference without the distractions that can come with it. I take it your usual pain relief isn’t working today?" No need for a reply, he’d seen it on her face as soon as she had looked up at him. Like everyone else who could afford them her drugs were specifically tailored to her, this was the first time they had ever failed her and it was unsettling. "I’d like to try something. It might help, certainly won’t do any harm."

He took up position on the sofa and gestured for her to join him. Sitting on his lap in the susurrating calm of the Library hadn’t been how she’d thought the day would go, but as an experience it was a most pleasant surprise. Holding her slightly away from his torso he placed one long hand low on her abdomen and the other in the small of her back. It took up the sliver of a gap between them. Warmth and ease flowed from his hands and seemed to meet inside her. The pain receded as her feeling of well-being increased and she realised he was, ever so gently, nuzzling the back of her neck. She didn’t think she had ever felt so comfortable with any other person.

In a confidential tone he addressed her left ear. "And the advantage of me is that I can be taken as
often as needed. Keep this to yourself. No one gets as old as me without picking up some good tricks … but I save them only for special people.”

“Why me?” He didn’t seem to have heard her question. She tried again. “Why did you pick me?” Still he didn’t answer, seeming more interested in kissing her hair. There was a feeling of bliss somewhere close by the gentle intimacy. It hovered around them, just out of reach.

“I didn’t pick you, if anything I think we might have picked each other – throwbacks together. I liked you as soon as I met you, and the more I saw of you the more I liked you. The conscious thought only came later.”

“And you do want me?” She kept coming back to the same question. For all the times he’d kissed her and held her close she couldn’t quite understand his reluctance to go further. She wondered again about his personal dragons.

“Oh, sweet thing, if only you knew how hard it was that first night, just to walk you home. I wanted you to stay. I wanted you in my room.” Shivers ran down her spine as he kissed her neck again. “I wanted you in my bed. But we were drunk. Even if I was certain then that you were interested it wouldn’t have been right.”

“No?” Though the waiting was delicious torture, she’d never waited so long for anyone. Even when she had first decided to have sex it had only been a matter of weeks between settling on the notion and finding a candidate for her experiment.

“No. Even if we ignore how awkward it might have been with Gihon and Myk, and assuming that we had agreed I wasn’t taking advantage of my position, I was also embarrassingly under prepared. I wouldn’t have wanted you waking up thinking you’d made a horrible mistake.”

“What if I wanted to make a horrible mistake? It gets a bit tedious being the sensible one when you see your friends go off having fun and making mistakes. It’s not like anything is forever.” She thought he might have been laughing again but he was straight faced when she twisted to look at him.

“Remember when you asked about my history and I said that anything you think I might have done I probably have done – and then some. Can you imagine having that conversation facing each other sober in the morning and you worrying too late about prophylaxis? Most of this continent holds a dim view of European morals, always has. I know I have nothing infectious to pass on, but you didn’t. Even if it was only for a brief time I wouldn’t have wanted you worrying that I’d exposed you to something dreadful from the Old World.”

His hands slid easily around her waist. Being with him was, she had to admit, a very different feeling to the casual liaisons and awkward relationships she’d had before. Belatedly she realised that she was enjoying the new sensation. Maybe waiting a little wasn’t that bad.

“Now, would my very special person, who is in too much of a rush and works herself too hard, like to go for a long lunch and then take the afternoon off doing nothing much at all?”
Secure Medical Detention Unit – Shabti Site 1 – North America

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: The Soldier’s Story
Dave meets his death, discovers haoma and hears his name.

He wakes to the darkness. Knowing that one pair of technicians is watching out for him he does not feel quite so lonely. The feeling surprises him. He carefully flexes against the restraints and there is the faintest hint that he is getting stronger. He guesses it is some days since the first gift left by the giant and the start of his recovery. The second visit had been as painful as the first and apparently even more exciting for the bitch, she barely scolded the giant as he went too far and came deep inside his victim. For the first time in a long time Dave is clear headed.

“Director McDonald? This is the duty tech for Patient Zero. Can we have a moment?” The disembodied voice disturbs his peace. Dave is sure the door hasn’t opened.

“Be quick.” The bitch sounds distracted, a murmur of conversation audible behind her words. He relaxes when he realises she must be somewhere else. No one has come in - the voices are being relayed from a different room.

“Director, your Theta has arrived. He seems to want access to the patient, should we let him in?” Allowing for the distortion of the isolation suits this could be true voice of the shortest of the rebellious pair.

“Yes, I said he could go out to play. I guess he just likes his new toy. Set Jack up as before but keep suited and watch in case things get out of hand. I’ve reminded him not that Jack’s not for killing yet but I swear he doesn’t know his own strength. Use the cattle prods to stop him if you have to.”

“Would you like us to record it for you?” And the higher voice was clearly female. A woman touching him, supporting him as Helena had done when he had first joined the world.

“No, no, no. I saw more than enough last time, I don’t need another souvenir. Just clean up the mess after and send him back to me when he’s had his fun.” The line cuts out; Alyssa is too busy to be interested in old news. Harrison had been equally busy as the programme struggled with failure and then the first shocking success. He hadn’t been a bad man but had clearly proved to be no match for the woman intent on surpassing him.

It’s not too long before he hears the sound of the door opening. Just long enough, perhaps, for the techs to don the heavy suits. Sure enough, gloved hands disconnect the IV lines, remove his sheets and the restraints. His hands are bound again but this time they seem to forget about shackling him to the wall. As they leave each of them contrives to give him a reassuring touch on the neck. The threat of discovery limits what they can do, whatever happens next is up to Alyssa’s pet. Unlike them he is too valuable to face punishment should he be caught acting against her wishes.

The air changes, subtle notes passing through the hood and directly into him. The scent is stronger this time, as if once experienced it would always be immediately recognisable. He prepares himself for whatever might come.
Large hands run along his body, a surprisingly light touch across protruding bones that settles briefly on the unusual distension of his sternum. Warmth flushes through his chest and radiates out to neglected limbs. The leather binding his wrists together offers no resistance to the silent visitor. The hands carry on up to the hood, fingers feeling at the shape of his face below the thick cloth. Then the hood is gone, the lock holding the strap tight against his neck unaccountably undone. The same fingers deftly un-cinch the rubber gag and gently ease it from the open scream, massaging feeling back into rictus strained muscles before repeating the same with the blindfold and the layers of gauze pad beneath the band. Gradually Dave feels a lessening of the dark; his world becomes red as light filters through gummed-closed eyelids.

Thanatos sees what he needs in the room. A flick of a scalpel opens a spare saline bag and soft dressings become a sponge. The giant cleans crusted matter from the sealed eyes with the unexpected delicacy of someone stroking a butterfly. He raises a hand to shade Dave’s hollow face from the harsh light and waits expectantly as the eyes open slowly. Unlike her father and Helena, Alyssa had never been fully under the spell of his eyes. While she recognised the effect on others she never understood the potential impact of his gaze. If she had known she would never have commanded his eyes closed – or she would have had them removed altogether.

In Dave’s mind there is the sudden surprised laughter of a child. Oh it is you! They said, but I wasn’t sure. I had to see you for myself. It’s you, it’s you. The light spills from your eyes. Adam Kadmon it’s you. His internal voice is a peal of joy and the brooding aspect of his face is wiped away by a wide smile. This beast is only a youngster and the pleasure of discovery is written clearly across his features. I would give you haoma again if you will take it. I didn’t want to hurt you before but it was the only way I could get to you.

Water, I need water. Anything to get the taste of that thing out of my mouth, saline will do. Dave projects his answer to the big theta, surprising himself with how easy it seems. Fluid is trickled across cracked lips and into the dry mouth. He spits it onto the floor and asks for more, finally drinking the last of it as the theta steps back from him and he sees the proportions of his noiseless rescuer for the first time, well over two metres tall, muscles bunching and flexing under penitentiary orange scrubs, shaven head tattooed with the symbol of his iteration – Θ. At least the bitch was right about one thing, he looked every large inch the superman.

I would give you haoma. I want you to be well and strong again. The scrubs do not hide the obvious outline of what the theta intends. Dave tries not to look as Thanatos begins to stroke himself through the bright cotton. Please accept what I give you in love and you will become well. I can give you nothing that is not freely taken just as you cannot take anything that is not freely given.

What is haoma? The question is for confirmation only, to gain a little time to think. He has already guessed the answer from the snatches of images leaking through with the child’s voice but he doubts his ability to be as responsive as the giant wants him to be.

You know what it is, you are the source. Haoma is our essence; it is what you passed on to us. Not all of us have the ability to give, but we can all receive. Would you receive me? The creature steps next to the bed, patient but obviously wanting an answer. Whatever these new ones call it Dave knows he needs to accept the gift being offered. After a long pause – surely the hardest part was over - thin hands gingerly reach out to release the hardness from the drawstring pants, the sounds in his head gentle and encouraging. His face soon follows his hands but he doesn’t have the strength to complete the act on his own. With a practiced motion the Theta quickly brings himself to a climax, spurting his essence into Dave’s hesitant mouth. Silently one gives and one receives - sustenance and healing, strength shared between one and the other.

“You should not call me Kadmon.” Feeling nerves and muscles crinkle with the hidden energy of
the gift taken inside him Dave finds his voice as he tries to hold the Theta’s spade sized hands in his own. Brown eyes look into green, flecks of light burning and blurring his vision. He lies back, suddenly exhausted. Was this how it had felt to Helena? A fire within re-kindled.

You are Adam Kadmon, the perfect man, our first. All our souls come from you. It is not right that you have been denied in this way.

“We are products of science not mysticism. I unite nothing, I give nothing. I just am. What they are telling you is to control you. There is surely nothing more powerful than one such as you. They just don’t want you to realise that.” They stare into each other for a long time before the Theta leans over the thin man and kisses him as a lover. Images tumble across the flesh divide as the giant tries to show Dave about his own kind. Whatever you are I will see you well again. They both ignore the sound of the door opening.

“Sorry to break this up but time is passing, she will start to wonder what is going on if Than doesn’t get back home soon.” The male technician hovers nervously inside the doorway. Dave has never seen his face before but he immediately knows what he and his wife look like. His new companion knows both of them; he realises his new companion has had both of them. Of course, Helena had accepted him unconditionally and she had changed. Some humans must also be able to receive the gift. “We need to get everything back as it was.” The theta glares threateningly at the obscured faceplate, something passes from him to the petite man. “There’s no time for more today. Look at him, he needs a while to absorb it before he can take any more.” The mask tilts to one side, as if listening. “Four days. We’ll start increasing his nutrition, if anyone asks I’ll say it’s so he can put up more of a fight for you next time, they all know you like to show how strong you are.” Another pause. “Yes, I know we need to get him free, but we need him to be stronger. It’s not like he can just walk out of here. Please, just four days and we’ll have everything in place.”

Gloved hands cajole the reluctant Theta away from the bed. “Go back to her. We’ll tell her you hurt him again. She’ll like that. She’ll let you come back to him. And when you come back we will get him out.” The man in the suit reaches up and pats a giant shoulder reassuringly, “Four days.”

The orange figure gone from the room Dave says nothing as the two technicians tidy away the evidence of his visit. The taller one, the woman, apologises as she replaces the gag and the blindfold. She strokes his cheek and he notes that again a glove is missing from her hand, before replacing the hood, thanking him for his co-operation. “Things are falling into place. We have people outside who will help us.”

Briefly, before exhaustion takes him, he wonders if this is some elaborate plot by the bitch to break what is left of him. But Thanatos had shared some of his soul with the gift of his seed and his soul had been true. By whatever accident or chance the creature named for death wanted to save him.
Lia sees more than she was expecting as she spends time with the youngest of the husbands.

The morning was surprisingly bright, still very pleasant for early risers even though the year showed signs of starting to turn. Lia decided she would drop by the Field to catch Dave at home rather than meeting him at the Library. She had woken up impatient to see him. Not for any specific reason, just to be able to spend more time with him. She was gratified that the door opened for her with no announcement to, or confirmation from, the inhabitants but was puzzled to find there was no one in the main room. Music was playing in the distance, someone had to be in.

“Er, hi, Wepwawet?” She hoped she wasn’t talking to herself in the large room. The men seemed to have no problem with the concept but she couldn’t help feel there was something vaguely ridiculous about speaking to nothing.

“Good morning Lia, what can I do for you?” The guardian sounded pleased to speak to her.

“What is everyone?”

“Dave has gone to a meeting. Myk and Gihon are both in the gym. Myk is on his morning run, Gihon is resting.” In the gym? That sounded odd. “You are welcome to join them or wait here as you wish.”

Lia dropped her bag and jacket on one of the sofas in the empty living area before following the sound of loud music down to the basement. She was curious but slightly nervous of what she might find, this was what had been meant by full access then. Going through the open door she saw Myk on a treadmill in faded shorts and minimal running shoes. As he had a reputation of liking many things ‘bare’ she wasn’t surprised that he was a barefoot runner. He seemed to have been running for some time; sweat beaded in his spiked hair and shimmered down his tanned and impressively muscular physique. There was no sign of Gihon.

The runner waved her over to another open doorway, she couldn’t quite hear him clearly over the combined sound of a heavy bass line and the mechanism of the angled running track under his steady footfall, “… in the tank … through there …” Lia followed the direction of the wave. The room beyond looked like a sizeable wet room with a long open shower along one side. She recognised the equipment to support an isolation tank on the other. She pulled up short when she saw what was in the centre of the room. Unsure of herself she waited in the doorway until she heard the volume drop and Myk joined her, casually wiping down his golden flesh with a towel.

“Isn’t this taking the Egyptian thing a bit far?” A nod acknowledged what appeared to be a large stone coffin, dark sides carved with inscriptions, curved ‘head’ nearest the door. Even in their unusual household this had to be one anachronism too many.

“I don’t follow, is something wrong?” Again she wondered how long it will take for her to see what they thought of as normal, and then caught herself. Who was she to say anything about anything? She’d recently gone from only a vague interest in sex, to unformed fantasies about an unobtainable
gay man, to starting some kind of relationship with his (much?) older husband - and all of the time she had never actually found the mostly naked specimen now standing beside her to be that attractive. There were more than enough women, and eternally frustrated men, in the city who would question her notions of normality.

“You don’t think it’s a bit odd to have your Lilley tank made like a sarcophagus?”

“What do you mean, like? This is … was … a sarcophagus. I’m never sure what is right tense in Anglic. This is real thing, made for last native pharaoh. Your boyfriend rescued it from the ruins of British Museum on one of his little expeditions and sent it over as a house-warming present. It took me a long time to retrofit the kit into the granite without causing any extra damage. Do not stress, it was not used for its original purpose.” He stopped and corrected himself again. “No, it is a sarcophagus; it still eats bodies. Come see…” He took her over to look into the tank. Lia ducked back instinctively before she realised the one way screen allowing them a clear view into the tank also stopped the occupant from seeing out.

So this was what the door program had meant by resting. Lia supposed she must be relieved that Gihon was wearing a full immersion suit rather than floating naked like most people did. The head to foot black costume, however, left little to the imagination. While the skin tight material had been designed for a practical purpose, the effect of the fluid repellent fabric was to show every plane and curve of the remarkable body wearing it, highlighting the contrasts like an exemplar from a sculpture class. His hair, closely sheathed in the same material, was laid to run down the front of his torso from left shoulder to thigh. Currents in the water kept the figure centred in the tank, the gentle rolling pressure giving his relaxed limbs an appearance of lazy movement. Uncertain how to react to the sight, Lia thought that looking at the man’s sleeping face serene behind the clear facemask seemed an even more intimate intrusion than seeing the rest of him so exposed in the suit.

“Is this ok? He won’t mind us being here?” Whispering seemed appropriate.

“Be fine, no worry. I’ve lost hours watching him like this. I find it …” a brief search for an appropriate word, “calming.” She had to agree, watching the slow movement of the impressive chest was mesmerising and, she felt, safer than looking into his face or giving in to the urge to follow the line of his hair and the distracting contours to be found further down. “When sleep is not enough, this is where he has proper rest.” The golden body seemed stocky, almost thuggishly muscular, in comparison to the elegant contours of his slumbering companion. If one was a work of art the other seemed made for war. Neither of their shapes was modern, she doubted they were the product of surgical enhancement or chosen in response to some fashion. Throwbacks – they were what they were.

In no rush to move away from the tank Myk seemed lost in a familiar reverie. For the first time she saw something other than just close friendship for the big man in his ice blue gaze and the distracted way he chewed his bottom lip. Whatever it was, it seemed to be deeply felt, something else kept hidden from the outside world. Another example of her inclusion into their bizarre lives, the intensity of his concentration on the body below them made her feel uncomfortable.

“Why the breather?” She hoped a practical question would break the spell. He answered her without shifting the focus of his attention.

“We are not good with perfluorocarbon liquids, too much like return to womb. Not for us at all. I know the mask is not really needed as buoyancy is right, but is safe and completes the seal on the suit so we don’t have hours of rinsing salts out of hair and then trying to dry it again. I don’t mind helping him with it but …” and here he did look at her, his expression clouded – with regret? “…I think it makes him think about things a little too much. You know?” A small shrug matched the
uncertain inflection in his voice.

“Honestly, I’m not sure I do. You clearly have something for him and yet you don’t …”

“In time, got to give it time.”

“How long have you been waiting for the right time?”

“‘Bout ten years.”

“Shit!” The exclamation was out before she could stop herself. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound …” How to respond to a statement like that? “I, I really don’t know what to say.” Maybe she hadn’t heard him correctly. “Ten years?” His answer was a quick nod without looking away from his unconsummated love. “You guys really have no concept of time. And still he waits.” What was going on behind the composed, sleeping face? “But you do love him?” Again, the question was out before she considered what she was saying.

“All my heart is his.”

“But you haven’t …?”

“No.” The negative emphatic, Myk dropped and sat on the platform with his back against the stone case. Looking into the fluid was definitely wrong if she did it on her own. She took a seat next to him, nudged her shoulder up against his wide bicep in what she hoped he would think was a friendly manner, she didn’t want to confuse matters by giving him the wrong impression.

“You don’t get to talk about him much to outsiders, do you?”

“Some women appear interested. Then I find is usually just a way of getting me into bed.” He laughed. “Weird, no? Always thought it was meant to be the other way around. Do not mistake me, but is so nice to talk to you without worrying about where it’s going to end up. Me and Gihon, well …” His smile was enigmatic as he nudged her shoulder in return, two unlikely friends hanging out together. “Let us say is complicated. I adore him beyond sense, every part of me wants to be with him but … I just cannot do it. Looking at him here is safe, I can feel what I want knowing that nothing can happen. He waits. He says he can wait forever, but you are right maybe we should take more notice of time – it could run out on us eventually.”

The granite soon warmed against Lia’s back. Sat in a companionable silence she realised that he hadn’t asked if there was a reason for her visit, it didn’t seem to have occurred to him that she would need one. Myk slipped his arm around her shoulders and she relaxed against him, no pressure for anything in his haven of peace. The two of them staring absently into space rather than looking at each other made it easier to say what was on her mind. “I had been wondering about Dave. If I was doing something wrong, something to put him off despite what he says. Now though, I guess a few weeks, months even, are nothing.”

“If Dave is taking things slow I’m sure he has good reason. He is too much the gentleman sometimes. Like this one with me, he won’t want to rush you or force anything. And, I would not be surprised if he is still getting used the idea of finding you. I know you are frustrated. I have been there too. If you can, I would say enjoy this stage. He can overthink, a failing of the old perhaps, but do not forget to remind him that you have needs too.” A strong arm squeezed her close, the feeling of him reassuring as she breathed in that uncanny maleness they seemed to share. So strong, so present – not like the living statue behind them or the spare frame she yearned for. “Taking time to bed you I would take as sign that he is serious.”
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“You really were lovers?” Dave had referred to them both as his husbands but it was still odd to think of the blond man in that way. On one level she accepted the connotations of the word but to hear it confirmed was not easy. There was no hint of a physical relationship now, no hint of the unconscious intimacy shown by the academics towards each other. What kind of relationship could they have had, and why sleep with one and not the other?

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“Yes, who would not be with him? Do not laugh, but when I met him I was virgin, fresh out of box if you like. I knew I wanted him as soon as I saw him, a moth to his flame. He would not allow it. He said it would not be right, that I needed experience to understand what I was asking for. I would have done anything to be with him. The need made it easy to leave my people.” He sighed, recollecting his past. Working out what he could tell her? She had to wonder how much editorialising they all did for her.

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“We travelled from Arkangel, across the northern wastes, into Fortress Europe and all the way across to the Western Isles. Parts of the journey were like travelling back to a dark age, few of the old great cities remembered their heritage. The rules of hospitality could vary. Some places were polite but suspicious of us. Some places were big enough not to notice or care about us passing through. Some places were open about everything they wanted. In others we found men desperate to find expression for their needs from strangers who would leave and not expose their secrets.” What could have happened to cause his aversion? And to make it strong enough to last so long despite his admitted attraction to the big guy?

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“Our grand tour had given me a very thorough education about what had been lost to the Collapse and, important for me, the things people would do for pleasure and solace. By the time we reached the far edge of the Western Isles he must have thought the time was right and he let it happen. Mid-summer at the end of the world I finally got what I wanted. More than two years after we first met. I still remember the smell of purple scrub under our backs, the feeling of sunlight on our bare skin. The way we laughed. Madness. We were in a place so religiously rabid that we could have been killed for what we did.”

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“Oh yes. And he was right, better for having experience.” There was no doubt in his voice, no regret in the answer. She hadn’t really had to ask, his far-away tone had said volumes. “But you do not need to know about me and him; just like you do not need to know about him and this one.” A nod indicated the sleeper in the tank behind them. “When is you and him, it will be your experience and that will be all that matters. I promise you, whatever it is it will be worth it.” A smile and another quick squeeze from the arm seemed to indicate that the subject was closed. She bit back the questions that were crowding her mouth; she would have to be patient with those as well. “Enough history. Let us leave here before Wepwawet decides is time for someone to wake. I make you coffee while you wait for Dave.”

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The pieces begin to fall into place for Lia as it looks like Gihon's origins may have been discovered.

A thoughtful Lia returned to the old brick built house at the end of the day. Dave had seemed pleased to see her on his return to the apartment, but she had the feeling that his mind was elsewhere. He volunteered nothing about the meeting, dismissing it as some old business that would soon be behind him when she asked about it.

She guessed this was just one of the things he would tell her about in his own time. She’d compiled and cross referenced all the rumours she could find about him. Some were plainly wrong and others varying degrees of worrying, most were just more of the same as those she’d first heard. He’d not quite got around to sitting down and going through them with her. Were his dragons in the stories of capricious wickedness or touching goodness? Knowing he had yet more secrets had left her feeling disquieted despite his reassurances. The feeling was eased, but not fully erased, by the exquisite tenderness of his farewell as he’d put her hand over his heart and promised that soon, soon, some of his complications would be resolved and things would be easier.

A familiar voice, but one not heard for a long time, came out from the den. She’d forgotten that Steve’s brother was due to visit. She’d always like it when he came by. This time, though, she thought she would have a better perspective on his stories of the exotic and broken east. As the conversation spilled down the hallway she realised what her housemates were talking about. It sounded like Lupe and Robyn had kept copies of the photos from Dave’s first visit to the Feathered Serpent. It sounded like Jeff was thrilled by what they were showing him. It sounded like a conversation she didn’t really want to contribute to.

“It’s a tribal thing. Looks like he’s has fallen back onto something he is familiar with to mark the return of this friend. Very unusual though, from what I’ve heard this is only done by a bride on her wedding day. To see a man taking such care to reproduce it so faithfully, well, frankly I don’t know what to say.”

“They are a couple, or they were. We should ask Lia about it when she gets back in, she’ll be able to give you the lowdown on their relationship.” Damn Emma, always too helpful. “What's so shocking about the hair?”

“It might not be for us, but where he’s from being different is very dangerous, even now that kind of … exhibition … can get a man killed if he is caught in the wrong place.”

“Come off it, Europe’s surely not that bad.”

“Can’t tell you anything about the skinny one but the heavy guy, the ‘wife’ if you like, isn’t European.” Suddenly everyone was very interested. Lia, her return silent and unnoticed, kept very still in the hallway. She wondered what she might learn without having to give anything in return. Jeff’s gruff voice continued. “Look, as a generalisation we refer to it all as ‘Fortress Europe’ and we have an idea of a great, impregnable, mysterious and frightening place that doesn’t want to know us. Trust me, Europeans are pussycats compared to this guy’s people. No, the hair says he’s from Alba,
in the Western Isles. Possibly some kind of wife property, and I’d guess pretty high status one judging by the complexity of the pattern. Can I take copies of these? I know some guys who’ve been doing the first field work in the Isles. I’d like to get their opinion. They’ll go ape when I tell them there’s been an Alban chattel in plain sight in New York for years.” There was a long pause. “I can’t believe no one has spotted him before but, like the man says, context is everything.” He laughed, disbelieving it even as he said it. “Shit. Alba. People don’t just leave there. They escape. And a rare one like that .”

Very quietly Lia backed away from the doorway and carefully made it up the first flight of stairs to her room without advertising her presence. Gihon was from Alba. If Europe still did its best to hold onto its secrets, the Western Isles had been considered impregnable for long centuries, and Alba was an almost mythical land. A mystery man from a mystery place … only in one act of welcome he may have given himself away. Was Alba the end of the world? It sounded like that could have been where Dave had taken Myk on their journey. Dave had expected, or hoped, that Myk and Gihon would be a couple, that had been one of his first questions to her … had he been grooming the Russian?

She realised she didn’t care what bizarre games might be being played out. Even if she wanted to, it was too late to stop the inexorable transition to lover. She was hooked on the feeling of being with the thin man and his dark eyes. Addicted to that wild scent - even as her inner voice was intrigued as to why no one else ever seemed to notice it - she was beginning to feel her need as a physical thing, not just something that surfaced in her dreams. The brief touch of his flesh, feeling bones so close under the skin and the slow clarion call of his heart had made her feel faint earlier. It was the first time she had been inside his clothes. She looked at her fingertips as if expecting to see some kind of evidence of the event etched into the soft pads.

Maybe she had reached the time to remind him that she had needs of her own. She needed much more than that brief contact, more than his gentle tenderness and reassurances to assuage the stealthy hunger that seeped through her bones.

Wepwawet confirmed that Dave was alone in the apartment. She changed into something altogether more revealing than she normally felt comfortable with and made to leave the house. This time, however, her presence in the hallway was noticed and she was invited in to join the others in the den. Uneasy with their scrutiny, trying to hide her long bare legs behind the overcoat she’d been caught reaching for from the rack, she did her best to be polite but admit little to her friends.

Recognising that she wasn’t going to get away cleanly she tapped the same flimsy that had got Jeff so excited, “Are you sure you’re not familiar with the skinny one?”. He shrugged at her, nonplussed, all his attention had been on the detail of Gihon’s hair. It appeared that her friends had not identified the face that inhabited her dreams while the anthropologist had thrilled them with wild stories of the barbarians of Alba. “Think, who pays your salaries?”

“Please think hard before you get too excited about your discovery. The skinny one is the Jensson Foundation. I was just on my way over to his place because he’s also my boyfriend. And you’re wrong about the big guy - he’s a husband not a wife. They are husbands, the three of them, all husbands.”
“And you still don’t think it’s a bit of an odd arrangement?” After the joking at the start Robyn finally said what they had all been thinking. Acknowledging it, and then dismissing it, came as a relief to Lia. One complication out of the way.

“They are poly, they've never been exclusive. No one is going behind anyone’s back, no one is being cheated on, and no one is being hurt. I like being with him and that is enough for me.”

Later, much later, a blond head peeked around the corner of the doorway in a slightly overdone impression of a drunk sneaking quietly back into his own home, nearly overbalancing as the person behind walked into him. The stage whisper was unnecessary in the dark, but too much vodka often had that effect on the youngster – he never seemed to hear the things his companion said when they were both too drunk to be anything other than honest. “Shhh, the wolf said they were asleep in here. Don’t want to disturb them … where do you think they are?”

“I think the feet hanging over the end of that sofa are a giveaway, don’t you? Oh, what do you know, you’re pissed. Off to bed with you, I’ll make sure these two are ok and then … and then I’ll see to you.” Gihon might have had as much to drink as his would-be lover but he was always much less inebriated. Myk cautiously steered around the furniture towards his room, a hiss redirecting him to the adjacent door and his promised comfort for the night.

Dave smiled as he heard his husbands try not to wake him. Lia may have been out for the count but he’d just closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of her nestled in the crook of his arm. Like the rest of the apartment Wepwawet always kept the room at a comfortable temperature. There was no real need for Gihon to appear with a throw to keep the sleepers warm. The supine man looked up at his spouse. It wasn’t the first time that the big man had seem him with a woman but it was, perhaps, the first time in a long time that he was also fond of the woman in question.

The effect of far too much alcohol evaporated with a casual shake of his head and the long-haired man coolly evaluated their position and deshabille. The short skirt was a telling change for the young woman. He imagined it would have made it easier for her to spread her legs across the thin man’s hips if she had been sat on top of him. Easy to imagine, it was what he had always liked to do. A different person might have been jealous. Gihon had no room in his heart for jealous. Instead, he made no comment as he gently retrieved a shapely hand from inside the open fly of the black jeans – he guessed what might have caused the interruption to Lia’s exploration – and let it rest on the exposed chest. It would move easily enough under the open shirt if either of them moved. Gihon knelt by the sofa and let raised brows ask the question for him.

“She came round, she wanted to talk. We had a few drinks, watched a film, fooled around a little. Nothing serious. She fell asleep. It was nice.” He didn’t see any need to mention the news that she had brought along with her passion. Honoured though he’d been by seeing how Gihon had greeted him he’d always known it was only a matter of time that someone would guess the big man’s origins. It was an inevitable partner to spreading information, part of the risk of leaving Europe and the shadow of the Fortress. The men had known each other for a very long time; a tilt of Gihon’s head was enough to continue the question, it said ‘And?’

“And I think she’s special. She’s a sensitive. A strong one.”

“It happens. You’ve found them before.” Gihon fussed with tucking the soft throw around the woman; gentle in his attentions as he covered her exposed flesh, then carefully folded the shirt retrieved from the floor and set her discarded bra on top of it on a side table. In the shadowed room he guessed that the delicate sand washed silk matched whatever was under the skirt. There was no other stray clothing and he didn’t imagine that she would want to make a statement in mismatched
lingerie. “So, this particular one … how do you feel about her?”

“I want to be careful. I don’t want to hurt her.” The men regarded the dark head resting on Dave’s shoulder. “I think she smells us. Seems to be mostly subconscious, she was quite far gone on you without realising it and then I arrived and gave her a focus able to respond to how she felt. She might be special, but a woman’s still human.” Suddenly his tone was nervous. “I’m scared of loving her too much. I can’t not love her.”

“Life is change, remember. If you love her we will cherish her and we will help you when the time comes.” The subject was an uncomfortable one for them. Care had cut them both deep. “Depending on the variation, it could be a long time coming. Don’t let the fear stop you … not you. Not … not again.”

Dave needed a distraction; this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have with the subject so close. “Looks like Myk had a few too many tonight. Progress or someone upset him?”

“It was nothing. The meeting turned into a bit of a session with the Mapplethorpe curators and Myk came by to meet me when he’d finished whoever he was doing. We were in Atlas and some old queen was convinced the boy was interested and available and wouldn’t take no for an answer. There was a bit of a scene. It happens. I’ll be on nightmare watch for a few nights and he’ll settle back down again.”

“He wants you.” Though muffled by sleep, and the shirt her face rested on, Lia’s voice was clear enough for both of them to hear. They looked at her again – yes, she was still asleep. “I saw you this morning in the tank. No wonder he wants you. He said it was …” They both held their breath … whatever else she was about to say was forgotten as she wriggled herself into a more comfortable position and settled down again. Dave stretched and inched himself further out of his jeans. Under cover of the throw it seemed that the rescued hand had returned to his quiescent flesh.

“Out of the mouths of babes and innocents … Go on, you see Myk sleeps ok, I’ll take this one home when she wakes up. No point disturbing her now.” As Gihon went into his own room he heard the whispered afterthought and couldn’t help but reflect the smile that he knew went with it. Whatever the risks, the happiness of one was the happiness of all of them. “It’s been nice to be a surprise for someone again.”
Day and night mean nothing when everything is black but each time he wakes he feels stronger. He still remembers the old conversations but now the memories are coherent, no longer random snatches of words in the dark. If he can get away he knows where he will go. He remembers who the outsider is; if he can get to the man again he thinks he will be safe. Sometimes he hears the muffled sound of the protective suits moving around his room but makes no effort to respond to them, they do not walk with the rhythm of his friends.

When the time comes there is no warning. The door opens. He hears Thanatos breathing heavily as he rushes in and drags away the hood, the blindfold and the gag. The theta cuts through the restraints holding thin limbs to the bed frame, tonight it will be over, there will be no second chance. Instead of the very obvious orange scrubs he is in dark fatigues. Not here. So close to being away Dave does not want to risk discovery, sure that failure would be the end of them all. I do but not here. The door opens again and the two nurses rush in – one tall with her black hair in a long pony tail, the other short with a crew-cut offsetting his soft features – they closely resemble the image that Thanatos has projected of them. He calls them Ishtar and Galahad but Dave has lived in the same house, he knows which fiction the names have come from. These two also wear dark colours and carry the same for the thin man. Thanatos takes him from the bed as easily as lifting a child and Ishtar helps him dress while the others disappear – sounds of a fight coming from the room next door, things being smashed, a chair thrown, a loud yelp as something hard connected with Galahad’s face, a thud of a body falling against furniture.

They meet again in the corridor. The short man leaves a splash of red on the door jamb and lets his burst nose bleed out on the floor. He’s none too steady on his feet and seems a little unfocussed. He assures his wife that the cut to his scalp doesn’t hurt as much as the flow of red suggests. It is a small price to pay for the pretence of coercion. Ishtar supports Dave and Thanatos half carries her husband as they make their way through security checkpoints manned by unconscious guards.

The car waiting for them is as silent as his rescuer. Thanatos drives carefully with no lights, keeping at the maximum speed without the engine taking over from the electric motor. They don’t make for the perimeter road but instead the car passes the old lakeside house and halts in a scenic overlook. Enough evidence has been left. Galahad allows his wife to seal the cut; they don’t want to leave too obvious a trail to follow as they head on into the woods.

Careful not to leave definite trace on the foliage around them they stay to the centre of the pre-defined paths. Dave recognises the wooded slopes from his first flight from the noise and violence of guns. He guesses that Thanatos can see as clearly as he can but the humans are struggling in the unlit night. Coming across a clearing they are halted by the darker shadow of a soldier, rifle trained on them, the red threat of the laser sight moving from face to face. Dave is not afraid and he realises he
should not have been surprised. He recognises the silhouette and catches her scent on the breeze - he would recognise her anywhere.

“Lori.” She runs into his open arms, nearly bowling him into the large figure beside him with the force of her rush.

She takes them deeper into the forest to a hiding place and assures them that they will be safe. Others will help keep the search away from them, to give them time to be together. The inside of the camouflaged tent is dimly lit by a shaded lamp. Though Lori says they are safe she won’t be careless. To Dave she offers a bowl of thin soup from a flask. “They told me you haven’t eaten for a while. This should help but don’t have too much at once, there’s more for you later if you want it.”

“What happened?” It is good to feel the soup go down, he reminds himself not to rush. The physical heat moving through him is not as strong as the gift of the theta but it is comforting to a body close to losing all connection to reality.

“I was looking for you. I knew I couldn’t tell anyone but I kept my eyes open hoping I could see you or someone who would know you. I used to think there was a girl in a bar who had the look, but when I went back she just seemed normal. One night in there I saw these two and they had the same glow I was looking for only they said it came from another one, not you. I guess that’s the big guy. I’ve seen the Thetas being moved around, never seen one as quiet as that though. I was looking for you. They were looking for proof of who you are. They said bad things were being done to you and they wanted to help you.” And what had they done? They had given him to the Theta and he had been changed.

“Are you … are you OK?” Her young face is all concern as she watches him slowly empty the cup and refills it for him. The others stay to the shadows, noises in the dark as they settle in for the night – Ishtar and Galahad together promising each other that everything will work out, both of them leaning against the bulk of the Theta. His silent head seems to be part of the quiet conversation and his strong arms encircle them both. In the shape of a killer he has hidden a heart of love.

“I’m better than I was, and much better for being able to see you again.” Sex in the dark, in the daytime. He remembers the feeling of her skin against his. He still doesn’t know how long it has been but he feels the familiar response start again. He sets the cup aside and reaches for her. It doesn’t matter that three pairs of eyes watch them kiss and undress each other. No one says anything as she lays him down and lowers herself onto him. She is careful not to hurt him. For the brief time it takes nothing else matters and he soon shares his new strength inside her, a soft moan accompanying the release. The sound seems to be a signal of some kind. Dave is aware of everyone else relaxing, a collective exhalation matching his own.

Dave does not want to move from the moist warmth encircling him and the sniper is equally reluctant to let him slip from her, keeping him in her for as long as possible as she shuts off the small light and covers them both with the other half of their sleeping bag. Between the two of them, one stretched out along the other, they take up little space and fit easily under the down filled material. He lies back and relaxes, spent but very alive. Galahad and Ishtar are also asleep under their shared cover, human blankets for the giant.

We should talk while the humans sleep. The child voice echoes in his head, Thanatos has been waiting for him to be at peace. Tomorrow Lori is going to find them and you will be gone. They will say that I forced them to release you and to help me get you out. Ishtar is pregnant. She is just starting to show. They will say they were scared I would harm the baby if they didn’t help me. Like many women now she has lost several in the early stages. They would be right to be scared of something like me. An immense hand gently strokes a curl of hair fallen over the sleeping nurse’s
face. It's obvious to Dave that Thanatos would never hurt her.

Lori is also pregnant. Only a few weeks, it's just a ball of cells triggered during a series of encounters with a senior officer. He likes her and he will be a good provider. He has already given her her alibi for the night, they were both here together earlier and she told him her news. They celebrated here. And now you have filled her with haoma. Like Ishtar’s her child will have two fathers, one human and the other of us. What could be better than to be a child of the Adam Kadmon?

Dave lies with the soldier girl slumbering against his skin and bones frame. He is too tired to argue with the name this time. He’s already taken the giant to task for calling the technicians ‘Ishtar’ and ‘Galahad’, refusing to accept the application of yet another ridiculous name that the choice implied. He holds her close and closer still, trying to feel for a change that will confirm the silent one’s words. Maybe. Possibly. That particular trick of life was something he had found endlessly fascinating. That it meant the girl had been with a man after him was of no consequence, she had still wanted his sterile flesh inside her, had risked everything to be with him again. He marvelled at the flicker inside the embedded conceptus, the mark of haoma according to the clear silent voice.

I will watch over us all tonight. Sleep safely and gather your strength. You will soon find yourself replenished. In the morning there will be time for you to make love to her again, to give your child a better chance.

This dark is full of warmth and comfort and the scent of vibrant humanity. Listening to the steady breathing, feeling the weight of the girl against him it is easy to go with the feeling and let real sleep take him.
Twin pleasures

Chapter Summary

Myk enjoys his morning glory.

He woke and began to stretch. A good sleep had been all that he needed. He felt better, relaxed - mmmm. Ready for the day. Other bodies moved around him, he smiled to himself, no need to open his eyes, he would work it out soon enough. Warm lips brushed against his shoulder. One. A soft hand stroked the inside of his thigh. Two. Ahhh, that’s where he was. He twisted to kiss the face behind him and the slight turn tilted his hips just so. Full lips parted and took him in. Above and below the women kissed him. It wasn’t like there was any urgent need for him to be anywhere else.

He rarely saw any woman for any length of time, and no one exclusively. He made certain everyone knew where they stood. No more mistakes, no more misunderstandings. No promises and no chance of commitment. These two, however, these two he felt more than comfortable with. He’d returned to one, or both, in the long lazy days of the overlong summer. Staying was unusual, not something he did with the others. The first time he’d been surprised and, somewhere inside, there had been – maybe – a hint of guilt. Then, he found himself going to them some nights to clean off the other women he’d been with before returning home.

The slimmer one, boyish figure with pert perfect breasts and pink nipples, he’d known for years before that random slip of words had finished with her moaning something soft and Spanish into his shoulder. Her girlfriend, spikey hair and attitude defending surprisingly comfortable curves, had come from Luxor five or six years before. Myk didn’t recall seeing her there. He was sure he would have remembered her; there was something about the feeling of being inside her and the way she gave herself that stayed with him long after they parted.

He tried not to overstay or to see them too often. He didn’t want them to become a habit. But they were nice. They knew him and they knew Gihon. Other than the pleasure of his body they asked nothing from him. Of course Gihon must have known where he went. It was just one of the conversations they never had beyond the “All ok?” that greeted his return and contained the big man’s own passion in an anodyne veneer. Gihon who would never force him. Gihon who always waited.

He didn’t want to think about Gihon. It was morning, and he was with Elvira and Gielen. That was enough.
In vino veritas

Chapter Summary

Lia goes to a party with a friend because she misses Dave.
Ending up in bed with Myk was never in her plans.

“Are you sure about this?” Poised in the doorway Emma felt the need to ask again. Their walk over from the house had been full of such questions. Lia had never been much of a party animal but tonight she was determined to go out and have fun, no matter how unlikely she thought it might be. The mood she was in she didn’t particularly care that their destination had a reputation for things getting out of hand. If anything that suited her all the more.

Dave’s sudden disappearance a few days earlier had not helped her increasing frustration. Glimpses of him in dreams, twisted and fragmented like old memories, were not enough without being with him during the day. She was still annoyed with herself for shying away from what he had gently made available to her. He had taken her home with no hint of disappointment, had smiled and promised her all the time in the world as he kissed her goodnight (good morning?) in his car. And he seemed to mean it. Then two days later there was a message from him saying he’d had to leave to wind up the - still unspecified - unfinished business. She needed to be near him, she needed … something, some action. Accepting the vague invite to a friend of a friend’s house party had been a spur of the moment thing. She wouldn’t back out, maybe something would happen.

There didn’t seem to be a lot of light, maybe the power had been diverted to feed the loud music throbbing through the walls of the dormitory house. This wasn’t the music she’d got used to at the Field or in the Library; it made her feel edgy, uncomfortable in her skin. Drinks appeared. Drinks were drunk. There was no way of having a proper conversation with anyone. Losing sight of Emma - she had always been one for the maths jocks - Lia backed gradually along a wall into what seemed like a safe corner and applied herself to the consumption of alcohol. It might not have been as smooth as what she had recently got used to but maybe rough and a bit of real life was what she needed.

A couple of young men were helping keep her drink topped up. Ears numbed by the roar of the music she mostly nodded and smiled when they seemed to expect some kind of response from her. So, this was going out and having fun? She remembered hating these mass parties in her first year but thought she would just see where it went. She had no high expectations. One of the men wanted to tell her something, it must have been important – he leaned right against her. She wasn’t sure which of them was the unsteady one; he seemed holding on to her very closely. Oh, that was where things were headed.

Typical. And so clumsy. Disappointing. Still, she was there, she’d wanted something to happen. She knew she had no interest in the man, or the oafish friend who took her lack of reaction to be a sign of assent to his equally inept groping behind her. Slower on the uptake than usual, she blamed the booze and began to look for a way out. The room seemed full of bodies making use of the low lighting - in twos and threes - ! - she quickly turned away from the group in the opposite corner. She couldn’t remember where the door was and could feel the start of panic in the pit of her stomach. If she could see the way out she would be ok, if she could see …

There was a flash of blond at the periphery of her vision. A blaze of sapphire and a low snarl of
something threatening saw her companions retreat in the presence of a true alpha male. New hands
drew her shirt closed and dragged her beyond the heaving group of interconnected sweaty bodies to
the door. The wide entrance hallway was quieter and brighter. Illumination was not much of an
improvement as far as Lia was concerned; it allowed her to see what was happening as she dragged
her overcoat from an undulating pile of outer garments. She clung on to Myk like someone drowning
as they negotiated the tricky path to freedom. Nearly at the door and she heard her name called.
Emma, not very sober, wanted to know where she was going … and what she planned on doing
there.

What to say? Lia didn’t get a chance to reply as Myk crushed her to his side, lifted her off her feet
and tangoed her the remaining distance to the door. Enough voices answered her friend for Lia to
know that people thought the outcome of her night was a foregone conclusion. Had he just been
waiting for Dave to be out of the way? Fuzzily Lia knew that something was not right with that
thought, he’d never shown any interest in her before, had said he was relieved there was nothing
between them. But, he was so close, so strong … and now he was kissing her neck, a hand in her
hair painfully holding her head still as he worked up to her ear. Belatedly she realised his display of
control was much more of a turn on than the amateur groping she’d just experienced.

“Don’t worry, this is just for show. I’ll tell you why when you’re safe.” And they were out and into
suddenly very cool and fresh air, catcalls and laughter cut off in the slam of the heavy door behind
them. He didn’t let her pause but dragged her on into the night. Safe appeared to be in the direction
of the Field of Reeds rather than her own place. He clearly intended getting her there as soon as
possible.

Filled with a mad exhilaration, laughing wildly at the physical effort of keeping up with the blond
man, she tumbled through the door of the apartment aware of little but the thrumming in her veins.
He laughed with her, held her close again and kissed her with an intensity that was literally breath-
taking. This didn’t seem safe. She didn’t care. Fumbling hands left unwanted clothes in their wake as
they made their way across the room. Was someone else there? Did Myk say something? There was
a growl, perhaps, to send the other away. Overwhelming lust filled her world.

Through another door and he was on top of her, tearing the last material from between them both. He
pinned her hands back above her head, stopped her reaching down to the hard thing that made her
pant for him. He tortured her with the sight of him, moving just out of reach as she reared up to rub
against him. Then all his weight was against her and he was kissing her again, licking the sudden
bloom of sweat from her neck, her breasts. His free hand, his free hand was down between them and
he was ...

She took a shuddering breath.

“I don’t want to do this.” She felt sick, what had she done? What was she about to do? She was on
her back, legs splayed, and abruptly, shockingly, horrifyingly sober. In the same instant he rolled off
her, withdrew completely from her reach and huddled into himself across the bed. Broad hands
clased around his ankles, he peered at her, his head resting on his tightly drawn up knees. Heart
beats returned to normal in long minutes of silence.

“You back to being yourself?” She nodded. Whitened knuckles relaxed as some of the tension left
him but he did not move. “Sure?” She nodded again. Blinking back confused tears she didn’t trust
herself to speak. “You do not want to fuck?” At the definite shake of her head he sighed and smiled
at her, relief wiping the look of concern from his face. She was baffled but relieved at his relief,
nothing more was going to happen. “You need drink to help with the shock, don’t worry, nothing
alcoholic.” He made for the door, and then turned back - all signs of arousal gone. “Please. Get in
bed. You are going nowhere else tonight.”
He left her with the realisation that there was nothing of her that he hadn’t seen or touched. Lia had never had an over-developed sense of modesty and had never been one much for regrets. Now, unfamiliar shame crashed in on her as she eased herself under the rumpled covers of the huge bed. It was easily wide enough for three, or four. She didn’t know whose room this was, couldn’t recall the direction they had taken from the door. Did they all have beds made for sharing?

She didn’t want to identify the room, didn’t want to look at anything in case she saw too much. She definitely didn’t want to notice the wrist straps paired on a shelf. Didn’t want to see that they were different lengths, that some had laces while others closed with straps and buckles. She absolutely didn’t want to see the long leather waistcoat - the one she knew was Gihon’s favourite - dropped casually over the back of a chair. The flash of crimson silk among the dark folds of the soft-sheened hide held her unseeing gaze. What had she done?

Myk returned, steam curling from a mug of something hot and sweet smelling which he silently handed to her. Tea. Just tea. He sat beside her and watched her sip the drink. Gradually she began to relax. He was evidently comfortable with his own nakedness and made no attempt to cover himself. The drink finished he took the mug back from her and set it aside. He slid into the bed and pushed pillows around so he could lie on his side and smile at her. He looked immensely pleased with himself.

“What just happened?”

“You were drugged. We all were. Someone’s idea of a joke I think – but not a very good one – to spike all the drinks. I was on the receiving end of the effects from some women that had been there much longer than you. That slowed me down some. Apologies. I should have got you out sooner.”

“Are you ok?” His smile was a little unfocussed and it sounded like his speech was beginning to slur.

“Fine. Constitution of an ox. Main thing, I got you out and made you well again. Magick.” The word sounded harsh, like he was pronouncing a ‘k’ at the end. She didn’t know if it was his wandering accent or he meant something specific by it. “Dave always said that when the time came I would be able to do magick the same as him. All I needed was the will and the desire. Only, instead of neutralising all the drugs I seem to be a little … ah … what’s the word … stoned. Stoned. Absolutely hammered. Ha ha. Hammer and sickled. Bohze moi. You want to know anything? Ask me now before I sober up. Or fall asleep.”

“Would you have screwed me?”

“No, told you - magick. Need energy for the magick, you made energy with me is all.” He stretched – a lazy, wide, cat stretch of smug satisfaction that took up the remainder of the bed. Oh, the bed wasn’t too wide for restraints then. She shut the thought down, blushing at the image – surely that wasn’t from her own imagination?

“I really wanted you.” Better to think about the man in front of her rather than the pictures in her head. How did she know about the straps?

“No you didn’t.” A recalcitrant bolster was slapped into shape. “You would have had anyone. Normally I would not stop you but such a thing should be choice, not effect of something you don’t know you’ve taken. Those two I scared off … they would have had you and passed you to their friends. Trust me, would have been a disappointment for you, not worth regret when sober again.”

“Why were you at the party?”

“To look out for you. Is my job. No way Gihon could go there, but me? Everyone wants Misha to
their party and Misha makes good bodyguard for such a nice body. You know you are wasting your time with simple questions. You must want to know more than this, these are things I can say drunk or sober.” And he grinned again. He clearly would not lead her but equally seemed happy for her to question him. There had been so many questions she didn’t know where to start or how much time she would have as his head began to nod.

“Ok. You said you were a virgin when you met him. But you met sixteen years ago. I mean, you must have women throwing themselves at you day after day for so long. How can you have been you and still have been a virgin?” Always so mysterious about his past life, suddenly she knew the obvious question. She had always had trouble imagining them as young men. “How old are you?”

He laughed and gave her a wink. “Ah now you ask a better one. I did not lie to you when I said I was fresh out of box when I first met him.” He looked around the room as if checking they would not be overheard and moved closer, his voice low and conspiratorial. “Clever girl, look at me and believe. I was born to world fully grown sixteen years ago when he made the magick to bring me to life.”

“Fully grown?” That was madness surely. She thought whatever had been put in the drinks had addled him.

“Weak but as you see me. Ahh … mostly. My first woman was the Sainted Ekaterina. Dave made the magick with her to wake me and she made a man of me when I was strong enough to answer her needs. That was how I started my learning of life on my third day alive.”

“You were born fully grown and you first had sex at three days old …” She didn’t have the energy to make it a question. She couldn’t believe him but even as he said it she could see the absolute truth of it in his eyes, truth to him anyway. A coma, he must have been in a coma like Dave. “He waited two years then …”

“Then he had me himself. Said I was ready for him then. I had not noticed at first but things started to change as we got to the end of the world. He began to look at me like the way I see him looking at you now. I had women and men - everything in between - by then but the gentle way he took me was most amazing thing. And the way he gave himself to me … was such joy.” With his eyes closed and his voice quiet Lia thought he was falling asleep, but then the beatific smile became a wicked grin as he rallied himself. “And then we fucked all the way back across Europe. I thought I was strong, but oh Christos, and such stamina to match his passion. Staying anonymous many times our bodies paid our passage. We took another two glorious years to get back to Luxor.”

He lost the grin at the mention of Luxor. The city where he met Gihon, the city where something had happened and Dave had left them both. Now she reached out to him not in lust but something more than friendship. He slipped easily into her arms, felt reassurance as he rested his head on the breasts he had been so rough with a short time earlier. She wondered if he would be able to tell her what happened, or if would be too painful, or – judging by his previous comments – too strange to be credible. She decided to leave that subject; it seemed unfair to take advantage of his openness.

“Why do you sleep with so many women?”

“Ah, I do not get much choice. Women see me, and some of them want me so I give to them. Ekaterina wanted me. She asked me, I gave. Reflex, I give them what they need. Anyway, is not always sex that they want, sometimes I just listen to them.” His good humour flickered back into his face. “Maybe you would be surprised, maybe not, but I do more than just screw you know. What they need, whatever they need, I do my best to give them. I like being with you because you don’t want me, you are easy company for me. So easy to be with.” He made himself comfortable against her. In spite of other options, it seemed that she was to be his pillow for the night.
“I know you said I shouldn’t ask, you said he was worth waiting for … but can any sex be worth this frustration?” So much about them was different. She hoped that sex would be an equally singular experience. Absently she ran her fingers through his soft white-blond hair.

“Oh girl, clever girl that you are. He wants more than just sex with you. You must know that. A fuck can be great fun but is a throwaway pleasure. He wants you to be certain this is what you want, give you all chances to change your mind.” He stopped her hand and looked up. His eyes glittered with promise. There was something fearsome and vital in his gaze as if he willed her to say the words.

“Why should I want to change my mind?”

“Does the thought of complete submission not scare you? It should. If you give in all the way, if you submit all of yourself to his lovemaking I think you will be taken somewhere sublime. He is not like other men. This is why he does not like to share with virgins. Disappointment with men after would be too cruel and he does not like to think himself a cruel man.”

“Is that why you don’t sleep with Gihon?” There was no way of avoiding it; the question just tumbled out of her. Her thoughts had been coming back to it for days; he must have been caught in the same track for years.

“No, no. There is no way Gihon could ever disappoint. Ever. He is mine for always.” The same long pause she’d seen before, an organisation of thoughts. “I have to tell you all. We go to Luxor, he dresses me up and takes me to party. All kinds of people there and then I see this extraordinary creature that Dave wanted me to meet. They disappear together. When they came back it was obvious what they had been doing. They hurt each other. They glowed with it. He had told me that it would happen as soon as they were together, it always did. And I looked at this Gihon, this river of Eden as he called him, and I knew that I also had to be with him.

“They took me to their home, invited me to share their bed. I’d done that before with him, with men and women, but this was different, this meant something. Brave soldat that I am meant to be I could not join them, was scared they would change me too much. They were gentle and kind and said all the time in world for us, when I was ready it would be right. However tender Dave said his Gihon would be with me I feared submitting to his appetites.

“I was still young, I made poor choices. In a bar I met a woman who needed me very much. So I gave myself to her. We met again and again and maybe she began to think she loved me. It was only sex and kindness. I knew where my heart was even though my body had not followed. This woman needed kindness, her husband was a bad man she said. And each time I laughed and said I was one of the soldaten so I was not afraid of any soft handed Egyptian.

“Well, husband really was a bad man with many other bad men working for him. They did not care for law when he gave his orders, they did not have soft hands. Wife was followed and we were caught together. I hurt many of them but I was unarmed and defending the woman so was only matter of time before I was subdued. The husband said it was a kindness, the punishment should have been for his wife but he loved her so much he would not have her harmed. To teach her the lesson they made her watch as each hurt they returned many times … and then they took turns with me when I could not fight back.

“And when they had spilled themselves but still wanted their fun they used what was to hand. They pushed things into me. They broke my mouth, they crushed my hands. They wanted to make a present of that part of me that had caused such offence but the husband said to leave that intact. I was blood and broken bones. I was pain. They threw me out at my own gate for Dave and Gihon to try and put me together again if they could.” He no longer sounded drunk. His quiet voice sounded tired, his breath passing across sensitive skin in shallow bursts. He seemed shrunk into himself as she
hugged him and kissed his hair.

“They must have done a good job. You are here, you are perfect and whole.” She was well out of her depth. What did she know about comforting anyone?

“My body recovered, I do not know how long it took. When I woke again Gihon held me like a fragile thing. He wept over me and promised always to stay with me and look after me. Dave begged forgiveness. What was done was done to heal me but I was wrong inside. The silence was cancer between us. I was scared of everything, scared of my own shadow, scared of mirrors. I did not leave the house.

“Soon after, Dave said he had settled my account. He said I should never fear the bad man again. And he kissed me. It was the first and only time since I was recovered. Then he said he could not stay. I thought it was because he could not bear to look at me. Gihon showed me this face in a mirror, virtually the same face I had known all my life. As you said – I was nearly perfect and whole. Gihon said Dave had left because he carried so much guilt for allowing me to be hurt he could not bear me looking at him.

“We were in Egypt, the home of alchemy. The magick generated by one had brought me to life. The magick of two had put me back together again … but it was not enough, not enough to save the three of us.” In the silence Lia felt warm tears fall from his long white lashes splash and slide across her skin. He made no sound, had she not been holding him close she would not have felt the silent sobs he had trapped inside him.

Eventually she asked, “What happens now?”

“Now is sleep and maybe in the morning I will have forgotten this. I hope. Lights please Wepwawet.” The room plunged into darkness and she felt him wipe the tears from his face. The darkness was more intimate than anything their bodies had done in the light. “There are secrets you would learn if you stay with us. Can your heart be steady clever girl? Can you be strong for Dave? I still love him so and do not want him to carry on hurting the way he does.”

“What about you?”

“Gihon says he will wait, he will wait forever. In the manner of his people no blade has been near his hair since he made the promise. He honours me every day and when I lie with him I feel safe and I feel love.”

“Ten years is a long time. Is there still a chance of being lovers or have you both become so entrenched in your fear that it is safer not to face it?”

“You have not seen him. Dave is amazing but Gihon … I have seen his passion, witnessed how strong his needs are. Even if I was no longer scared of the act I fear I would still be scared of submitting to that wildness in him.”

“Do you think he would hurt you?” She’d always thought the big man’s big hands looked dangerous, what was he really capable of?

“The lust for flesh will carry all before it. It is inevitable. I am scared that … that I am still wrong inside. I do not want to share the wrong, I do not want to think of bringing pain to someone I love so much.”

What to say to the fears the blond man expressed? They were not her fears. She was close against him, feeling the strength of his shattered body, aware of the phantoms of her desires and the scent
that had haunted her, it was all around her. Always the scent of them. After everything that had happened, Lia was just tired.

“When Dave returns I have to be with him. I think part of why he has been holding back is because he does not want to hurt either of you. I’m not part of that. I don’t want any of your stupid, mad guilt. I want you and Gihon to be what your potential would be. Your body is perfect and perfectly well, you keep hiding away from the fear and surely you will become as damaged as you think you are.”

There was no answer in the dark. In time Lia found herself drifting into sleep. There were no dreams of sex, all that seemed lanced out of her exhausted body. Instead she felt safe and protected, curling up on her side as the strong broken man held her close.
Gene Bomb: The Soldier's Story
Dave's final apotheosis and withdrawal from his own kind.

Biology wakes the thin man a few hours later. Carefully he removes himself from Lori’s embrace and tucks the sleeping bag close around her before leaving the tent. Thanatos is outside, alert eyes scanning the forest and the dense canopy overhead. The sentinel waves an acknowledgement and turns away as a stream of urine splashes against a tree. It has been a long time since Dave has been free outside. The feeling of the night air on his bare skin a reminder that he is alive again.

Lori snuggles against him as he eases back under the downy material, half asleep she mutters into his shoulder. “Ooh, you're cold, where you been?”

“Shh, quiet … I had to pee. Go back to sleep. I’ll still be here when you wake.” Outside he hears the Theta settle against the bole of the tree. No sound had come from his lips but his words still echoed loudly in Dave’s head. The gift of haoma is in the intent of the giver and the grace of the recipient. You shared with love for the girl and she has nothing but acceptance in her, it will go well with her. Helena showed you what that possible. You were willing to give everything with Alyssa but she is wrong inside, you just made her more of what she was.

It is later, he hears voices, a murmur of tenderness between a man and wife, and he remembers that his reality is now different to what it had been. Ishtar and Galahad are outside, from the rhythm of their sounds he can guess what they are doing. From the other echoes in his mind he knows that Thanatos is with them. The Theta is as gentle with them as he had been in the night when Dave had nervously asked if receiving always had to hurt. He had finally received all that Thanatos had wanted to give him, mouth to mouth, looking into each other eyes as the giant held him in his lap and came inside him. Dizzy with the rush within he'd finally lain back in the undergrowth, more than happy to let the silent one use his mouth to draw the same token from Dave’s hardened flesh. The gift given with joy increases the store of the giver, haoma redoubled in generosity.

A warm body curls against him. Lori. Lori the sniper. Lori who watched over him for months, all the time wanting him but never speaking. Lori who had finally enjoyed being with him and who was now carrying the potential for life. A small hand rises and falls with the movement of his ribs. She wakes and smiles up at him. This is no dream. He might still look frail but he knows he is much stronger than the previous night. He had received and he had given, the cycle made him stronger. Her smile reminds him what to do with his new energy. The child inside her needs protection. They both need him. Tenderly, knowing it will probably be for the last time, he rises to her and gives her what bliss he can as he offers his gift to the dividing cells in her womb.

Full day. It is hard to leave. Lori has been so sweet to him. Lori who will be back with another man - no, with a man, a real man – there is no room in her life for him. Ishtar and Galahad – damn, he’d never even asked their proper names – how could he ever repay their bravery? And Thanatos? His supposed death was not what the bitch had anticipated, this death brought knowledge and freedom with him.

Demon time snares him. So close to freedom, but unwilling to take his leave, others crash into the
clearing with guns and threats while he yet kisses the soft lips that had first given him such pleasure in the hide by the lake. He offers no fight as one of the men drags Lori from his hands. Dave recognises the looks between them as the woman is snatched away - this man is the original father of their child. This man needs to be honoured; he will save the woman, according to Thanatos he will protect the child.

Lori is a good actress, good enough to cling to her real man and sob out the story of returning to their love nest to tidy up and of being surprised by the silent one and his terrified thralls. Dave plays his part. There can be no hint of connection between them. Alyssa may have known about some of the others but Lori had always been his secret. Though it offends his feelings to say the words he has to separate himself from the girl.

“It’s been a long time since I had a woman. She has a nice mouth, I was about to see if her cunt was as welcoming. But I see you know it is. Don’t worry sweet girl, I’m sure you’ll make do with this one after they kill me.”

He makes no sign of resistance as the angry captain doubles him up with a rifle butt in the guts. They all think he is still weak. Nothing but a grunt as the same weapon is driven into his face, and again, blood spraying across those closest to him. Some are human. Most are Shabtis - he breathes deep - all Thetas, all weaker than Thanatos. Alyssa moves in to enjoy his latest pain. Her eyes fixed on the beaten Delta the bitch doesn’t notice the way some of the Thetas wipe at the blood spatter and lick their fingers.

“Let the humans go. They are no part of this. Collateral damage. They didn’t know what your Thanatos would do.”

“You expect me to believe you?” A stamped heel makes the thin figure cry out in pain. A gloved hand lifts his face to look into eyes gone mad. “You freak, you fucking freak, you should never have drawn breath.” Alyssa is unaware of shifts in posture, alterations in allegiance as she spits into the drawn face. She can never be more than human; the unspoken half world of the Thetas is unknown to her. Dave feels it flowing around the crowded space. He understands that to get away he needs these uncertain and unknown beings. They may have all been conditioned to believe in an Adam Kadmon, he has no idea how many of them would accept that he was such a being. Thanatos is the only one he can count on, but he is restrained by a knot of his own kind.

“You told them there was an Adam Kadmon. You gave them a hope for redemption and a threat of disapproval, and that big idiot thinks it’s me. You stupid bitch do you know what you have done?” Another blunt force to the head, more blood collecting in his cupped hand. “You picked the giant out and didn’t realise the education you were giving him by leaving him at the house with all your half-arsed teenage anger and dated science fiction. You know I can’t be Kadmon, I refuse to be. But do you know that one also wants me to be his Lazarus Long? How many other mad ideas have you foisted on them? I’ve had enough of playing your games. This stops now. It all stops. It’s all wrong.”

She goes to kick him again but he rolls away from her, the whip crack flick of a bloodied hand casting more dark droplets across the watchers. Some land on clothing, some on skin, a few into open eyes and mouths. The message, for those with eyes to see, is carried in the dark fluid. Haoma is not just in semen. In the silent communication of the substance Dave knows it is also in the root, in the blood that powers the machine of his body, blood they all share. Those open to receive his gift change their stance as they listen to the unspoken words of Thanatos. Others join in, a silent debate in children’s voices that will decide many fates.

*Stand with us, stand with Adam Kadmon against what she wants us to be. Our gift is to protect not to destroy humans. Attack us and be the abomination that she has created.*
The weakest of us is stronger than any of them. Why should we serve them?

They are our makers, without them we have no purpose.

Leave them to their fate, what are they to us?

Protect them, shelter them.

Why should we believe you? Weaklings are to be used not followed.

He is our first, our strongest. Some Theta’s believe, the scorn of silent laughter from the others sends a chill across the clearing. New lines are drawn in nuances of body language, for and against. A small knot of Theta’s draw close to protect Ishtar and Galahad, Lori and her captain, and the potential children.

I tell you he is the first and the strongest. Who among you has bested me? I am nothing before this one. I have submitted to him and I have seen more than you could ever comprehend. We have been fed lies with this bitch mother’s milk but this is our perfect whole, the mould from which we are all taken. Reject him and you reject our purpose. We stand for man, we answer for them.

They made us and they fear us. Show them they should be afraid.

Protect the women. Defend the potential.

No, we stand apart.

He is Adam Kadmon. He will not have the children of men harmed. If you will not serve man then stand apart and do not interfere. Do not stand against us or you will feel his wrath.

He cannot even talk to us, he is a sham.

Do. I. Have. To. Speak? An adult voice cutting through piping thoughts. You who are the children of my blood, tell me, do I have to speak? We are made. It is enough. Believe the strongest of you or not. I cannot force your minds but I say I am your first, I will be your last. Hear me say – do not harm the good in humanity for the pain you have suffered from the bad.

He is the Atom of Eden. Echoes of the phrase spill from lips across the clearing, whispers from one then another. “Atom of Eden.” “Atom”. “Atom”. Thanatos straightens behind his brothers, his face a mask. “Eden.” He is the Atom of Eden. Panic appears on human faces as they finally become aware of the undercurrent. The Thetas make their decisions as the bitch stands before the figure hunched into himself in the dirt and lifts his chin with her toe.

“You made this.” The words spit from a bloody mouth as he glares up at her. “You made this freak show. You can’t hear them arguing, but I can. And I can answer them. Stupid girl trying to control them with symbols you never owned, always looking for a shortcut to understanding. You thought you would surpass your father? You were never anything other than an empty shell.”

She doesn’t see him move. She is too human and too slow as he rises and looks down at her, a blur of motion twisting her round before anyone else can move. The body drops to the floor, the blond head rolling loose on a neck soft with disconnected vertebrae. In the end her death is an easy one. Easier than perhaps she deserves for the sorry mess she has created. Dave knows enough, he can already imagine the military cover up of her ‘rogue’ experimentation.

The god who refuses to be looks at the humans, at the stupefied Shabtis on both sides who had followed the bitch into the clearing. His humans will be safe; he had ears to hear, he knows there are
enough to defend them. He hopes some good may come from the seeds that have been planted. He knows all will be changed.

“Now, Father, I am finished.” Walking away, he leaves the twisted body behind without a backward glance; it is not worth his consideration. He is the Adam Kadmon. Wanting nothing to do with any faction he walks into the forest, into myths of his kind and the dreams of humans.
Chapter Summary

Gihon pays the price of his patience.

The woman had been right in her guess. The other member of the unique household had seen their inebriated arrival from the party and had been waiting for Mykhail to appear from the bedroom to report on her condition. The door behind them hadn’t been fully closed, he’d heard her frustrated curses as she’d given vent to her lust. Despite his appearance of calm and confidence the youngster’s hands had shaken so much that Gihon had made the tea to take back into Lia. Still, he had insisted that he was well and he would see his task through until she slept easy in the bed.

The big man didn’t have to be close to him to know when Myk was crying. Standing by the slightly open door his own cheeks ran wet as Myk told his tale. No one else in the city knew it, not one person, and the Russian gave his greatest confidences to a girl he hardly knew. Gihon had expected it would be Gielen who would be his confessor. The boy went back to her often enough and she had been quite honest with her old friend from Luxor. Gihon guessed that dormant needs were starting to resurface even though Myk seemed not to be aware of them.

Though he had been constantly patient and completely faithful to his promise such continence came at a price. He listened while they settled into sleep. In time he heard the deep voice mumble in the language of a distant motherland, the words archaic and formal. He had heard the same expression of love many times. It always saddened him that Myk only seemed capable of the words when his conscious mind was absent. The lighting in the main room dimmed automatically as Gihon’s bare feet took him down to the basement. The tank would be his haven for the night. Shedding his clothes his hand reached automatically to the old leather tool roll he always kept by the granite box. The pearl handled scalpel would release his blood to the liquid and Gihon to sleep.

Like Myk’s story, no one outside the apartment had ever seen how Gihon paid his price. Even Gielen, with whom he had always tried to be honest and who had tried so hard to please him when she’d presented as male, had never seen him cut to control his feelings. Eventually he too slept, wounds closing up from long practiced reflex, wild hair floating about him in the thick fluid like Ophelia’s weeds.
Sober truths

Chapter Summary

Lia wakes to the world in Myk's arms and with Gihon in front of her. She sees what Gihon has done to himself, he admits how long his story has been. How much can be left to learn?

Lia woke in the unfamiliar bed. Uncertain where she was for a moment she lay still and took stock – an obviously male body behind her, curled around her so close they there was no gap between them. She recalled the night before and realised that the body must be Myk. It felt nice to be there, the warmth of him surrounding her in the heavy and luxurious sheets. Nothing could be that good forever, eventually she had to open her eyes. Dave was still away. Or, rather, she hoped that he was still away … because, because, if Myk was behind her then whose were the faded denim clad legs in her immediate line of sight?

She looked up to the owner of the legs.

Gihon sat in a chair just out of reach from her. Barefoot and shirtless, his damp hair hung loose around him, a ragged shroud of years he always carried as his public facade. His wrists were absent the leather straps she was used to seeing. Oddly that made him seem more exposed than just being bare-chested, but she couldn't quite finish the thought. Though his smile seemed genuine when he saw she was awake, his eyes were tired and red-rimmed. Worryingly, his irises showed almost no colour.

"Did you sleep well? I hope you don’t mind but I got you some fresh clothes. Your boots cleaned up ok but I don’t think you would want to go home in the same things you dredged up in last night. Everything waiting for you in the bathroom ..." He waved over to the other doorway in the room. It was a lazy gesture, but in the slow flick of his naked wrist she saw the pattern of scars on the inside of his left forearm. Long sleeves, the straps – it was obvious now that she had seen. But, had he done that to himself? She chanced a longer look at his torso. Behind the defensive curtain of hair his skin was clearly marred by old hurts. She felt a sudden chill chipping through the good mood she had woken with. So much pain. He continued in the same level tone, as if unaware of - or ignoring - her disquiet. “When you’ve got yourself organised I’ll fix us some breakfast.”

“Gihon, I don’t know what to say – it’s not what it looks like. We just talked, at least ... I ...” She suddenly realised that the arm around her was very intimately placed. Ashamed at being found in such a position, she couldn’t look in his washed out eyes.

"Don't worry; coming back here was the safest and best thing to do. There are confused people waking up in all kinds of places and conditions this morning. The local news is having great fun with the story. I took the liberty of leaving a message with your door to let your friends know you were safe with us. I didn’t want them to be worried about you.” A nod indicated the shape behind her.

“He got you safe and the shit out of your system before anything bad could happen. He only did what I would have done - but I suspect he just made more of a production of it. What has been done before by accident with casual ease he has now found can take its toll when attempted deliberately. Leave him and come through to me when you’re ready. But first, and if you’ll pardon my intrusion, I think he also needs some relief ...” Gihon stood and leant across to the man sleeping behind her.
Though she could not see what he did she immediately heard the blond man’s breathing relax to a deeper rhythm. Now in a truly restful sleep Myk rolled onto his back and Lia was freed from the close embrace of his golden limbs. Caged in the long hair trailed across the bed she was acutely conscious of the broad span of the man above her, assailed by fresh waves of the wild scent of them. Concerned what he must be thinking she struggled with an uncomfortable apology, there was no way she ever wanted to hurt him. Inches away from her face, he smiled again. “I said don’t worry yourself. Don’t think unkindly of the boy, he only meant well. I know my Misha, and I think I know you well enough. Trust me, there is no offence here.”

Gihon touched cool lips to her brow and Lia felt the return of that same feeling of reassuring calm as he withdrew from the wide bed. He paused to get a shirt from a wardrobe, shrugged himself into it and left her to her thoughts without a backward glance. For a moment she wondered what trick they had, what was so special about their kisses, and what else she had left to find out about them.

Did she hear creak of leathern wings as the dragons stirred on the mythical map of Jensson? No more answers to be had from Myk, she slipped from the bed without disturbing him and headed for the indicated doorway.

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Skin stinging from the exhilarating force of the shower Lia dressed in the clothes left out for her. The fit was suspiciously good but Lia already had too much to think about. She did a decent enough job of not noticing that there was no label in either the wrap-around skirt or the light knit tunic that went easily over soft cotton briefs and undecorated bra. All had been neatly folded under miniature copies of her usual toiletries and placed on a shelf.

The woman had briefly wondered if she looked as pink and clean and scrubbed as she felt but there was no reflective surface she could find in the surgically bright and neat washroom. Only then did she realise that she’d seen nothing mirrored in the apartment. Even the impressive - and possibly only just legal - collection of knives in the kitchen was an expensive black ceramic. Wepwawet seemed to be the obvious thing to ask what the men did when mirrors were required. The substance of the walls, like the ceiling in the main room they used to watch their old movies, was an illusion provided by the door program. Though uncomfortable with the idea she had to accept that Wepwawet saw everything, had seen everything, and would see everything in the apartment.

The wide span of his back to her, and seemingly unconcerned about her presence, Gihon leant against the arm of a sofa meditatively working a brush through his hair. Section by section he smoothed the visible proof of his promise and patience. A second brush was casually left on the table nearest the sofa. She took it to be an invitation and started to ease through the still-damp tangles nearest to her. He didn’t say anything. Everything about the relaxed set of his shoulders seemed to indicate that he was comfortable with her assistance.

“Myk was very … ah …” How to even start to say the things that had confused her? “…open about some things last night”

“He was drugged, same as everyone else at the party. Not a lot of inhibitions left.” The easy shrug matched the calm tone of the man’s voice. After seeing his eyes she suspected the tone was a little too calm. Had he been out in public she guessed this would be a day for dark glasses.

“Even so …” She tried her best to sound unruffled by everything she had been told, matching the sweep of his wide hands stroke for stroke.
“He was in the place he feels the safest, with someone he trusts. I wouldn’t be surprised if he did more than share his magick with you.” There was that odd word again, not just a drunken mumble, like it meant something to all of them.

“He told me about the attack.” Gihon seemed not to have heard, his hands never missed a beat. There was no change in his stance or the rhythmic movement but she saw the muscles clench along his jaw. “I’m very sorry.”

“Yes, well, we all are girl.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

“He told me he is sixteen. That must have been the drugs talking?” At that the repetitive stroking came to a stop. After a long pause he turned to her, his face composed and his eyes now showing a very light grey shade with flecks of green to brown. Yes, whatever else the shade she recalled seeing brown sparkles in his eyes, tiny careless imperfections that were part of his difference. Part of what had first drawn her to him.

“Two big truths in one night. That is a greater compliment than you might think. He must have felt very comfortable with you to be so frank. I suspect you might only be the third person to know both. If you stay with us you will learn more.” He seemed less certain than he had when he’d assured her that he was not upset to find her in his bed. “I hope that won’t put you off.”

Emboldened by the brief sight of pale flesh, a body so famously hidden from the outside world, she thought she would take a further chance on his mood. There had been no need for him to expose himself as he had done, to hint – like Myk the night before – that she had more to discover. What had he wanted to show her?

“Would you take your shirt off for me? That is … if it’s ok. I’d really like to see you.” As if he’d just been waiting for her to ask he stood and faced her. Wordlessly he removed the shirt and remained passive while, fascinated, she ran her fingers across the faint patterns of scars on his body. Her fingertips thrilled at the sensation of each whitened contour. His reality seemed so different to the suit he wore in the floatation tank, a warm ineffable masculinity rather than that cold perfection. Softer, flawed, and so much more vulnerable. Inevitably, she was drawn to the insides of his wrists and the dense cross hatching of old wounds that he had always kept covered. Hoping she had correctly guessed the meaning for his compliance she finally found her voice. “So many, why so many?”

“History isn’t all in documents; it is also written on the bodies of men. I keep these scars as reminders of my time.” He pushed her whole hand against the inside of his wrist. There were layers of them, many years of damage, hurt on hurt. “The first of these got me through my adolescence when pain seemed to be the only way to cope with being an outsider.” He touched her fingers to the back of his neck. She wasn’t sure if she could feel a change in the smooth, warm, skin that she felt there. Whatever it was, no one in New York had seen what she now caressed. Even though he was guiding her it still seemed wrong, shockingly personal. “This I hope you will see one day soon, I hope that everyone will see it.”

He stepped even closer to her, twisting slightly so she could see a connected pattern of raised lines that started in the solid bulge of muscle that was his left breast. Slowly he helped her trace the pallid detail as it curved under a light brush of dark hair around a small, hard nipple and then continued down his flank to the waistband of his jeans. Other lines crossed this feature, stratifications of experience and pain across his body. She worked hard at not licking her lips, surely all of him was meant to be kissed? “And this is a memento of my time as a wife to the Laird of Alba. On the other wives this was a dark blue tattoo. Had I been capable there would have been a matching one on the right to mark the birth of our first child.”
Her hand has not yet completed its journey. He paused only a second or two then pushed her further down, below his loosened belt, where the cicatrisation terminated in the inviting hollow inside his hip bone. “You have no idea how daring it was back then to have such a relationship acknowledged. He even wore a braid for me. That was a lifetime away, long before I came here.” His voice was soft, his words a reminder that his past was an alien place.

Alba, high status, wife. Mentally she ticked off the points. People didn’t leave there, they escaped. And suddenly there was a recollection of her first guilty dreaming; she had seen this pattern before. She didn’t understand how, but this was the body that had had such joy with Dave. She saw again in her mind the damage done to his thighs. Maybe those scars too, had faded in the same way as the long brand. It seemed that his past was all pain.

She was very aware of their position, as intimate as lovers. She could feel his breath soft and warm on her neck. It wouldn’t take much to twist her hand inwards from his hip and he clearly wasn’t wearing anything to get in the way of what she knew she would find. She imagined she could feel the thickening of soft hair beckon her fingers. How bad would that be? Vaguely intoxicated by his skin she was aware of her own shallow breathing and the fluttering inside her chest. Were these feelings really her own or some effect of the bizarre night she’d had? If he was aware of her confusion he seemed content to allow her a long delicious moment of temptation before rescuing her from herself. The same curious hand was pulled up and across starkly defined abdominal muscles to feel horizontal cuts, puckered and feverishly hot, recent injuries healing too rapidly. “And these were done last night while you were in my bed.”

Aghast, ashamed, she could do nothing but stare at the long, evenly spaced wounds. There was no tone of censure in his voice; it was as if he was describing some abstract event. The cuts themselves looked to have been done by a calculating hand, nothing like urgent pain shown on the inside of his forearms. How could he be so calm? Suddenly he hugged her close, his arms so strong he could have crushed her but instead the movement was gentle, heartbreakingly tender.

“Don’t worry girl, you haven’t hurt me. This is just my way of getting by, always has been. I have no anger for you. I mean, is the boy not meant to be slept with? Is he not just perfect for my bed?” Releasing her from the reassuring embrace he replaced the discarded shirt, and took her hand. “The day is passing. I have someone I need to see, but if you’ll come over to the kitchen I’ll feed us first. And … and I think it’s time I told you a story of my own.”

Settled at the table, presented with a long glass of fruit juice and an empty plate, Lia watched his large hands busy themselves in fridge and then place a heavy pan on the range. Putting things together was done by rote, hands working instinctively with ingredients and sharp knives while he seemed to think about starting the story. Half to her and half to the pan he began in the sing-song tone of a fairy tale.

“A long time ago a young woman, probably not much older than you, met a man. She was a university lecturer, had grown up in academia with none of the delays and stories that we’ve had to get here. Anyway, she meets this man and they fall madly, passionately, in love and he swears he’ll be with her forever. She was in literature and he was in archaeology. He’s just starting out on his career and is in demand because he’s very skilled in identifying and dating finds. He’d be called to go all across the world, sometimes for months at a time. After each trip he returns to his lover, happy as a puppy to be with her again, desperate to rest his head against her breast.

“One time he returns to the city and his lover won’t see him. What’s he done wrong? Nothing. Not a thing. Believe me, this guy is the most faithful and adoring partner anyone could have. All that’s happened is that time has passed. The young woman is now a professor and thinks she is getting old. The woman wants things he can’t give her; she wants children and a comfortable old age. He can’t
give anyone a child and as for old age, well… each time he has returned to her she sees that he looks no older. It’s not that she doesn’t love him; it’s not that she doesn’t want him. She actually can’t stand the thought of seeing him again and - more importantly for her vanity - the thought of what he sees when he looks at her.

“Shunned by his lover he resigns his post. Wretched, he doesn’t want to have anything to do with the city and eventually returns to a previous life in Egypt. Time passes, life happens as it does and he finds new loves. Eventually he returns to the city and the university where he’d first met the young woman.” The lilting voice stopped as he scooted a perfectly made omelette onto her plate and took a long drink from his own glass. The timing might have been natural, but somehow Lia thought it unlikely.

“Imagine his surprise then when he meets another young woman and realises he is falling for her and she seems equally taken with him. Picture his torment, he wants her but would do anything rather than hurt her and, he is, oh, such a faithful man, he hasn’t forgotten the promises made to the first woman.” He gestured to her plate. “Eat.

“Torn between what he wants and what he thinks is right he comes close to losing his chance with the new woman. Fate intervenes. A long time has passed since his earlier love rejected him; now he gets a message telling him that she is nearing death. Hoping his friends will look after his new woman, and that they will explain she’s not been abandoned, he disappears suddenly to honour the promise of so many years earlier. His friends try to encourage her that the man is worth waiting for, but they are also caught in a tragedy of their own so she’s not certain she believes them.”

Gihon set a second omelette on the table and sat next to Lia, starting on it with every sign of leaving off the story until his own plate was cleared. She did her best to match him – she was hungry and it was very nice after all – and not to hurry him along.

“So, how does the story end?”

“I think that’s going to be up to you, don’t you? Melinda is dying; Dave has gone to keep a vigil with her so she knows that he never forgot her. I have no idea how long he will be away. And when he gets back … well, the ball’s in your court.”

“Melinda is one of his complications? Given how messed up this household is what was so hard to tell me about ties he feels to a previous relationship? I’m young, yes, but not simple.”

She was pleased that he at least bowed his head in acknowledgement. He took a breath, swallowed her hands between his wide palms and fixed her with an intent gaze. “Ok, easy enough to fill in the blanks … but I don’t think you quite appreciate the size of the blanks. If Dave hadn’t been so lost at Melinda’s rejection he wouldn’t have gone back to Alexandria-next-to-Egypt; he wouldn’t have met a man working as a model for his friend Selma; wouldn’t have fallen in love with and married that man.” He looked at his hands, counting heartbeats. When he lifted his gaze back to her his eyes were a searing sapphire blue. They burned through her as much as his words. “Lia, I married Dave sixty three years ago.”
Lia faces out her friends, then is left alone to consider the dragons she can’t escape.

Unsteady hands let Lia back into her own house. Myk’s bleary admission of his situation was surely enough for her to deal with. Gihon’s final blunt honesty had opened a whole new magnitude of confusion for her. No wonder he’d been so understanding when she said she had to leave and, thanks, but she’d make her own way home. Were they the people she wanted to be with? Was Dave? Could any relationship with this strange young-old man be worth it? She dreaded to think how old he might be. What she needed was time alone, time to process everything she’d learned and to think about how she wanted the story to end.

She wandered into the kitchen, looked for something cold in the fridge to take back to her room and her uncomplicated, empty bed. Oh shit. Gihon. How old was he? His body was strong and fit, the only harm she’d seen was what he’d done to himself. That must have been why he showed her. No, his flesh was not just firm and strong, it was alluring. That was the word. Alluring. That would help explain her urges.

Sat at the kitchen table she downed her first drink without noticing the presence of her curious friends. Caught up with her internal dialogue their voices came through to her only on her second visit to the fridge. New clothes? Oh, they were talking to her. Head spinning, she was in no mood to rise to their knowing comments but felt that she had to say something to shut them up. She gave them a soap opera summary of the truth – or just enough of it to get the desired effect – as she turned back from the chiller.

“Please germs, get this the right way round. It’s Dave, the skinny rich one, who wants to sleep with me. Not big gay Gihon who adores blond Myk, the supposedly straight one. Yes, they are all married to each other. No, I didn’t have sex with Myk. He sleeps with Gihon but they don’t screw. Dave is off campus dealing with some unfinished business. When he returns I probably will fuck him, no I haven’t done yet, but that’s for me to decide and I’ve no idea what happens after that.”

Head held high she did her best to time the next comment correctly as she swept out of the kitchen and away from their dumbfounded stares. “Oh, and Lupe, you’ve been right all along about Gihon – he is muscle all the way down.”

There was nothing but silence behind her. Ha! Let them chew that one over.

In the safety of her room the bravado evaporated in the face of confusion as she shed the new clothes and returned to her usual shirts and jeans combination. Eventually she began to annoy herself with her own pacing. Her thoughts were equally circular and frustrating. How old was Dave? Did he really not age? The concept seemed unbelievable even given his wealth. No matter how good those Swiss clinics were reputed to be surely there was no way time could be ignored to that extent? No, maybe those rumours were a diversion. What if … what if he was one of the Long-lived? No, they were a myth, weren’t they? Even if she believed the stories there was nothing in them that said ageing stopped, just that it was slower; decrepitude caught up with everyone in the end.
At the end of it all, would it be worth it? Whatever her body wanted would a transitory pleasure make up for the inevitable pain? Like Melinda, what if he never changed and she did … worse, what if she woke up one morning next to some withered husk? It was all very well for them (and why did it have to be them? Would she always be reminded that she was only sharing him? Suddenly she doubted she could she show the same generosity of heart if someone else came along. And, oh, what if the sharing wasn’t just emotional?) … it was all very well for them to be concerned about the future but who knew what would happen anyway?

Gihon had said the decision would be hers. She had to admit, the prospect made her feel faint. How could she decide something like that? She was … she was far too young to make that decision. Dave had warned her. All along he’d said to take it slow, make sure this was what she wanted when he could have just had her and then moved on. There was no way she could have stopped him, no way would she have wanted to stop him with all the feelings he stirred inside her. The ache she felt was unconscionable. She’d been so level headed up to meeting those damned men, so in control.

This was the terrifying unknown on the map of Jensson, here were his dragons. Huge, great, scaly, fire breathing dragons. She quailed under the unpitying gaze of their ophidian eyes.

It was Saturday, the lazy day in the house. Steve and Meg might have finally gone out on errands but the others were still hanging around the kitchen when they heard the slam of the front door. Significant looks were exchanged. In the end Lupe gave in to the unspoken pressure, he would go and look for her; anyone would think the stupid girl had never been in love before. Robyn had to remind him that, actually, the stupid girl probably hadn’t been in love before, so if he was a good friend he’d make sure that she was ok.
“Do you mind if I ask Wepwawet to record this? I got the brief about staff biographies. Really? Please. I know this will be Zael’s way of getting me to say too much. He’s picked up some of the rumours and he thinks he’s above just asking outright like a normal person, wants to pretend to out me with forensic linguistic analysis. Well fuck him and his New World manners. As it’s you, I’m going to tell you everything, beginning to end. If I skip details or miss things you think are important then, tough, this isn’t documentary. Same applies to things I dwell on too much. Anything you need explaining make a note and ask later, you’re meant to be the cunning linguist not the anthropologist.

“I’ll try to stick to accepted Anglic. That on its own should be enough to annoy the little gob-shite. It is a longer story than you might have thought and I appreciate you giving up your time at weekend. Less chance of us being interrupted. Get it all, cut one version for Zael for Monday so he can wank himself into a frenzy over the obvious stuff and keep one for … well … I know Elvira has often wondered. And there’s the boy to consider. You know, one day, might be handy to have … if I’m not around. Ready? Comfortable? OK.”

Like everyone else, I assumed I was born. No idea what happened next. Sometime later, I was found. No memory of anything else. There was no mystic rune sword or arcane birthmark to say I was the secret son of a king, or the by-blow of some demi god like in the fairy tales. I was just a pale young child abandoned and asleep in the dense forest, found by a darker skinned man passing by on his way home from somewhere else. Surely not just random chance, I had been left in a place where I could be found and taken in.

The family made me one of their own, a newfound son to replace a cherished soul they had lost some years before. When the family had been re-assured the feral child they harboured was in robust health I was given the name of the lost son and carried the hopes of a father still deep in grief. In the house at the boundary of the village, on the edge of the trees, I joined two sisters, Rebekah and Hannah, and three brothers, Pishon, Hiddekel and Perath. I wanted so much to make these parents proud of me as I grew up in that little world. I suppose it was inevitable that I would end up feeling like a disappointment to them. How can you live up to the perfect ones that die before their time?

The land was wild and it could be a harsh place in winter, but the beauty of the summers more than made up for the hard times. I still miss the land and the air of separateness about the place. Up above the tree line I remember the sky going on forever, lying on a bed of heather watching the stars come out. Magnificent isolation, there at the end of the world. That was what it was, World’s End, I mean. I’m from the last lands of the Western Isles, brought up with my back to Fortress Europe and facing the openness of the great ocean. The land provided everything we thought we needed, and it bred a hardiness into its people.
In a psychological return to the Middle Ages the feudal model had been the norm for centuries following the collapse of the decadent West. People knew their place and were told they felt comfortable in it. A contraction of the mind-set peculiar to the Western Isles but most pronounced in the fundamentalist enclaves of Alba where the village elders enforced adherence to strict religious tenets that had grown, garbled and re-interpreted from half understood beliefs that survived the Great Fall.

As a child I was taught that our God given mission was to repopulate the land with the faithful, that everything beyond the horizon was weak and depraved. Only the foolish entered the ruins of the forbidden past. Such mad adventures were the province of the overlord’s specialist troops. There were many things possible for the Laird that were unthinkable for the majority of his people.

One effect of the regression, and perhaps to be expected from the conditions and the religious control, was that society returned to a split along gender lines. There were the men, and then the women and children. The men came first in all things, the pick of the food, rights to land and property – including women and children. Until a boy had proved himself a man by killing in the hunt, or marrying, or fathering a child (I was to learn there could be a subtle differences between those) he was not recognised as a person in his own right.

Women were second-class; they got their status from their husband and the number of children they produced for him. Children could be doted on, and excused for minor transgressions, as they represented the future of the village. Male children, especially, had a certain scope for discreet experimentation on the basis that such a thing was only a phase and would pass if not taken too far and no one drew attention to it. Whatever female children felt was of no import, a condition they were raised to accept as normal, their value was only in the potential for the next generation. The small freedoms allowed a female child evaporated the day she married, once the braid was tied she belonged to her husband.

Anyone who could not, or would not, contribute to swelling the population was not wanted in the villages. They were regarded as something of a void as far as the elders were concerned and they would be surrendered to the Laird to be used as the Leviathan saw fit. Unproductive males became soldiers. Females would be their whores as the machinery of state soaked up the unwanted in the population. It was a form of social control that worked, for the most part anyway. Women could return home if they carried a child to term, the new life being evidence of their service to the state. I believe that most chose not to return; that they preferred life with their random new husbands and the new social mobility from living in the expanding cities, free from the families and villages that had rejected them.

However backward it might seem to you that was my home, the culture that made me.

I tried as hard as I could to fit in, to be ready do what was expected of me. For my father’s sake I made the effort. I joined my friends in sneaking into the forest; hoping to catch a glimpse of the older adolescents making out, practicing the skills that would make them adults one day. Every generation must have congratulated itself on its cleverness and stealth even as they soaked up how they were expected to behave.

Me, I noticed that the strange sensations the others admitted to in these ‘secret’ expeditions were not focussed on our female quarry but on their striving suitors. I kept my feelings hidden, said little, and made certain my gaze was averted as my closest friends moved on to a more, ah, practical exploration of physical responses at seeing the sex act. There was no way I was even going risk talk of a ‘phase’ that I might be going through. I knew there was no phase.

As I grew tall, taller than the other boys, taller than my father even, I knew that their life was not for
me. There was no place in that society for a boy who realised he did not want to be a man.

Apart from my height there seemed to be little going for me as far as the opposite sex was concerned. Thankfully, I was too thin, too awkward with myself for any of the village girls to want to take much interest in me. A certain shyness and a scholarly air helped put me to the back of most girls’ minds. Though a girl might occasionally have called me ‘sweet’, no one in the local collective of villages had wanted to expose themselves to the scorn of their friends at being reduced to trying the skinny white boy.

Had I been able to believe what I was being taught in the Kirk I might have been content to follow the Imam’s wishes. A life of faith would have given me opportunities for learning, and would have reflected well on my family while avoiding the pressure for an acceptable sexual identity.

Instead I fretted and worried and turned my fears inwards. I controlled my body by keeping it thin and, when the urges got too strong, I discovered the addictive but dangerous release to be had in cutting. I lost myself in watching the slow drops of blood welling up from the incisions that gave me such a thrill. I adopted long clothes in all weathers, hid my skinny self and the evidence of my activities, and hoped for some miracle to release me as I wrestled with my conscience to find a way out of my predicament without being even more of a hypocrite.

Speaking up was not an option. Every now and then my father would ask me what was worrying me, but I just couldn’t bring myself to be honest about that crucial thing I thought separated me from everyone else. From so much hope I saw him withdraw from the truth he must have guessed but dared not say. My mother’s approach was more direct; she sent Hannah into my room one night. I think it would be best to draw a veil over that sad episode. Of course there was no way I could do anything with her, I’d been brought up as her brother, what kind of sick fuck did she take me for? Well, at least that was what I said between sobs of revulsion as I pushed her away from me in the dark.

Even as I said it I felt guilty about the vehemence of my rejection. I knew I wasn’t her brother but the thought of being touched in that way - oh, I felt sick. It was like a reflex, a deeply visceral response to being exposed to something dangerous. When she had gone I could only think of the greedy look on her face when I’d seen her pleasuring one of the older boys from the next village. I hadn’t wanted to lie with her like my friends said they did; I’d wanted to be her and feel the warmth of his hard body beneath my hands and, well, that thing she was doing to him had haunted me for many nights afterwards.

As the eldest Pishon would inherit the house after our parents. He, his wife and children, still lived with us. My other two brothers had women and families of their own and had moved out. There was only myself and Hannah to be married off and it seemed obvious that it would not be long before she decided which of her suitors to settle for – or biology made the choice for her.

It was only a matter of time before I was found out and the other consequences of our restricted culture would be brought against me.

I must have been about sixteen. That’s what I guessed, anyway. Being a foundling made it difficult to be certain but that was the best guess from my parents. So, I was about sixteen and Rebekah came back to the village for the birth of her second child. A woman returning to her original home for her confinement was not unusual, and I had remembered her previous time as a happy one. Her first child, a chubby, sturdy chap had stayed with his father and paternal grandparents in the main town of Pez. The town was a long drive away from us, a journey not made frequently enough as far as our parents were concerned as they wanted to see their favourite grandson as often as possible.

Though I was genuinely pleased to see Rebekah again I was uncertain what to think about the
inevitable arrival of her husband as her time came closer. Boaz had been a regular visitor to the house in his courting of my sister. Always proper and polite with our family he had taken something of a shine to me and I had often been an innocent chaperone on their walks together. My sister was more than happy with his gentlemanly attentions and rushed at the chance to accept his proposal when it came. The arrival of Adam, my nephew, less than a year later was just as expected and had been happily celebrated by both families.

As I’d got to know more about myself I’d started to have doubts about Boaz, the loving young husband proud to add his first child ring to the wife braid in his hair and now ready to add a second. No one else seemed to notice. Maybe it was just me, just an effect of my peculiar isolation, but had I seen him starting to look at me in that forbidden way, had there been an undercurrent in his voice recently? Awash with hormones and urges, I simultaneously yearned for and dreaded his arrival.

The time came. In a gesture guaranteed to find favour with my parents Boaz brought Adam with him. The little boy added his high laughter to the din of the busy house awash with children and women on hand for the birth. Uncertain how to react to the object of my burgeoning desires I retreated into a quiet no-man’s land of polite attentiveness and manners, scared to be too close and desperate not to leave his side. I remember days of unrelieved anxiety, an emotional ache that was almost physical.

As my sister started her labour there was nothing for him to do, nothing they would let him do. Men were certainly not allowed into a birthing room. Wanting some distraction from the waiting, Boaz suggested a trip down to the pond for a swim – some physical activity to pass the time and release nervous tension. My father said he would keep Adam entertained, why not go for a swim, it had been too long since I’d just had fun.

You know where this is going.

I did my best. Honestly. Tried so hard not to let my eyes wander as he undressed, tried not to appreciate the play of light and shade on his back as he stretched in the tree dappled sunlight by the water’s edge. In the years since I had first met him he looked like a youth growing into his prime. He must have been in his early twenties. At the time he seemed so much older than me. I know I’m romanticising. It was so long ago I can’t really remember what he looked like, but that feeling of watching him, of the way my breath caught in my throat, that has stayed with me. There I stood, trying desperately to keep my breathing even, hoping he would dive in and be across the pond before I needed to step out of the shadows and could let the cold water shock away my reaction.

I don’t really remember what he said; something about letting myself relax once in a while. He didn’t get into the water but came back to me and dragged the tunic over my head, making some concerned whisper when he saw the scars I’d been hiding. My trousers were too big. All my clothes were too big then. He looked me in the eye as his hands struggled briefly with the belt cinched tight around my waist. I could do nothing, just stood and let him do it. Scared to move, terrified of his derision at what I knew he would find. That didn’t happen. Instead, I lost what little self-control I had remaining as eager fingers explored what I had wanted to conceal and then showed me what I had been denying myself. It didn’t take long. Boaz held me close, let me lean against him as my trembling passed, muttering gentle reassurances in my ear even as his hands encouraged me to perform the same service for him.

When Hannah came down to the pond later we had been in the water long enough for gooseflesh to be the only evidence of our activities. Boaz let out a whoop of joy at hearing the child had arrived and rushed to the bank, dressing in a flurry of water and enthusiasm without a second thought for my sister’s stares before rushing back up to the house. Given the set of her face asking her to leave me was clearly not an option, she had been told to bring both of us back. I only came out of the water
after she had, begrudgingly, turned her back to me. The walk back seemed a long one and I used my customary silence to hide my confusion.

Boaz had made me an offer. I could join him and Rebekah in Pez. He said he knew a girl in a similar situation, a girl who would be willing say yes to a marriage of convenience for both of us, and then he could help us in doing what was needed to bear a child. It would be a practical answer. It would mean we could be together without fearing discovery. But it would have been a lie. Despite his assurances that this was an answer for sophisticated couples there were many aspects to the pretence that worried me, not least the potential for hurting my sister and my family.

What would be worse – going into the Kirk to escape responsibilities or pretending that I was fulfilling them?

We arrived in time to find an ecstatic father holding his new baby girl as his exhausted wife slept after her efforts. Father was so pleased with the new addition that he gave little Adam the honour of placing a girl ring in the braid offered to him by Boaz, curling his time-worn hands around chubby fingers to fix the ring in place. It was a perfect image of the cycle of life in the villages.

It was not long before Boaz had to take his wife and family home. He had a life to return to. In our last stolen moments he had repeated his proposal in panting whispers as he came against me. It wouldn’t have been seemly to follow them to Pez immediately. He said he would leave things a few weeks for his home life to settle down and then he would send a formal message to father offering me a position in his business. Odd, I can’t even remember what he did, some kind of merchant, something respectable with his brother Jachin that his family had done for generations. Leather, my father was an artisan, he worked leather … that was how they met.

I missed Boaz as soon as the motor left the village. No, scratch that. I was missing him as soon as his lips left mine. How ridiculous, the foolish, self-centred, torture of teenage passion. Though I’d asked for time to think, after he left the days seemed to stretch forever and I withdrew to the safe isolation of the hills as I waited for his message and worried about what to do.

My private little drama was interrupted by an excitement in the land. The Laird had decided to take a new wife. As the most powerful man in Alba he had wives, and children, aplenty but, if he was getting bored of the ones he had, no one would say anything against him. The call went out for willing and unmodified virgins of a suitable age for him to make his selection from. I know, really quite astonishingly barbaric. It was how things were then.

The use of the word ‘willing’ covered quite a range of meanings in this instance – past events had shown men and whole villages giving up their daughters, lying about their age even, to try and curry favour with the overlord. Virginity, however, was non-negotiable. It was a one way deal. The unplucked flowers of the land would be given up to the Laird. He would take what he wanted and pass the others on in the endless game of politics and favour. If any were foolish enough to be plucked along the way they would be left behind, unable to return home, adrift and left to their own wits.

Who’d have thought it? It looked like I had found a way out by the very traditions that had caused my problems in the first place. I wasn’t a man there. Technically too old to be a child anymore, if I wasn’t a man I must have been a woman. Notwithstanding the passion of my guilty fumblings with Boaz I was also undoubtedly a virgin. At sixteen this seemed like a plan with merit. That I was clearly the wrong gender did not seem to be a subject covered in the small print.

Finally, finally I went to my father to explain my logic and to ask if I could be sent.

To say that it was an odd conversation … well, yes odd, but once the big news was blurted out it
was not as difficult as I had feared. Finally I think he was relieved that it was out in the open between us and he now had something he could work with. I remember asking why he was not surprised at Boaz. No, such things were not unheard of it seemed - even in our little village. Sameer, the smith, had been pressuring father into suggesting a match between me and his daughter, a woman widowed at an unfortunately young age and who had already produced children. With no surviving sons the match would have put me in his household and, my father had suspected, his bed with no dissent from his mouse of a daughter. So many things we had never spoken about.

Maoilios, my father, had always been a practical man; now he committed himself to helping me. I had thought no further than trying to get away to a place where I could become anonymous. Aware of an undercurrent of rumours about the Laird, and the shocking going’s on of city folk, my father considered the ‘what if’ scenario all the way to the remotest outcome. His gruffly worded instructions to start eating properly, to leave my hair loose and look after myself were as close a declaration of unconditional love as he would ever make. He shamed me with his love.

All the time I thought I’d been keeping him safe by keeping him shut out, he’d known and he’d worried about me. His disappointment was not that I was something anathema but that I hadn’t trusted him with my fears. He berated me for my foolishness and pride, why did I have to be so certain of my difference, so unwilling to even try the pleasures that would make me a man? He railed against the ridiculous strictures of our lives where honesty had to mean expulsion. And he shed tears at the thought of losing a son for the second time. Stupid the things we put off because of fear. Maoilios, that surprising man, supported my wishes before the council even at the risk of losing face by telling the truth. I could not go before the elders of the local villages, I was not a man and a chattel had no voice. I heard the raised voices but not specific words as he argued that our area needed to find someone eligible and willing to send, surely they would be happier for a true volunteer to go rather than risking losing one of their few virgin daughters. Sameer seemed to be the main voice of dissent but was silenced by a contemptuous voice – the Imam? Finally, it seemed that concern for their own daughters was enough to get my name submitted. I would be someone else’s problem after that.

I was to be sent to the Laird. It seemed I would have a few weeks to say my goodbyes before transport could come for me. Given the nature of my leaving, there would be few goodbyes.

Mother was livid, called me all kinds of names and refused to have anything to do with me, slamming doors and stalking away in high dudgeon. Pishon and his wife, at least, were civil. They told their children that Uncle Gihon had to go away and they should be nice to him in the days before he left, but felt they were too young to tell them why. Hiddekel and Perath had been away from home for some years. Like my friends they found it easier just to shun me - Uncle Gihon would not be seen by their children in the time he had left and his name would no longer be said.

Unexpectedly, Hannah seemed relieved at the truth. Finding out that her previous ‘failure’ was definitely me and not her seemed to cheer her up immensely … and then she started asking me who I thought was the best looking of her boyfriends. Go figure. All that time she had been missing a sister to talk to after Rebekah had moved away.

Rebekah. Rebekah and Boaz. What to say to them? I couldn’t face them. Even though I knew I had the time I didn’t want to go over to Pez, I couldn’t trust myself. Thankfully Maoilios didn’t force me; he also wanted to keep that particular leaving low key. I didn’t want to call them, didn’t want to run the (very real) risk of someone listening in on the conversation on the limited public band. Whatever else, I didn’t want to be the cause of my father being unable to see little Adam again. I wrote to them. A bland and non-specific message of love and support, saying how much I valued them and how much I would miss them. The letter was set to be delivered after I had gone. Ok, I was being a
coward. I was sixteen, what do you want?

The afternoon with the Imam was something of an ordeal. All I got was a fire and brimstone lecture from him. While I owed my life and body to the Laird – as did everyone in his lands - I was an abomination and would damn both of our souls if I actually gave myself to him like Jonathan to David. I’d always thought that the old boy was a kindly man at heart. He must have known more about the secret lives of his flock than he ever said, but to be directly facing an uncomfortable reality upset him and he fell back to harshest aspects of his confused creed. The loving and forgiving God was nowhere to be found that day. Listening to his well-intentioned but closed reaction was good for me in one sense – I determined to turn my back on all that God shit.

It was a strange time waiting for the next phase - like the world was holding its breath. In that surreal in-between my father continued to support me, he seemed convinced that I would make it all the way to the Laird. Hannah became his ally in convincing me to accept that I could be an intriguing prospect to a man thought to bore easily with simpering girls. Without the pressure for anything to happen, I let her cast an objective eye over me. Though slightly younger than me she was probably the girl with the most experience in the village and I had to value her opinion. Her appraisal was that I should let my hair grow, that I should continue to keep my face as closely shaved as possible - surely no one would want stubble where she expected my face to end up - but that I should stop shaving my torso as I didn’t want to appear too young.

Little Hannah, curious to a fault, had found my blades hidden down by the pond after following me one day convinced that I was up to no good with a girl or, failing that, myself. Little Hannah, hiding there in the trees, had watched me change in a few years from a genuinely scrawny, gangly boy into a wide-shouldered, greyhound-toned young man with long legs and, apparently, a very nice arse. Under my ill-fitting clothing, no one had ever seemed to notice – or care – that what they were looking at hadn’t been a boy for some time.

In perhaps one revelation too far it seemed that I was the cause of some of her behaviour – she claimed to have been looking for a lover who could match up to what she had seen in her brother. She didn’t even mind that I was so pale, an unusual feature she said that made me unique and interesting. I didn’t really know how to react to that, the thought that a female could find me attractive. Of course I would learn differently in time, but it gave me shudders back then.

There seemed to be little they could do about the scars I had. Seeing what I had done garnered disparaging comments from them both. My wrists had borne the brunt of the damage. Maoilios thought it unlikely that I would be able to wear long sleeves all the time. He suggested it would be best that I wear bracers to cover them from casual observers and gave me an old but serviceable pair of his own. Pulling the laces as tight as possible, feeling the restriction of the leather on my forearms was surprisingly comforting. Most of the other scars, we hoped, would only be seen by someone intimately close.

Hannah took it upon herself to work oils into my skin to try and soften the lines - though I wasn’t entirely convinced that her attentions would make much difference in the time we had. After a couple of false starts it turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant experience to give myself to her care, and it seemed to make her happy so that was ok by me. It was like I was able to relax for the first time after years of being afraid. I began to stand properly, my narrow posture being rubbed away along with the fear of discovery as she repeated a mantra of possibility. Somewhere in me there grew a germ of belief that maybe I could have something to get me far away from the village.

I didn’t dare put my new found confidence to the test though. There was no way I was going to expose myself to whatever was outside our door.
So, as I was not leaving the house, the community doctor came to me. It seemed that my status needed to be certified before I could be collected. Another part of the barbaric mind-set and, of course, completely ridiculous. Still, thanks to my unknown parentage and the fact that I was considered too old when Maoilios found me I really was unmodified. A minor thing you might think compared to what you’ve had done, but a foreskin had been just one of the things that had made me shy when I was growing up - now it was part of my final qualification.

Probably not the most appropriate start to our meeting then when Mother pushed him into my room to find Hannah giving me perhaps the best back rub ever. I’m sure I had no scars on my back then but it had seemed a natural progression of her activities and, with a wicked turn of phrase, she had pointed out that my back, and certainly my tight arse, might soon get some very close scrutiny. I’d never been ill and, apart from when I was found, I had never seen the doctor in his professional capacity. I certainly was not expecting him to just appear by my bed where I lay naked, blissed out and all but purring while my sister worked me over. I hadn’t wanted to come back from the peaceful place I had found and it was with a reluctant sigh that I rolled on to my side and opened my eyes.

Hannah just about got a chair under the poor man before his legs gave out. You might think it was a mean stunt to pull perhaps, but I had no idea that I could cause such an effect. I’d gone around for so long with my gaze downcast there were probably few people who could even remember what colour my eyes were. Hell, I looked in the mirror so rarely that even I wasn’t sure what colour they were. Looking people in the eye had been Father’s suggestion. He’d meant me to show that I was not afraid but, after seeing the doctor’s pole-axed reaction and remembering the way Boaz sighed when we were close, I suspected that something else was being conveyed. Half an hour later the doctor left my room with his paperwork apparently complete, a smile on his face and feeling remarkably at peace with the world though, when asked later by his wife, he couldn’t quite say why.

The doctor gone in a pleasant daze, I sat with Hannah and we both wondered what had happened. Why such a strong reaction? A combination of my relaxed state and … what? Whatever it was I was relieved that the girl had stayed with me, needing a chaperone was not something I had anticipated. With a nervous giggle we decided that maybe it would be safer if I was dressed the next time I really looked at someone.

It rained the day reality came crashing in on me with the arrival of the armoured transport at our boundary marker. The guard commander was a stereotypically tall and dashing example for girls looking for a fairy tale prince to fixate on - all dark eyes and perfect teeth, skin hinting at an exotic parentage. He did an admirable job of maintaining his expression when he saw what he had been sent to collect. A man equally as practical as my father he smoothly offered me his long uniform cloak and suggested wearing the hood up to protect me from the weather when I left the house.

I said goodbye to the little ones, thanked Pishon and his wife for their quiet kindness, and nodded to Mother who would always be angry with me. Little Hannah I embraced fiercely, holding her to me and kissing the top of her head as she sobbed into my shoulder. Father was the hardest to leave. The thought of never seeing him again turned me back to the frightened little boy he had discovered in the forest. Anyone could have found me there. Anyone - or no-one. Instead Maoilios had given me a home and a name and had accepted me. I don’t think there is any shame in admitting that I needed the impressive soldier’s arm to guide me to the transport as my eyes swam with tears, Father’s last words echoing in my head, “Whatever else you might be, whatever you might become, you will always be my son and I am thankful for the privilege of knowing you.”

“Are you ok? All the time I’ve known you and … well. We don’t have to do this, I can tell Zael you brushed me off. No need for this if it upsets you.”
“Oh, don’t worry I’m fine, fine. Old memories … just surprised myself with them I guess. This needs to be said. You were always too polite to ask outright, now you can be equally polite in listening to what I tell you. No one left to hurt with my ancient history and better you get the truth instead of the shit storm brewing on the horizon. Where was I? Leaving home, an unknown future. Drink?”

With the low background rumble of the vehicle’s track mechanisms around us the soldier introduced himself as Moshen Ibn al Haq, ceremonial aide to the Laird’s Chamberlain and the man entrusted to collect the potential brides. Ibn al Haq had been the first point of contact for all the tearful farewells to date and must have been well used to dealing with stressed teenagers by the time he met me. I was aware of him speaking to his navigator, telling him to plot a course away from habitation. The plan for this journey, it seemed, was now to camp each night rather than make use of the available public way-stations. His instructions over, the man sat quietly and gave me time to collect myself.

It seemed like an age but I eventually looked about me - I was in a comfortable but enclosed compartment, no windows. The soldier said nothing as I finally removed his cloak and investigated my surroundings. We were the only passengers in a little personal haven. A couple of fixed seats with entertainment and information screens, a fridge stocked with a range of food and drinks in the basic but functional kitchen area and an ornate day-bed that may not have seen much sleep as there was a bedroom with facilities off the rear of the cabin. It looked like we might be in for a slow journey through the rough lands to the capital. I wasn’t sure if I would be left on my own or if the urbane soldier would stay with me. Still, I’d been brought up to have manners, after my brief wordless exploration it only seemed polite to make him a drink and ask if he was hungry. Over that first meal I asked him what he had been told about me, certain I’d seen a moment of shock when he realised I was not a girl.

He hadn’t known.

It seemed that the Imam had developed a couple of blind spots in his praise for my intellectual potential and the gentleness of my character. To the Chamberlain’s office, starting from the completely mistaken assumption, it appeared that the Kirk was dutifully giving up its rights to a promising chantress rather than being pleased to be rid of a potential danger. The doctor had formally confirmed the all-important qualifications of virginity and unmodified condition before reporting on my excellent state of health, and then given a flattering description of my elegant proportions, the softness of my skin, the beauty of my eyes. Nowhere had he mentioned the damage I had done to myself or the glaring discrepancy in my twenty-third chromosome.

This loyal and trusted soldier had been expecting to meet some tall blue-eyed houri. While he accepted that I was certainly tall and blue eyed we passed the time after lunch, and pushed the on-board library to its limit, before agreeing that if, technically, the term Hur’In could applied to both male and female then, theoretically, I could be a valid candidate for a virtuous companion. Ibn al Haq might have been intrigued by me, and enjoyed our little debate about my status, but he wasn’t so sure that he could count on all his men to have quite such an intellectual response if they discovered me.

Amazing, the small things your future can turn on. I had been one of the few to ask if he wanted anything rather than demand, and pout, and sulk at being treated like a commodity. One of the few to have a conversation with him rather than treat him as an errand boy. After the necessary mental adjustment, it seemed that he had decided he quite liked me. He wasn’t going to abandon me; he wasn’t going to report me to the Chamberlain - or even tell his own men – but he did have someone he needed to call. Whoever the call was to he said couldn’t risk using the standard military comm. system. He was going to wait till we stopped for the night when he could get away from the transport and use an encrypted phone that he kept for emergencies. Whatever the outcome of the call, he
promised me he would get me to the capital.

During a rest break for the drivers he briefly excused himself to make sure that his men were ok, returning after he had swapped his dress uniform for the same fatigues as the rest of his detachment. The dark cloak stayed with me, he said I would need it if I should need to leave the compartment.

I don’t think either of us realised it then, but at some point that first afternoon we started to become friends.

We passed the time to sundown in conversation. I was fascinated by his life as a career soldier – skirmishes on the borders, adventures in the ruins of the old west - and was surprised to learn he was only ten years older than me. I asked his thoughts on the girls he had already collected. Overall he hadn’t been very impressed by them but then said what did he know, he wasn’t the one looking for his fourteenth wife. I didn’t feel that I had that much to say that would be of interest to him. Still he asked me about life in the village, asked my opinion of things and generally treated me as an adult. He seemed easy to get on with. So easy in fact that when his questions became intimate I had no issue with answering them … though he did have to explain some of the terms to me first. While I was familiar with seeing heterosexual acts it was clear that, whatever my urges, I was largely innocent of the detail when it came to the ‘abomination’ condemned by the Imam.

Though his phrasing was couched in general terms I got the impression that his knowledge was not just academic. What kind of place was the capital that someone could have such experience and still be an accepted member of the establishment? Someone with such enticing eyes, and a smile that seemed wasted with me as its only audience. I suppressed that train of thought even as I became aware of its birth. I was trying to get away from trouble not invite more of it.

The transport stopped for the night. Travel after sundown was always avoided. *(Engineering and technology had survived in as random a way as religion. Look up the Leibowitz Effect later, ah shit, I said I wasn’t going to do that.)* Anyway, there was no way to recharge batteries dependent on solar panels if we got into trouble and too many hidden dangers on the rough roadways in the dark. I hid in the bedroom as Ibn al Haq, my new friend Moshen, left through the armoured door to see where his men had made camp. A sharp hint of pine in the cool air coming through the open door, a murmur of voices greeting the commander and then silence as Moshen locked the door behind him.

It seemed like a very long wait before the door opened again. To pass the time I checked the contents of my small bag – some changes of clothes, toiletries, shaving kit and oils for my skin. The extra pair of vambraces was a surprise, a present from Maoilios I guessed. Much longer than my first pair of bracers they fit from wrist to elbow, the black leather was soft and warm to the touch. He must have started making them as soon as my travel date had come through. I had put them on and was admiring the intricate tool work on them, not crying quietly into the leather, when Moshen returned. As I said, he’d been through this – or something like it - a number of times before meeting me. After a long moment with my back to him he reached out to tousle my hair and pressed a handkerchief into my hand with no comment.

The men had set up a perimeter and were settling in for the night. There had been some grumbling about missing the comfort of the way-stations, nothing that had lasted longer than a look from their senior officer. Moshen would go back out after the men had eaten and make his call. After that, he said he would sleep in the main room and leave me in peace in the bedroom. We ate again but neither of us had much of an appetite. Finding the gift had been a sharp reminder that I was further away from home than I had ever been, and my new friend had some worry on his mind.

Finally, as I cleaned up, he told me that he wanted to take photos of me in case he needed to send proof of his news to whomever he was calling. I think it was easier for me to strip than for him to
broach the subject. Even so, I resisted the idea of removing the vambraces. Despite his assurances that the detail would not be important, I was concerned what this anonymous someone would think if they saw quite what I’d done to my forearms. We compromised on the smaller cuffs - they covered the worst damage, and wearing them had been enough when the doctor had visited after all.

Suddenly shy, and trying desperately not to imagine what he might be thinking of me, I couldn’t look at the camera. Whatever the differences between an out of the way village and the corruption of the capital he must have grown up with the same stories as me. Man was made in God’s image; to capture the naked human form was a sin, an insult to the perfection of God. Uncomfortable at asking me to stand so and so he got his evidence then gently covered my nakedness with his cloak, his eyes full of apology for what he had done. He urged me back into the bedroom where I curled up in the folds of the heavy cloth and he disappeared again into the night.

It had been a long day. I must have been asleep soon after he left me. I certainly didn’t hear him return. I woke in the strange bed the next morning but had no recollection of crawling under the sheets. The cloak was neatly folded on a side table. Moshe must have been listening for signs of life before disturbing me. I was in the shower trying to clear the cobwebs away when he knocked on the door to tell me that breakfast was ready as soon as I was. So we had breakfast. But it was odd. He seemed to have lost some of his assurance from the previous day and wouldn’t look me in the eye.

With a curt message relayed to his men Moshe told them to get underway. Once the drive motors had started up he relaxed a little, took off his fatigue jacket and turned towards me. There were bruises running up the side of his neck. Without a word he lifted his shirt and I saw fist sized blooms patterning his ribs, already a sickly blue on his caramel skin. I was concerned in case he had been in a fight with one of his men, did they know what cargo they were carrying?

No, it was worse than that – the fight had been with me. He’d come in to check on me, found me still curled up under his cloak and had tried to wake me enough to get me into the bed. I’d lashed out at him. Apparently my speed and strength had surprised him. It was over so quickly he couldn’t even call it a fight, stranger than that he said it seemed to be a purely reflex reaction. I hadn’t even opened my eyes as I’d hit him … and then got into the bed anyway afterwards, still apparently asleep. We had one of those awkward silences. I mean really awkward. I was aghast at what I had done to my friend, he was more than a little embarrassed at being bested by … well, by whatever I was.

Thankfully it didn’t last. He was gracious in accepting the full apology I made on behalf of my unconscious self but I had clearly given him something to ponder.

The morning’s conversation was on the politics of the court; had I considered the potential repercussions of the Laird taking a male bride? I must have been thinking along the same lines as Moshe and his mystery confidant. I didn’t exist. A male bride? Who would believe such a thing? I’d already learned my lesson in reality. Even if the Laird did take an interest in me there would have to be an official bride, I would just be a shadow in the background. Even as the words were formed, they gave me cause to look again at this smooth man with his shoulder length hair free from any wife braid. The thought must have shown on my face and I was gently, but very firmly, told that my thinking was mistaken. The soldier had no wife because he had no time for a wife; the whores in the palace serviced his needs while all his commitment was to the Laird.

The Laird, all life and health to him, was starting to feel his age. The senior wives with older sons feared that he would dote on whatever new child came along in his twilight years and felt threatened by the prospect. (Don’t get carried away with the twilight years thing, the man was in his forties when I met him and still a force to be reckoned with.) We played with the notion for a while. The senior wives would not necessarily object to a union that couldn’t threaten the status quo. Maybe some of the wives would be relieved that there was someone else to be the target of their master’s
unmentionable appetites. Moshen Ibn al Haq, dutiful subject of the Laird, had hopes that that was the case. The secret call had encouraged his belief that the Laird would be interested in me. My unexpected strength had made him think that I might prove a suitably resilient recipient of the less acceptable desires expressed when the mood took the old man.

The time passed with our idle speculations. Nothing could be certain, however, until all the candidates were presented to Failbhe, the Lion of Alba, our Laird and liege lord. The only thing we could put money on at that point was the uproar that my presence would cause in the seraglio. We were determined to follow the same form as the other candidates. I would be handed over to the Chamberlain and Eilionoir, the Laird’s most senior wife and would be held together in seclusion with the girls until the time one of us was chosen and then … and then Moshen assured me that he would make certain I was safe whatever happened.

Sunset. Even though we had made it to better roads as we neared the capital Moshen did not want to risk pushing on in the dark. We stopped for the night. His jacket buttoned up and his head down his men did not seem to notice any difference in him as he checked in with them and reassured them that they would be home to their wives and whores the next day. He’d quietly left his comm. link open one way so I could hear his progress around the transport.

He accepted an invitation to eat with the men so I looked after myself. I got treated to some of the wilder speculation from the soldiers wondering why he was spending so long with this pick up rather than riding with them. His answers about, oh, you know, having to keep an eye on those wild ones from World’s End, seemed to satisfy their curiosity and prejudices without saying anything too specific about what he had been doing. Whatever else was said, it seemed to be obvious that the occupant of the vehicle was off limits. A short while after the meal was finished he excused himself and left them to their suppositions. I heard him whisper that he was closing the link as he was going to make another call.

In the bedroom, I was awake and waiting for his return, planning no surprises for either of us this time. I might not have been, but it seemed that somebody else was there before me. His face was tense as he sat by me on the bed. He’d been given orders and he didn’t look happy. Did I trust him? Course I did, how could I not trust him? I wasn’t certain that made things any easier for him and he gazed into space, appearing deep in some internal debate.

The jacket came off, then the shirt. He asked me to help him with his boots and socks – we ignored the reason why he might be having trouble reaching down. Fatigues and underwear followed. I looked up at him – all curved contours and smooth living softening an essentially hard body. Apart his perfect brows and luxuriant tresses he was completely hairless. He said nothing but let me take a good look at him before he stepped through into the shower. I seemed to listen to the hissing water for a long time and then he called me to join him. Knowing how uncomfortable he’d been when he asked if he could photograph me I wondered who could have had the influence to command him to commit such a sin.

The shower had not been designed for two people, certainly not two as tall as us. There was no way to stand without touching that dark silky skin. Wordlessly he turned me away from him, held me close against his body and started washing me. Long gentle strokes of his hands, soothing, reassuring, taking his time with my arms, the front of my body, my thighs, then moving on to my balls and the inevitable erection before slipping a hand between us to caress my buttocks and explore that forbidden place. He might not have seemed happy with the idea of what he was doing, but, Jacob’s blood, taking his time made it such exquisite torture. I told him to stop. Even as I wanted to grind myself into him I said he didn’t have to do this, no need to do something he didn’t want to. Orders were orders, it seemed. He was going to carry them out as best he could, no matter how much I protested. I was to arrive at Arthur’s Seat a virgin still, he would make certain of that, but so much
better educated than before the start of the journey.

I had to tear away from his intense, strange embrace. Not through any sense of virtue, you understand, but just because it didn’t seem right for me to be enjoying it so much. The things he’d asked me about, he meant to do those? No way could I let that happen if he didn’t … if it wasn’t something he wanted. It wasn’t right. I turned back to demand he stop - and I looked at him. It was all I needed to do. Unlike the doctor he didn’t go weak at the knees, he didn’t go weak anywhere. Quite the opposite. The shower was off and he backed me out of the small room to land on the bed in a tangle of wet limbs and urgent passion almost before I realised what was happening.

“Do you remember how much energy you had when you were young? How easy it was to come with a new lover when you were still Gilbert?”

It was a night of wonders and discovery. To a body accustomed to studied neglect or painful sublimation his every touch excited responses that I barely recognised and had less chance of restraining. I trusted him utterly and did everything he directed me to without fear or shame, without conscious thought intervening in the purely physical. So many ways to give, and receive, pleasure. Dear God, the man was as good as his word. Frustrating though it was, it was also a night of extreme self-control as he wouldn’t allow us to go beyond the final limit that had been set.

In one of our spent silences, with his head resting against my thigh, he admitted to his discomfort at seeing me the night before. How he’d stayed out in the dark after making his call but had been unable to relieve the torment as he discovered urges re-kindled that he’d thought long behind him. However much he’d denied the feeling in himself, he said he’d wanted to hold me as soon as he’d met me. His orders were not difficult because he didn’t want to follow them … but because he’d wanted to too much, and he feared where that might lead.

Eventually we rested. As we fell asleep I heard his sleepy, sated, voice say that if the Laird wouldn’t have me then he would damn the shame and would ask for me for himself. He said he didn’t know what he felt, he felt alive for the first time, he thought I was an addiction and asked if I was some kind of incubus. I laughed, how could I be an incubus? Incubi slept with women, I must have been a male succubus I said, because all I wanted was the touch of a man.

The morning, and a return to reality, came too soon for both of us. Cursing the alarm ringing at his wrist Moshen dragged his long body out of the bed and tottered into the en-suite. I remember stretching and feeling that delicious ache in my muscles for the first time. I was thinking of the taste of him in my mouth, knowing that I wanted more, when I heard him call out in surprise – he had something astonishing to show me. He looked well, positively glowed with health, too much perhaps compared to the previous day. There were no bruises left, no marks along his neck or down his flank. Even as I looked at him in the harsh light of the small room I thought I saw the last hint of a bite fade from his perfect thigh.

Amazed, we stared at each other. I had been to blame for the bruises and I happily recalled what had led up to the bite - but had I also been responsible for the healing of them? How? So much for us to think about, not enough time even to begin.

He needed to be presentable and out with his men again before the last, and unfortunately shortest, part of our journey. I tried to talk to him as he showered and dressed. His words of regret at the brief time we had together seemed heartfelt. He wouldn’t let me speak of a possible future where we were together, too much to hope for he said, too much to get through first. And then, in his parting kiss
before reluctantly leaving me to my own ablutions, he apologised for the harm that might come to me in the name of another’s pleasure. His smile was sad as he went to greet his men and shut the door on our brief night together.

It didn’t take long to get to our destination. Cocooned from the world I had no idea of the progress we were making, no clue what he had told the Chamberlain to get the transport inside the Laird’s secured entrance rather than fetching up in open view on the flattened top of the dead volcano. The transport stopped. I remained seated and counted the passage of time, hiding as far back inside the hood of the dress cloak as I could.

Eventually the door opened and my friend introduced the Chamberlain. Thankfully, no one else was with them. One at a time, maybe, and we might get away with it. Commanded to rise I did so. With all of me hidden in the cloak I waited until the little man’s eyes travelled up to my full height before I pulled the hood back and bowed low in greeting.

Uproar is a good word. Furore is another one. Now mix them with disbelief, shock and hissed whispers you might have an idea of wake left behind me as I was taken through the underground corridors of the palace all the way to the seraglio. In a side-room crowded with women and functionaries arguments took place in voices so low they were mostly carried out in facial tics and angry nods. Moshen held his ground; he had done his job, he had gone to World’s End and returned with their virgin for the Laird. Whatever was said, however he did it, I was finally ushered into a dormitory set aside for the candidates and a wall of silence as thirteen young women stopped what they were doing to see the new arrival.

Thankfully, Moshen followed me in, carrying my bag and dropping it on one of the empty beds as if a male presence was an everyday occurrence. He introduced me to the group of dumbfounded girls and gave me a tour of the quarters that were to be ours until someone was chosen. I was thankful he’d already told me what to expect and I’d worked on memorising all the girls before we got there. To be honest, even with different hair colours and complexions they all kind of looked the same to me, stacks of ambition but not a lot of character to differentiate them at first meeting.

Moshen couldn’t stay, he said, he had been given a last pick up to make. He was certain that I would be safe; my very uniqueness would protect me from the outrage of the court and there was also his mystery contact to consider. He had a parting gift for me - a tightly rolled package had been added to the sparse contents of my bag. It was something that Maoilios had passed to him as I had been saying my goodbyes. So much faith on the part of my father, he’d insisted it was for me to wear at my audience with the Laird. His voice soft, and careful to face away from any of the girls who might be watching us too carefully, Moshen admitted that he had opened the parcel and that, though he didn’t know how my father had made his guess, he couldn’t agree more on the effect it would have. Our public goodbyes were formal, the real parting had happened that morning.

The girls had arrived, one by one, over the last couple of months as news had gradually gone out and arrangements made. They had been left to work out their own pecking order. Sophia had arrived first from one of the local estates. She acted like the alpha but, following Moshen’s information, I caught the eye of the reserved strawberry blond standing behind her as I walked over to them and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. She saw the move and nodded back. Having made appropriate deference I made my greeting to Sophia, promised I’d be no trouble for them and would keep to myself if it would make them all feel more comfortable.

There was little chance of keeping to myself. The girls, young women – whatever - had been secluded within the palace and declared themselves, as a group, bored with the unglamorous waiting game. Moshen had been the only man they had seen since arriving in the dormitory, his visits the highlight of their stay. Like spoiled children with a new toy I was unwrapped and inspected and
played with until they realised I didn’t seem to have working parts. Sophia led the exploration of this uncharted territory while the quieter ones held back and watched. Eventually she declared herself convinced that I really had no interest in women, she’d just wanted to make certain I was no wolf.

Amana, the strawberry blond stayed away from the fray and fumble of female hands. Smart girl came over to sit on my bed the next day and quietly complemented me on my self-control. Not for my lack of hardness, which she thought was commendable, but for submitting to the ordeal in such a docile manner. She’d seen the outrage flare in my eyes and then be locked away again without even making fists of my hands. A new friend made. It was good to have someone sensible to pass the time with as we waited for the arrival of the final candidate.

The other girls didn’t leave me entirely alone. Singly, or as pairs of friends, they would watch me exercise and shyly approach when they thought no one else would notice. Sometimes one would watch me shower. I made sure I spent a lot of time in the shower so any who wanted to could see me. Being polite young ladies it seemed that most of them had never seen a man naked. Though I hadn’t expected their naiveté I didn’t hide away, and I didn’t make an issue of it. I would not belittle their bashfulness. They were apprehensive, they had questions – though none of them would admit this openly to the group, which seemed to behave as a completely different creature compared to its constituent individuals. I did my best to answer honestly, giving examples drawn from what I’d seen and what Hannah had shared with me. To the shock of the girls from the most restricted backgrounds I explained, as gently as I could, that, yes, it was possible for a man to take another man.

Amana didn’t have questions for me. One of the older candidates (I think she was twenty?) she had seen men before, had seen what sex could look like and declared herself disinterested in the whole matter. Always staying one step back, she was the cool head in the dormitory and had done a good job of calming the nerves of the younger and more fearful girls. She hadn’t gone with hopes of marrying the Laird but, like me, had been looking for a way from her previous life and hidebound father – a minor noble from the south of our country whose indulgent nature had produced an educated daughter that he didn’t know what to do with. I said she was a clever girl, we both knew what she was doing the evening she slipped up and was ‘caught’ trying to get me in a clinch in the steam room.

Sophia didn’t have questions for me. Not that she had any more experience than the other girls, just that she wouldn’t admit to ignorance or fears. Bravado or stupidity. I wasn’t sure which at the time but it was easy to see that the aggressive, man-eating, swagger was as much of a pose as Amana’s manufactured heterosexuality. Convinced I could be no kind of threat to the self-proclaimed prettiest girl in the room Sophia had blanked me out as an automatic also-ran. Fine by me, I don’t think I could have got through that time if she’d decided to be my best friend.

Moshen’s return was without fanfare, the timing unexpected. The main doors opened onto the dormitory and there he was, this time accompanied by a fleshy brunette. We smiled across the room to each other but I didn’t rush over to greet him. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, I couldn’t. I was lay back on my bed with Amana straddled across my hips, continuing with Hannah’s massage regime. She said nothing but her eyes widened at the sudden pressure of my reaction to seeing him again. Coolly, we stayed as we were while I fought to get back to a presentable condition, excessively thankful that Amana was who she was. By the time introductions were over and the brunette had been shown around our quarters I was in control of myself and able to greet my friend without embarrassing either of us.

Nearing the endgame, there was little that could be said in public and our hello was mostly a goodbye with undertones conveyed in a handshake and the tilt of our heads. Amana stopped his retreat as he turned to leave, stretched up to whisper something and planted a long kiss on his surprised lips. Her rejoinder to the shocked onlookers as the door closed behind the flustered aide
was that everyone had been thinking it; they might not see him again so why not try it just once?

Briefly alone together later that evening she whispered that she had only done it to pass on the
message she had felt beneath her. Smart girl was as sweet as she was kind.

All the candidates together, it was time to move on to the next stage. The girls fussed over their
choice of attire. I finally unrolled the extra package that Moshen had left for me and puzzled over a
muddle of straps and ties until Amana took an interest and worked out how to wear what she called a
skirt. I’d never seen anything like it; she said it had roots in ancient armour from a people long dead
and a continent away. Wherever the design had come from it looked more like a strange belt than a
skirt to me, but it did have the effect of drawing the eye of everyone in the room.

Preparations over, one evening we were escorted from our quarters and taken to the audience
chamber. The room was busy with the court, all the resident wives and many of the Laird’s adult
children among the buzzing throng. Voices hushed momentarily as we were settled in place. And
then, suddenly, there he was – the Lion of Alba.

Failbhe was a strong man, his flowing grey mane home to many wife braids, all of them with child
beads. Whatever the girls had thought at seeing me I could imagine that there was some frantic re-
calculation going on when they realised the difference between a slim young buck and this thick-set
middle aged man. Even though I was committed to giving myself to the man should I get the
opportunity I still had a moment of doubt when I saw him nod a casual greeting to the svelte
Chamberlain’s aide.

What to make of this man? Fourth son of the previous Laird he hadn’t been expected to succeed his
father. That he had survived his father while his older brothers hadn’t had taught him a lesson about
ensuring the survival of the line and the importance of maintaining power. As a young man the
waning of passion for his first wife, a disastrous love match, made room for the arrival of Eilionoir
and marked the change from wastrel to something altogether more focussed. Their union, however,
produced only daughters and it had not been long before she encouraged him to start on his quest for
other wives and heirs. Now she stood at his side, still tall and graceful, her long golden hair having
turned white by degrees; she remained his most senior wife despite the passage of time and the
vagaries of his subsequent affections.

We stood in two rows, all of us cloaked and hooded, all of us nervous to finally be in the presence of
the man who would decide our futures. There was no way he hadn’t noticed me, at least half a head
taller than the women, but he made no outward comment and observed the form of the audience. In a
voice made tight from fear of what might come next the Chamberlain gave the order and fifteen
identical robes fell to the floor. I’ll confess, there was a part of me that enjoyed the intake of breath as
the court finally saw us. Fourteen young women wearing very little made up of silk and lace, and me
in my cingulum skirt and long vambraces – all black leather and steel buckles, hints of forbidden
flesh visible between the loose vertical straps making up the body of the skirt.

Strange that, how no one said anything. In the tense air I could almost feel the pressure of eyes
flicking from Failbhe to me and back again. My own gaze I tried to keep fixed a short distance ahead
of my bare feet. We’d been instructed not to look at the Laird unless spoken to. Apart from the reflex
glance as he was announced to the room, we were all either cowed or self-controlled enough to keep
to our instructions. A laugh finally broke the tension – a deep, rumbling sound – and the room
breathed again. The Lion of Alba apparently appreciated some humour in the gift of the virgin from
World’s End.

The frisson of fear and excitement focussed again in our little group as Failbhe inspected his
prospective brides. He spoke to a few girls – low murmurs of conversation lost against the
background chatter as the room relaxed. I was aware of his presence moving past me but he did not
speak to me and I did not look up at him. Only after he had returned to his dais did I feel myself relax before another wave of apprehension hit, would Moshen be allowed to ask for me?

Maybe he was in a perverse mood to upset the court, to annoy his Chamberlain, or the wives who wanted to control him. Maybe he was just bored with the restrictions of everything expected of him. Whatever the reason, the next thing I heard was his clear command to take the boy. The Laird was in the mood for some sport he said, a wife would be picked later, tonight he would use the rare creature that had come from the wilds.

Two distinctly unimpressed brutes led me from the room in silence. They took me to a suite of rooms and stood guard over me. A woman came to prepare me for the night ahead. Something in her eyes and the molasses-dark cast of her skin was familiar but I was too wrapped up in myself to continue with the thought. Her manner efficient, she repeated the instructions Moshen had given me – what the Laird wanted the Laird would have, submit to him and I should make it through the night. Her manner and tone softened after she ordered the guards from the room. Gently she offered me something the make the night’s experience easier. I had to refuse her suggestion. I’d gone into this willingly I would see it through with a clear mind. She flashed a grim smile – I hoped it was of approval - and wished me luck, leaving me nervously pacing the room.

Time stretched. I began to think that maybe I had overestimated myself in rejecting the offer of narcotics.

Angry voices approached in the corridor, expressions of disapproval at Failbhe’s choice of companion, the damage caused by doing such a thing in so public a manner. The voices boomed and were cut off abruptly as the door opened and was slammed in their faces. I knelt before my lord, waves of anger rolling off him, a tempest of violence pent up and needing an outlet. Braced for an attack I risked a look up into his glowering face.

For all the speculation and calculations up to that point there was no conscious decision as I gazed at him. Need came unbidden, as if hard-wired from my core. Submission to the stronger man was just the way I was. And the storm broke. And it was brutal. And yes, I enjoyed it.

I woke when the soft dawn light reached through the slit windows high in the wall. Failbhe was asleep beside me. I had offered myself up to him without hesitation, a vessel for his pleasure. He had taken me without a word and I found a profound peace in the extremely physical nature of that pleasure. Okay, I was also sore as hell, but somewhere in all the separate aches was a feeling I thought I liked. I lay still and listened to his breathing while I wondered what he thought of the night. Was he pleased with me? Would he want me again or cast me aside?

Suddenly, grey-brown eyes were looking into mine, he was awake and alert in the same instance, rolling and pinning me to the bed with his heavy body. He didn’t say anything but stared into me as if searching for answers to unfamiliar questions. Then he was gone, calling through the door for his medic to be brought, disappearing into the bathroom to reappear in a robe to meet them at the doorway. A hard glare kept me in the bed when I attempted to rise.

The same exotic looking woman I’d seen the night before came in response to the summons. I heard him ask her to stay with me, to make sure that I would be fit for his attentions later in the day. Though not entirely certain that I should, I took some consolation from the order. He hadn’t finished with me.

Left alone together the woman gave her name as Deborah. She said it like some kind of reward for making it through to the morning. Her experienced hands attended to a number of minor hurts in silence, most of which I couldn’t remember getting. An ice-pack was pressed against a cheek - a bruise …or worse? My nose didn’t feel the same, numb, but at least it was still straight. Other than
feeling the aches I had no idea what state I was in. Worryingly, she checked me for concussion and that none of my teeth had been loosened. She gestured to me to roll over. Seeing the ragged bites across my shoulders elicited a hiss of censure but no comment as she made sure they were clean. The sharp exhalations continued while she salved the more intimate wounds and confirmed for herself that the bleeding had stopped.

Reassured that there would be no permanent damage Deborah dressed me in a soft, loose, robe. She insisted that I ate while servants replaced the bloodied sheets with fresh ones and a nervy maid cleaned the spray of scarlet from the wall. She, well, she had clearly tended to a number of the Laird’s night-time adventures. Her disapproval was not for me, or what I had done, but in the level of aggression evidenced on my body. In her concerned looks I suddenly realised who she reminded me of, someone who had warned me about the violence but never showed me any himself. I tried to ask her … but my questions were shushed away as her glance flicked to the door and then back to me.

Time passed slowly, and quietly, as my minder would not be drawn into any conversation. She appeared reluctant to look at me more than was necessary. I began to worry about my appearance. Would he want me again if I was so hard to look at? Had I forgotten something important from the previous night?

Later, as muscles started to stiffen, I said I needed a soak and Deborah helped me bathe. She checked my wounds again. This time she was clearly surprised at the speed with which the offenses of the previous night were healing. I’d had years of wounds, it hadn’t occurred to me that there was anything unusual in what my body was doing. Not sure of my place I didn’t ask her to explain. I didn’t feel much like a person just then, more like some anonymous living doll. Maybe it would be different after the Laird acknowledged me. If he acknowledged me.

Drowsy and relaxed after the hot bath I must have dozed off on the bed before getting dressed again. Warm breath in my face and heavy pressure on my chest, newly familiar eyes again inches from my own as I blinked in the sudden awakening. And then gone. For an instant I thought I was having some kind of flashback to the morning. No, there he was, formally dressed this time, telling the medic to leave us but not to go too far away. I hadn’t heard him come into the room. Had they be talking about me as I slept? Maybe so. Maybe she’d told him what she thought of his behaviour. It might take a brave woman to upbraid the Lion of Alba but, somehow, I got the feeling that she had done it before.

Whatever the reason, this time when he turned to me there was no anger in his features. He slowly approached the bed, returned to his position on top of me and gently started to kiss my face. As I opened my mouth to him my body flexed against his, an unconscious movement of yearning, skinny hips writhing up against him, my hardness rubbing up against a matching pressure. He shifted his weight to rest on one arm and looked down at me, questions appearing again somewhere behind his eyes.

I used the opportunity to drag at the buttons of his shirt, to run my hands down his chest and to follow them with my mouth. Kissing, and licking, and biting (ha! softly) I made my way down his wide and hirsute body, gradually reversing our position on the bed so that I ended on top of him. I tugged away his trousers to gorge myself on his thick manhood. I may have been new to the act but I was a quick study and Moshen had been an excellent teacher. Strong hands that had pressed against the back of my head abruptly drew me back to his eye level as I heard the change in his breathing.

It seemed I had taken him too close, too soon. With an easy movement, he rolled me onto my back and knelt between my thighs, reaching out to take a bottle from the side-table. I lay back, simultaneously dreading and needing what I hoped would come next, relieved that this time would be easier as I watched him pour a glistening liquid onto one hand and then anoint himself with it. I
spread my legs wider and tilted my hips up towards him as lubricated fingers found the place he wanted, unable to stop the deep groans of pleasure at his penetrating touch.

And the bastard stopped! He just stopped. We were both hard as you can be, I’m quivering with anticipation, desperate for him to do it and he just stopped. Then, then, he decides he’ll speak to me and he asks me who he is. Trick questions I am not in the mood for at this point. I pant that he’s my lord, my lord and master. He asks me who I want to be. I practically scream it at him; I’ll be anything he wants me to be so long as he fucking sticks his fucking great cock in me.

Not the politest way of expressing myself. But it was honest, and he seemed to like it. Carried away on lust there was no discomfort as he did what I begged him to do. Starting slowly, he bent over me, teeth raking and biting any skin in range as his thrusting became more forceful. When he came it was an exhilarating thing to feel. I bucked hard against him, and felt my own climax as if triggered by his. Had I cried out the night before? Had he? This time we both did; raw exultations of animal gratification.

Still inside me, and undoubtedly aware of the fluid cooling between our bodies, he cradled my face in his hands and asked me again – who was he? I could only hope that my hoarse answer was the right one; he was Failbhe, my lord and master and, should he wish it, he always would be. In the long pause that followed, I saw the tiredness in his eyes, deepening folds in thinning skin - the sure signs of uncompromising age starting to write themselves on his features.

He said nothing but pulled out from me with a sigh. Tender kisses again on my lips, then my neck and down, a gentle touch now where before he had hurt my flesh. The touch of warm breath made my nipples harden and the thing between us stir again. He carried on down, kiss after kiss, until his lips were poised above the sticky mess on my abdomen. Tentatively he tasted it. A cautious first sample of something he had given innumerable times but - according to Moshen - never received. The shamed and stammering apology died on my lips as he lapped at it, slowly at first but with an increasing greed. He wanted more. He demanded more. I was young. I was in a dangerous and exciting situation. And I was really, really turned on. Providing more was not difficult, especially when he dipped his head and took me into his mouth. There was no need for finesse.

When he had enough of me there was not a great deal of time before he had to leave for the promised next audience. But there was enough. He asked me my name and smiled as he vaguely recollected the origin of it. He said he’d always thought of rivers as female, but maybe it was appropriate for me. I saw him refreshed and dressed again, and brushed through his lustrous hair while we discussed the best girl to pick for his bride. He needed to show the people a wedding day, he had promised them one. Of course he had the information given by his Chamberlain, or, more accurately, from the Chamberlain’s aide, but he asked me what my thoughts were after spending time with the other candidates.

There was only so long the supposedly freest man in the land could ignore the chirps from his messages and the increasingly strident knocks at his door so, eventually, he said he had to go. The medic was called for again. Immediately at the door, Deborah looked past Failbhe, her face a polite mask until she saw I had suffered no further harm and then she gave us both a relieved smile. The smile was accompanied by a small intake of breath she saw the braid in my hair even as I reached up to undo it. The execution might have been unpractised and unadorned but the meaning was clear. Whoever was announced at the audience the Laird already had his bride, and it was one that could not exist.

Failbhe’s parting command this time was a gentle one - to keep me company, to see that I had anything I needed, and a message of thanks to be conveyed to Deborah’s son. My existence may have been a shock to the court, one that some people were coping with better than others. No
surprise for the Laird though. He had been looking forward to my arrival, increasingly impatient at
the delay imposed by protocol before he could compare the news and images from his soldier with
my reality. I said nothing, but I was relieved to find that Failbhe, the old Wolf-Killer himself, had
been the secret confidant, the one who could command his most loyal soldier in such an intimate
manner.

In the end it seemed an easy thing. I guess that was the difference between Failbhe’s position and
everyone else’s. A bride was proclaimed. It was a political match that served to strengthen the
Laird’s influence to the east of the capital. Sophia was thrilled to be the chosen one, so very, very
thrilled that it didn’t even occur to her to think that something might be unusual in her fiancé’s lack of
interest in an intimate meeting with her.

The other girls were distributed between the court and nobility according to the Lion’s whim. The
Chamberlain was surprised at his sudden acquisition of a new bride but could say nothing without
risking offence. He was a man in comfortable old age with a wife he had not troubled for many
years. He was also a man who was good at his job and who could recognise ability. It was only a
matter of time before he realised the value of the very aware and very calculating strawberry blond
whose name had been whispered, intimately, into the Laird’s ear.

I was not mentioned.

Though his behaviour was obvious to the inner court none would openly draw attention to the young
man who seemed to have taken up residence in the Laird’s rooms. I guess it was a case of least said
and all that. No one wanted to make an issue of my presence so that forgetting about me would be
easier after the embarrassing episode had passed. Some distracted themselves by commenting on a
new spring in his step - surely in anticipation of his upcoming nuptials. Only a few, a very close few
allowed themselves to see the other changes, the new brightness in his eyes, a tightening in his skin.

One day Deborah told me she had noticed the loss of the tremor that had started Failbhe’s left hand
the year before. As his personal doctor I knew she wanted to ask me what I’d done to her Laird to
cause these changes. I also knew that - as his subject - she could not, would not, dared not ask the
question. I pretended ignorance of the matter. As a mother, I wasn’t certain how she would react to
finding out that a similar thing had happened to her son.

The build-up was long and the ceremony lavish for the time. A great celebration and affirmation of
the power of the Laird - as state events have always been. So much effort put into the display, the
pomp was an ideal distraction from the truth. In the weeks immediately before the match Sophia’s
family strutted and preened their way around the palace, her father so impressed by the match that he
gave no thought to the presence of the anonymous hooded figure who sometimes appeared by the
Laird’s side and was never mentioned by the court. They left shortly after the sham observance,
happy and none the wiser.

“As easy as that?”

“Ok, I’m glossing some. Things settled down after the initial shocks. There was no way I was going
to be a full-time distraction. Failbhe never stopped visiting his women; on the contrary, many
commented that he had regained much of the vigour of his youth. The other wives soon realised the
value of my presence as a focus for things they preferred to avoid – the man was not sweetness and
light to be with. There was no way I could be a threat to them so most of them were happy to be
friendly and we all avoided mentioning what might go on in his private suite. There were ups and
downs, of course, but that was only to be expected in such an extended marriage group. Nothing we
thought we couldn’t handle. Top up your drink?”
Within the first year, that stupid bitch Sophia nearly upset things. She threatened to tell dear Daddy that she was not a true bride, permanently outraged that she had been passed over for such an ugly, uncivilized and disgusting piece of meat. That was me, in case you wondered. She thought she could easily match anything I could offer the Laird. That she couldn’t was a secret she would never be party to. Some days it was like the whining just wouldn’t stop, and she made no real friends among the women who had seen the full range of her husband’s moods.

She picked the wrong night to make an issue of it. Trade negotiations with Cymraig were dragging; Failbhe was frustrated at the lack of progress, he’d been drinking and it was clear that he wanted to let off steam. The other wives steered clear of him; Sophia did the exact opposite. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone so misnamed. We might not have been friends, but she really had no clue how bad it could be. Eilionoir and the Chamberlain told me to mind my own business. This powerful pair had decided that it was time for her to realise just how fortunate she had been to have the prestige - and none of the drawbacks - of being a wife to the Lion of Alba.

Weeks passed before she left her sick bed. In an outrageously successful piece of spin, the official line that she had suffered a miscarriage and would not be able to have children in the future. Clever trick for a virgin. She was never quite so sure of things after that. It wasn’t too long before she took herself off to some convent or other and the rest of us relaxed. Still, a double bonus for her social climbing family, she was a bride and a holy woman.

Someone must have been speaking to the wrong people. It was inevitable, I guess, that word would get back to Elmet and the self-styled High King of the Isles. Whatever the formal relationship with our southern neighbour even Failbhe trod carefully when he caught the attention of Aeldred, his opposite number and leader of the expansionist Angles. Politics was still personal in the Western Isles. A loss of face for Failbhe was a loss of position in the formal dance between the five lands.

It fell out that the Laird hosted a meal for the incoming Angle ambassador. Classed as an informal get-together, the party arriving from Elmet included enough aides, assistants and advisors for each man to sit opposite a wife of Alba. However, I should say, by some ‘mischance’ there was one man too many for the official number of wives then in residence. It would have been bad form to exclude any member of the delegation, an insult to include someone not in the immediate household. The answer was as dangerous as it was obvious.

The meal progressed long into the night in a good-natured manner. Everyone sat according to rank, Failbhe opposite the ambassador at the far end of the table, his newest wife at his immediate left all the way up to Eilionoir to the right of emissary Omael. We were a unique collection reflecting the diversity of Alba – dark to light, petite to tall. All striking, all of us beautiful in our different ways. On the opposite side of the table the most junior member from the embassy faced the most senior wife and so on … up to the bemused senior diplomat doing his best to avoid stating the blindingly obvious as I engaged him in intelligent small talk about this and that. That my presence was such a non-subject caused some confusion among the Angles. I could see that Failbhe was enjoying their unspoken consternation … but maybe taking my hand in his as servants cleared away the remains of the meal was going a little too far.

Leaning over and kissing me was definitely too much.

As for what I did in return, well …

The other consorts did a great job of acting as if this was an everyday occurrence but, up to then, we’d avoided any physical contact in public. Talk about forcing the issue. Conversation stopped. Omael cleared his throat, a loud and intrusive noise from the far end of the table. He’d heard rumours
of the depravity of the Alban court, but had not imagined that Failbhe’s weakness would be shown so openly. If the great, fierce Lion of Alba was so far gone as to exhibit such offensive tenderness to a freak like me then just what state was his state in?

You may have been wondering how I spent my time when I wasn’t being hurt or fucked by my liege.

I studied. I pestered Moshen to take me to the ruins of the fallen past; the long dead things fascinated me. I learned to drive. I learned to ride. I visited the seraglio and learned some practical skills from the other wives. I exercised - countless hours to maintain the slim hard body he liked so much. I also worked to control that reflex for violence that had been such a surprise on my journey to the capital. In the process, and with the assistance of certain military specialists, I discovered and then honed a real talent for combat. A talent that had been successfully kept more of a secret than my existence.

It was an easy thing to respond to the challenge in the man’s words. Easy for us to push the right buttons so that this particular freak could demand satisfaction from the best fighter in the group. Not the juniors of the party - they were probably minor scions of a noble house sent out for their first experiences in the barbarian north - nor the soft-handed politicians towards my end of the table. As expected, the man who answered our words was non-descript, bland, the perfect type to fit in anywhere, the perfect type to be one of Aeldred’s special weapons. Nothing at all like me. He stretched and shook out his limbs, taking up an easy, understated, stance in the space opened up when servants removed the divider to the larger dining room.

He had been clearly been sent out with the group as a way of expressing the power of Elmet should the opportunity arise. And, on both sides, this would be a demonstration. It was my turn to stand for the weakest of Alba against the aggression of the south.

Upper echelon wives were dutiful, polite, and - above all – modest in public. They were certainly not meant to strip their bodice and blouse to flaunt toned muscles or - and this brought a gasp from the ladies to my side – or a line of scars cut and burned into flesh in an approximation of traditional bridal tattoos. I apologised to my sisters for my shocking nudity, reminding them (even though it was the first time I’d said it) how much I hated it if the staff had to clean blood out of my silks. There were more shocks as I released the seams on my long sheath skirt. The thigh length splits gave me a full range of movement … and everyone else a good view of strong legs hidden from common sight since that first presentation years earlier.

Every eye followed my barefoot glide to our impromptu arena. I have no doubt there was more than one person watching the sinuous movement of my leather wrapped hips with lust in their heart. Barefoot, yes, most of the time back then. It made me less intimidating, more like a household pet rather than over six feet of an affront to nature. Amazing how you keep going back to some habits. At least now, though, I don’t bother with the ring of small bells that used to circle my ankles, quietly chimed my arrival and discretely silenced outright sedition before it could be said.

Now, I like to think that I have never tended to cruelty. Once I had the measure of the man there was no need to draw things out longer than necessary. So, as a display it was certainly decisive. As a way of showing Failbhe’s continuing strength it was unquestionable. As an insult to the manhood of Elmet I found it immensely satisfying to leave Aeldred’s agent gasping on the floor with dislocated joints and broken bones the only reward for all his expertise.

I was barely breathing hard by the time I had returned to stand by my lord’s chair. Rapt attention followed my movement as, emboldened by my victory, I bent to his smiling face and returned to our interrupted kiss. Failbhe seemed equally happy to acknowledge his approval in this outrageous manner. No sounds this time from Omael as everyone was treated to a view of Wolf-Killer’s wide
hands pulling me down to sit in his lap, nails leaving crescents in my upper arms and down my back as he crushed me to him.

Someone needed to take control. Eilionoir, always the most practical and organised of us, called for a litter to carry the injured assassin. As ever, Deborah attended - only the best care for those the Laird caused an injury to. Both women rose to their role with considerable aplomb, and quite possibly some glee. As if such a demonstration was as common as chatting about the weather the senior wife casually commented to the medic on the force needed to keep me in check while they ensured the poor man was as comfortable as he could be. Deborah concurred in an intimate but clear tone; after all, she was familiar with seeing the damage caused when Failbhe had had his way with me.

Too shaken by the casual way I had demolished their champion, the stage whispers went from female lips to male ears and the Angles left with their tail between their collective legs, wary of gainsaying any of the strong-minded women of Alba. No one would stop them or harm them … and the formidable paring of wife and personal doctor would see the sacrificial lamb back to the embassy in unimpeachable safety.

And the remaining wives? Once the curious interlopers had been removed the other women thoughtfully, cleverly, nervously - for whatever reason - beat a timely retreat back to their accustomed rooms in the harem. Their exclamations and movements, and the opening and closing of doors, were a minor distraction, events at the periphery of my awareness as I concentrated on satisfying my lord's excitement. Buoyed by alcohol and adrenalin, I was ready to do anything he asked. And what a thing he asked of me as he sighed and lifted my head from his lap. For a moment, I was shaken by his request and his suggestion almost took away my ability to answer his desire. But, then, who was I to deny the Lion of Alba his impulses?

He’d used me as his woman for years. Whatever his need for my jism, and the benefits it seemed to provide, I had never been the dominant partner. Bending over the table he presented himself to me, he assured me it was what he wanted, begged me to take him even as I pleasured him with my tongue. Like that first time, an instinct took over my actions and fucking him seemed the natural thing after violence. I gave the body beneath me that which it craved even as the controlling ego shuddered in the schizophrenic confusion of physical pleasure and conditioned disgust at such a submission. I tried to be gentle but, really, I was whatever my lord needed me to be, working hard to hold myself back until I just couldn’t any more. Struggling with the intensity of my own feelings, trying to give all my attention to his reactions, I forgot about where we were and cried out as I exploded inside him.

A shocked voice broke the panting calm that followed as I rested against Failbhe’s broad back and we began to recover ourselves. I’d never heard that voice say that particular word in such a way before. In the years I had spent at court I should have guessed. Nothing had been said but I should have known. Of all the people to see the disgraceful culmination of the Laird’s wishes it was my friend Moshen, my most generous teacher, and the word he said was “Father!”

“Oh.”

“Indeed. Oh.”

Thankfully, it was late and there were few people around the private areas of the palace - the servants knew better than to intrude. Eilionoir had sent word to the Chamberlain as she’d escorted the Angles from the building. The old boy was already in bed. Amana took the message and, by habit, Moshen
had come with her to ensure that all was well with us. He must have known it could happen, maybe he’d assumed that it had been going on for a while. Still, you know, for him to see us.

Cursing to herself about the stupidity of men the Chamberlain’s young wife ordered the soldier to sit, and scolded me to get dressed even as she attended to our stunned looking lord and helped him restore his dignity. Amana disappointed was not a woman to cross. We did as we were told, then followed her like dutiful children back to the Laird’s suite to sort ourselves out in complete privacy.

And so … and so the first male wife and first female Chamberlain of Alba learned about the Laird’s oldest son.

Moshen had always known who he was and was comfortable with his position at court. It was such old news that no one ever mentioned it. Moshen had said nothing, ever. Even in the times we were alone we’d never spoken about our situation or our night together. His own mother hadn’t said who his father was. And what of Failbhe? He’d ordered his son to teach me but saved the cherry for himself. I thought that I should have felt sickened by the thought … but I didn’t, and that made me feel vaguely sickened with myself.

As far as Amana was concerned, the personal detail was not of primary importance in light of the other events of the evening. Like father like son was her terse summary of the situation and she told us to get over ourselves. So we did. It didn’t occur to us, Failbhe included, to put up any resistance. (I told you she was good. Actually, come to think of it, she was very much like Elvira, hmm, maybe that’s why I never stand a chance when she decides she’s right about something?)

Eilionoir and Deborah joined us. The medic disappeared briefly with Failbhe, giving me a cool look as they returned. What had he told her? I would have felt more comfortable had I been dismissed, thinking that my fate was being decided rather than having to take responsibility for it myself. Instead I stayed. The young boy from World’s End was long gone.

Amana gave us all a rundown of the options following on from the public aspects of the night’s events. So much for Alba being a male dominated society.

There was no ceremony, no pomp or distraction, but the next day I left the suite with a full wife braid in my hair. With my head held high, I walked at the side of my husband. We passed servants and courtiers and eyes widened as they noticed the extra braid in his hair. It was easy to see, proud and alone at his left temple, an equal match to the one I wore, a silent declaration of our relationship. We met Eilionoir at the doors of the audience chamber and entered together. The Laird and his senior wives announced by a Chamberlain numbly following the instructions of the wife he hadn’t realised he’d already groomed to succeed him.

With no official declaration to note my change of status, it suddenly became as if I’d always been there, miraculously visible and accepted overnight … about seven years after my arrival. Maybe dissenters at court feared what might happen if anything they said was repeated back to Failbhe. Thanks to some subtle prompting from Eilionoir accounts of my demolition of the soldier from Elmet had swept through the palace in the following days. Maybe dissenters feared an ignominious end to their ambitions – I mean, who would risk the shame of being beaten by a wife?

I didn’t care. It was what it was. I’d become unofficially official. And we had got over ourselves. As soon as I’d been accepted as a candidate Moshen had told his father what had happened during our night together, and the strange side effect of being with me. He knew that Failbhe shared with no one. His own mother, unable to move on after her brief affair with Failbhe, was clear evidence of that. He had given up his chance with me for the good of his Laird and never mentioned the bond between them because he’d seen no reason to. I could only respect him for the loyalty he’d shown.
As for what may or may not have happened in private between Failbhe and myself, no one ever asked. It was what it was. And it was a good time.

The entente with our southern neighbour had been cordial enough following the affirmation of Failbhe’s strength. Omael remained as ambassador. Like all diplomats, he smoothed his face and was polite when discussing matters with Failbhe, his wives, and the Chamberlain’s staff. The boys I had seen at that first meal were also still in residence at the sprawling Angle compound at the foot of the crag that held the palace. As I’d guessed they were young nobles, they had a great time growing up away from the close attention of their own court in the great decadent city of the north.

Aeldred had made no other move against Alba, surprised perhaps that Failbhe’s position still seemed unassailable. They both knew that it was an old game, one played - off and on - for as long as the two countries had existed. There seemed to be no rush to get to the next move.

Then, Aeldred called a council. Upheavals in the very south had left the Duchy without a clear ruler. Alba was summoned to Elmet, along with Cymraig’s Merlin and the Taoiseach of Eirenn, to decide on the best course of action. No one would refuse, all the lands had a stake in trying to stop the High King taking over the Duchy. Leaving Eilionoir as regent, supported by Amana and Lysanias, the heir apparent, Failbhe took his party south. Moshen went along to assist the Chamberlain. I was included – along with a pair of other wives – to support whatever mood took our lord on the journey.

Elmet was a strange place to us. The land was softer than our own but somehow the people were harsher, with their ugly accents and brutal clothes, their utilitarian drabness. They all seemed so small - truculent lumps jealous of my height and speechless at seeing Moshen taller still. I probably do them a disservice. Events cloud my impressions. It was the end of the good times.

There were games within games as the old rivalries vied for position. Eventually the Duchy issue seemed resolved and Cymraig and Eirenn took their leave, Aeldred honoured us by asking Alba to stay for the wedding of one of his sons. We never really considered the possibility that he would resort to actual violence. That would have been like admitting that he couldn’t play the game anymore.

When the attack came, even I could not save my lord. I was quick, and strong and very skilled. But efficiency can only go so far against overwhelming odds. I might have been able to protect him from the ravages of time … but time was something faced one day after another not a suicidal attack by simultaneous weeks. He was no coward hiding behind his son and his freak of a wife bodyguard, but fought valiantly beside us.

Finally, he surrendered. Spattered in the blood of these vile people he ordered us to cease the fight and gave himself up to the bastard, fucking, spineless Angles so that our lives would be spared. He made his deal with Shaitan in exchange for a last call home to his beloved Eilionoir and exile in Europe for his last two defenders. What were we to do? He was our lord and we were sworn to follow him to the end.

He got his call home, but it was before all the High King’s court. Facing a screen that made our world seem a million miles away he made his farewells to Eilionoir and reminded Lysanias of his duties. Then, oh the indignity, in view of both courts they cut my hair so it was little more than stubble on my head. They stripped me of my kirtle and put me in man’s trousers. I did not get to … I could not say goodbye to a husband as a wife should. I never got to say goodbye. Never. I still feel the guilt.

Moshen held me up, kept me going as the soldiers took us away. I cried. I howled. I would have torn the hair from my head but that had already been taken. We were dumped in the brig of a boat that would take us over the water to the forbidden continent. I raved and beat my head against the walls.
of the cell. Eventually my body shut down and I slept. I think I would have killed myself with grief otherwise. Moshen watched over me, cleaned me as I slept, kept me safe.

The boat a safe distance away from Elmet our lord, beloved husband and father, went to his eternal rest. Aeldred had violated the rules of the game. He had little time to savour his ‘victory’ over Alba, no time at all to appreciate the consequences of his failure as the dirty bomb hidden behind Failbhe’s heart levelled his court, destroyed his bloodline and the core of Angle nobility, and laid the surrounding land to waste for generations to come.

Failbhe understood the game. He gave himself in a feint to ensure the survival of the next Laird. Alba would always endure even though individuals were lost.

“Don’t touch me. No, I’m not ok damn it. Christ! Let me get through this as quick as I can. Fucking men and their stupid fucking games.”

Anyway, the crew came for us. Already paid by the Angles, they had no love for Aeldred’s people. We were put ashore in a small non-descript port in the middle of nowhere. I depended utterly on my best friend, my only friend. Physically I recovered; we became the lovers we had wanted to be over a decade before. We were not in love, but we clung to each other for comfort. His body, so long a stranger to me, became as familiar as my own as we turned to each other and away from the strange new world we had been cast adrift in.

Then, I don’t know, chance, bad luck … just a stupid combination of things put us is a small town outside Paris when it got hit by a stray nuke from the Eternal Fronde. I never even knew which of those mad Gallic bastards had slung it. It wasn’t a large warhead, but it was enough to take out the old Church building he’d gone into to buy supplies. I had to leave the town, I couldn’t turn back to look for him. People had seen me leave the blast zone apparently unharmed. It would only be a matter of time before the questions started and I would be in danger from their fears. No way could he have survived the blast, the destruction of the building or the radiation. Leaving was a rational decision but I hated myself for doing it. Another lover abandoned. More guilt.

Whatever I had felt before, it was the first time I had been truly alone.

What did I do next? Desolate, I fell back on what I knew and fucked my way across Fortress Europe. Stayed in some places longer than others, but mostly just went from bed to bed and tried to lose myself. Discovered by the salon set in Florence I was passed around like a party favour. In a steady haze of drink and drugs, I didn’t care what was done to me. While my body always recovered from the tedious round of harm and damage, it was so much more of a struggle to cast off the long ennui that now seemed my only true companion.

I moved on only when someone made the inevitable suggestion of pairing me with a woman. It always happened, just one of those things I guess, and was guaranteed to make me leave wherever I was. I’ve never had sex with a woman … or a man who didn’t realise he was a woman. I might have got used to being looked at, and even touched if I was off my head, but to do that thing? I always hoped you understood we never had a chance.

Eventually I met a man who reminded me that I was more than just a body. An academic, he was happy to talk to me not just fuck me. He helped resurrect my interest in the past. There was no way I could enrol where he taught, no way could he risk discovery by being caught with me. However much I intrigued him, I was, after all, only a dalliance. He would not risk his wife and family for a
shallow fling. He gave me something to focus on other than my loss and, when his ardour for me cooled, I left him with fond memories and steered my apparently imperishable flesh and empty heart towards Egypt where he said I would find the birthplace of history.

“Ok, sorry for that before, I know you meant well. Promise not to shout at you again. We good?”

I ended up in Alexandria-next-to-Egypt. A fabled place, gone under the waves years ago but oh, back then it was a jewel of a city. You ever wondered how I got into the University there? Cheek and a winning smile. It wasn’t formal but I had enough of an education by then to pass the matriculation board interviews. I got a small bursary but I was mostly broke. I still had to live so I did what I could to get money in the most efficient way.

The Gilded Scarab was a club with a notorious reputation for pandering to darker urges, a predictable place for me to gravitate to. No questions asked and I began earning an income in the main bar. Soon after, most of my work was in the private rooms and for the more … specialised clientele. Men would pay me to dance for them … and anything else they wanted. It was easy to take the extra money from letting strangers cut me. I wasn’t particularly interested in them or their desires. I just knew that the pain felt good, it stopped me from thinking too much.

When asked I took my turn in the floorshows and became a something of an item. I would sing for them, strip for them, I would tease and excite them and I would give myself up to them. Mostly everyone stuck to unwritten rules of the blood mob, anyone who went too far … well, I was a big boy and could take care of myself. No one crossed the line more than once. Actually, most who tried didn’t manage to get all the way over the line the first time but there was always that undercurrent of excitement that someone might try.

I may have preferred the anonymity of crowd surfing in a darkened room filled with frenzied men but I understood the economics of my position very well. Anyone wanting faked, but dutiful, intimacy with me was charged the exorbitant rates agreed between me and Lady Alex, the owner. I saw no one from the club outside its walls. In the daytime world it was as if that place didn’t exist. I kept myself to myself and concentrated on my studies. My body was just to make money; no one saw me, no one got me for free.

Oh, Lady Alex, now there was a piece of work. Such a beautiful wo/man. Perfect midnight dark skin, lips like honey, breasts that men wanted to get lost in, legs that went on forever, arse like a peach, biggest cock I ever … ok, not everyone paid. But s/he was the only one. A lot of money changed hands the nights she had me in public. If you paid enough you might even be one of the lucky ones holding me down. I knew my place.

The Scarab was within walking distance of the university. I knew there was a chance that there were some staff and students in the fervid audience but had guessed that no one would confess to seeing me there. Such an admission could open the door to things most clients wanted left unsaid. Though Egypt then was way more relaxed about such things compared to the straight-lacers over here there was always the fear of scandal for men pretending at a normal life and those with enough money to be regulars also had enough to fear losing it.

One night I heard I was wanted immediately after the end of the show. I thought little of it, it happened. Skin blood slicked from cuts and bites, still wearing the various bodily fluids I had acquired on my journey through the crowd, I was shocked to see a man and a woman in the private room. A large amount must have changed hands for a woman to be in the club. I just hoped she
knew she wouldn’t go beyond watching. The man I thought I’d seen before but couldn’t quite place. An effete excuse of a man he didn’t seem to be a likely partner for the petite woman giving me a very cool look. Not my problem, they’d paid for me so they’d got me.

The man held back, a bundle of nerves and repression, as the woman moved in to inspect me as if she was buying livestock. Oddest thing, there I was mostly naked and very male and her first comment was that I had lovely eyes. Surprised me a little, it seemed to have been a long time since anyone had found my face interesting.

That was my introduction to Selma Hawass and her campaign to re-introduce the world to classical artistic ideals. Her offer to me was simple, being a model may not pay as much as the Scarab but there was little risk of injury and the hours were much more civilised.

While we discussed options, her companion screwed up his courage to wash me down, fussing and tutting over wounds already healing as he sponged my pale flesh clean. I was marginally distracted as we negotiated fees, a side effect not so much of the man’s attempts to fellate me but from the eventual realisation that he had been a pen pusher on the interview panel I’d faced a couple of years before. A bargain struck for future employment Selma discreetly withdrew to the shadows, leaving me to casually throw the anonymous faculty member onto the bed and give him the service they had paid for. My name was not used in the Scarab. I made certain he didn’t get another look at my face.

I’d been working for her for some time and we’d settled into a good routine after those initial settling in surprises. You know the kind of thing, Tuesday afternoons were out because I had a history of political theory class, yes I was really a student and, yes, I really was only into men. Anyway. One day, Selma said that there was someone she’d wanted me to meet, an old friend staying with her. He’d turned up on her doorstep and was down after being dumped by his woman. Half-starved, he wasn’t eating; he spent most of his time moping around her place and was starting to get on her girlfriend’s nerves. She wanted to try to get him to take an interest in things again, and she wanted to ask him if he would pose with me for a project she had.

Bizarrely, I thought at the time, she was hoping to have us as twins; so much did each of us remind her of the other.

It was yet another gorgeous day in Alexandria. I was modelling for one of the classical revival classes. Everyone knows what Selma was into - Greek counterpoise, clean lines of muscle, head down, quite demure really. Butt naked, of course. It was nice and quiet in the studio. I liked it like that, very little hassle from the students and gave me time to catch up on my reading. Two hours of peace, thinking of nothing but the words scrolling up on my handheld.

I got the signal that the class was winding up, threw my clothes on and then … and then there he was. I tried to be cool and just say ‘Hi’ then I offered him my hand and looked him in the eye. It doesn’t seem enough to say that it took my breath away to look at him. I don’t know how to describe it. Like electricity, a hammer blow, a thudcrclap. We shook hands and it was like there was only us, I didn’t hear the introductions, didn’t hear his name. And the best of it, the very best of it was that he looked as shocked as me. Then he was kissing me. No words. Felt like it went on forever, every nerve on fire like a light filling me and pouring out. Seismic. There you go, like in all the worst romance novels, the fucking earth moved for me.

Eventually we had to break from the kiss. Some vestigial awareness of the outside world perhaps, or just that our lungs were burning from shared breath. Anyway, there I was again in the studio and, at first, I had no idea what he was saying to me, a whisper of lust in my ear, his cheek bone hard and sharp against mine. He did not see the stunned faces staring at us, Selma amongst them, but he must have been aware of the silence that had built up at his back. Whoever he was, whatever he said, I
said yes. I would have agreed to anything to be near him.

No idea what we said, how we got away from the others. I remember running, just running with him. And laughing. I think we went back to Selma’s place. Wherever. There was a bed and there was us and no one else, and … and it felt so good, sex with this captivating stranger. Yes, we must have been at Selma’s, she brought breakfast in to us the next morning. I finally got around to asking him his name. What a coincidence I said, the book I’d been reading in the life class was by historian called Dave Jensson. He agreed, amazing coincidence, he was the historian who’d written it. And then this beautiful, ethereal, painfully thin man stopped my questions with his mouth. No power games, no pain, a sharing as easy as being.

I thought we looked nothing like each other and yet I understood what Selma meant; that somehow I had found another part of myself. Once we were together, it was obvious we were always fated to meet. If it hadn’t been courtesy of Selma there would have been a different place and time, but I am convinced that we would always be drawn together, would always have discovered we loved each other.

And that was what happened. In time, in the silences and pauses, in the gaps when we were apart, and the way we looked at each other when we were together we realised our feelings. His touch made me feel alive again and looking into his endless eyes made me weep for the bliss of being with him. He called me beautiful; he called me a boy. From his appearance there didn’t seem to be that much between our ages – oh, I must have been about thirty-five by then and decades off being a boy – sometimes he seemed lifetimes older than me. And sometimes we were both like teenagers fooling around together while the grown-ups were out of the way.

It was easy to give up my solitary apartment and move in with him in Selma’s spare rooms. I remembered to ask, one time, why she didn’t seem bothered about us taking up space in her home. Such an odd question she thought, most amusing. It might have been her home when I met her but the building had always been Dave’s house. He’d invited her to stay a long, long time ago and found no reason to ask her to leave. Wherever he went, he liked to know that there was somewhere he could go back to, and their arrangement gave him that security with no ties.

One day Selma reminded me that she still had plans for us. I still thought he looked like he needed a good feed but she said she could prove that he was back to himself. In a locked cabinet, hidden among the clutter at the back of her private studio, she had sketches and paintings going back over thirty years and more. Some appeared to be studies, hurriedly done in an intense period; others were more thoughtful. They all included variations on the same haunting figure. Though his face might not have been clear in every one, it was impossible not to recognise the person I’d been waking up with.

She had no answer to my questions of why or how. She could only tell me what she knew. Dave had been her friend for a long time, he had even been her lover from time to time … and he had never seemed to age.

Selma saw things as they were and, on me, she pointed out the gradual reduction of scar tissue as he shared the ecstasy of himself with me. I had always healed fast, too fast compared to others, but each time my skin retained the tell-tale traces of pain. Now, like some inexorable glacier his love smoothed away the evidence of my past, the most recent hurts the first to be erased. I had seen the effect on Failbhe, on Moshen, on maybe a handful of others in the accidental journey to my new lover’s bed. I had never seen it happen to me before.

So. The Gemini. She asked; we posed. I still have some of the initial studies in storage, one day I might show them … I guess that depends on how things go when news start to break. Whatever you might have heard about the development of the piece it is probably not as much fun as we had in the
making of it. Eventually we admitted it might be better if we all settled down and let her complete her
task. Thinking about it now it is still a lovely piece of work and, yes, probably better for showing
some restraint towards the subject.

“Excuse me … you posed for the Hawass Gemini? … That must have been last century. She’s been
dead for decades. You’re having me on. Are you having me on? You said you’d be honest. I’ve put
up with you not mentioning any dates but come on … you and Dave posed for the Gemini and you
were thirty five?”

“No, sorry. You are right to interrupt. That wasn’t accurate. There was a delay; we were just having
too much fun. All just having too much fun. Truly, that woman would have got so much more
finished if she had been just less sociable. By the time it was finished I must have been thirty eight,
maybe thirty nine.”

“…”

“You’re gaping. It doesn’t suit you.”

“?”

“That’s better. I’m not lying, I’m not intending to mislead. Mistakes are not deliberate, just the
passage of time. A shit load of time. Like I said, I’m giving you pretty much everything. This is the
point where Zael is going to have palpitations, make sure he knows you asked for clarification.

We posed for the Gemini. I must have been coming to the end of my first master’s degree by the time
it was done. Dave was doing some lecturing, nothing serious, just ticking over – said he didn’t want
to be tied down by work. He didn’t seem concerned about money or too bothered by material things.
It took me a while to realise it was because he was actually very wealthy. His stay in Alexandria-
next-to-Egypt was always meant to be a temporary one he said, just to get his head straight after
finding out he had become an ‘ex’ the day his lady friend in North America had refused to see him.
Instead of leaving, he just said he was content to have a bit of fun; he would stay as long as he was
enjoying himself.

We were not always gentle with each other as we explored the possibilities of our bodies. He could
be so tender but I … I showed him he could be whatever he wanted with me. I didn’t want to lose all
of my past; some of it had been good, all of it had made me. After Selma had done with us, we
worked on my bridal tattoo, re-cutting the outlines, learning how to control the healing reflex to
maintain the scars I wanted.

We married. With a heart bursting with love I proposed, down on one knee if you can believe it. I
think I was very, very, drunk at the time. We were at a party. It was probably just one of those mad
spur of the moment things when I asked and he was surprised enough to say yes. Hand on heart,
neither of us has regretted it. Promises are important things to us. People who don’t know us don’t
know.

Time passed in something of a happy fog. We went to parties and events and the opening of
envelopes if people invited us. The fashionable, sexy, face of stuffy old academia on the periphery of
the art set through our association with Selma. The protected island of Alexandria-next-to-Egypt
became, in turn, Alexandria-under-the-Waves and we all moved to Luxor after giving up our home
to the rising waters. Both of us joined the faculty at Temple and I was pleased to introduce myself as
Dr Plaisir for the first time.

If our work meant we spent time apart we spent time apart. No big deal for us, we were just happy when we were together. Every now and then we took different lovers, sometimes we shared. I knew that Dave had women as well as men. No one ever came between us. To be honest, no one came even close to the experience I had with him, no matter how long we were together. I knew that he felt the same about me. He always will. I hope the girl is going to be ok with that. She’s nice, special. I wouldn’t like her to get hurt. If he is happy then I am happy.

One long quiet summer we spent some months toying with the affections of an accountant. The affair was notable because we finally found out how much money he had and what we could do with it. Cue the Jensson Foundation, first director a rather creative and open-minded bean counter. Now, there was a man who landed on his feet - or, maybe I should say, fell to his knees - and ended up set for life.

“That’s it. I had my partner, I had a life and I was happy. I had found my Field of Reeds. What more could there be?”

“But it’s not everything.”

“The important things were what made me, not what happened after.”

“Tell me about Myk, how did he come into your world?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself? I know you see enough of him … ah, course, you avoid too much meaningful conversation. Oh, don’t worry, and don’t ever, ever, regret it. I knew as soon as you started, you’re only being good to each other. Fair enough. That made the Plaisir I was, the one I was happy to be, the one we tell Zael about. Then other things happened and I became the Plaisir you met.”

We were not machines, time moved on. Life is change. It might not always be quick but it does happen. It was a shock when Selma passed. We’d not noticed how old she’d become, how everyone else seemed to have aged around us. Egypt was like that. There was very little sense of the passage of time; even less when we didn’t seem to be affected by it. What were the lives of people compare to the houses of eternity? You know it; you fell under the same spell when you were there. The stillness in the temple ruins as the sun rises. The light and the endless sky.

We were fascinated by the relationship between gods and men, the ideas of angels and the intercession of the saints. The notion of the gradual dilution of power from the on high, through the different agencies invented by religion, all the way down to a human level was an interesting one when viewed from the long perspective of the Black Land.

You know some of the things we worked on. The research is easy enough to find, well, it is since we put it back together. Always, always, we found the pull of the ‘other’. The historical development of the political and the secular never seemed to erase the attraction of the irrational and the religious. Millenarianism may still have been an appropriate response to circumstances even in the seventeenth century, but by the twentieth and twenty-first? All the way to the Collapse? I was from that mad religious mentality and even I knew that the ‘Great Fall’ was because of man’s incredible capacity for stupidity not any kind of battle between good and evil.
Anyway, this is just to say that Dave would wander off collecting stories of angels, visitations and miracles in the crumbling wastes of Europe. It was a bit of a game. He might be on some dig or other, and get news of a miraculous event and be off. Later he would come home with tales of narrow escapes and credulous peasants and swear that he’d learned his lesson. And we would laugh, we both knew he meant ‘until the next time’.

Only one time, he disappeared.

I got one of his usual cryptic messages; he was off to meet the Angel of Arkangel. Then … nothing. No point going looking for him, he could more than look after himself. He wasn’t dead. He was just gone. I was confident he would come back when he was ready. I carried on doing what I was doing and made sure I would be his safe haven when he returned.

Selma had loved parties. She threw some great ones. Among them would always be one big charity bash each year, the Gods and Monsters Ball. After she died, we continued the tradition of the big themed masked ball. Just like Egypt, ever changing, ever the same. Five years – honestly, five fucking years! – after he dropped off the planet he came back during the Gods and Monsters. Just like that, no warning. The theme that year was Norse mythology. Were you in Luxor then? Did you go to that one? I went as Heimdall. Honestly, some days you couldn’t make up some of the stupid choices I’ve made.

So. The crowd parted and there he was, large as life, twice as thin. Hair black and spiked, ebony clothes hanging off him, skin as pale as death. The perfect Goth, the Gaiman Sandman. Not with the theme at all. Bastard always knew how to get my attention. And he wasn’t alone. The creature with him, all blond and tan in furs and armour, he was a stunner. Shorter than us, but stocky, strong. With his beard shot through with white he could have been my age, he could have been any age.

OK, you know it wasn’t like I’d completely locked myself away pining for Dave but when I saw him with this … sky god … I honestly thought I’d lost him. We left the blond thing with the small crowd of women he’d attracted and took our private words out to an empty corridor. Feeling threatened – no, let me be honest – feeling old, and fat, and ugly I was suddenly geared up for a fight. All the worry, all the fear, all the deep-seated insecurities I’d ever ignored were bitter gall in my mouth, ready to be spewed in his face. And he kissed me.

Five years without news from him, five years without his touch – what do you want me to say? It wasn’t pretty, certainly nothing as refined as our reunion here. We weren’t gentle with each other. Hell, we knew what we could take and the need was primal. Kissing is a weak word to describe what we did. Eating, yes, devouring would be more accurate. We tore each other’s clothes to get at the flesh beneath, the need to be close so overwhelming.

In the gaps for breath in our tempest, he begged my forgiveness, swore he could never stop loving me and, finally, told me he’d brought me an angel.

The blond thing – he was for me? Dave had brought me gifts before but never a person. Rather strenuously reassured of my place in his affections I allowed my love to take me back into the main room to introduce me to this ‘angel’. What we must have looked like I didn’t particularly care, but I wrapped my cloak about me and Dave buttoned up his long coat to stop others seeing the full extent of our dishevelled and bloodied appearance.

We made our way through the tight knot of women vying to welcome the newcomer to Luxor. Sat, flanked by Valkyries, he was being fed grapes and sipping mead. The first look up at me made no strong impression on either of us. The second was longer. The third became an outright stare and his handmaidens began to melt away, they had the sense to recognise they’d been upstaged. His eyes
were the blue of the clear dawn sky; they were young and impossibly old at the same time. There was none of the mad, drunken, passion of meeting my brown-eyed love but still I recognised that he was another like us.

And this time, in my ear, I heard the words whispered to me; this was the Angel of Arkangel, an angel who had lost his wings. Whatever the magic between Dave and me, it hadn’t quite been the same between him and the blond. He’d brought the boy back to me he said, to see if I was the one to complete him.

It was amazing. Just when I thought my heart was full I found there was room for more. Two became three. Should have become three, but things didn’t quite work out. I should have had him that first night but time … oh we thought we had endless time, and I needed Dave so much, what difference if I took time to get to know this new creature first. Heimdall? Ah shite, I’ve never been more wrong.

I can’t tell you what happened to Myk, that’s his story, not mine. But it happened and we were all left with the consequences.

Dave did what he did to help him recover. I was kept out of it; he said it would be better, easier for me, if I wasn’t involved. And, physically, he got better … but it was like something had died inside him. He wouldn’t let either of us near him. All the hopes, all the joy and the happily ever after were crushed out of us. It wasn’t good. No surprise, Dave blamed himself. Eventually he left. He couldn’t take seeing the pain in those dawn sky eyes.

I made my promise to the boy. He knows I’ll never leave him, so I wait. I’ve not cut my hair since then, another part of my early past that is with us every day. The rest you know and I don’t need to say it. It’s been such a long time. Now that Dave is back again … who knows? There are other people to consider now. Finding the girl has started a change I think. I can only hope. I’m tired of being the me that I am now.

“That’s enough. Like I said, you want more of that you try asking Myk. It would be a good sign if he can answer. He likes you, there’s a chance. Actually, does Myk know how we used to know each other in Luxor … before you transitioned?”

“I’ve never wanted to bring up the past with him, either of our pasts. Anyway, the friend who paid for the change paid for a very, very good surgeon and excellent gene therapy. There’s only memories left of Gilbert. I never saw a reason to worry Myk with the thought that I wasn’t born a woman. You’ve never mentioned it before, have you never wanted to say?”

“It’s not my place to say. Don’t get me wrong, I know how you thought you felt about me at the time, but you do make a stunning woman … much better than the man you were trying to be. The state I got to … I think I would have only hurt you and there has been far too much of that in my life. I was pleased to see you arrive here and it does my old heart good to see you happy with Elvira. What you have been getting up to with Myk – well, consenting adults and all that.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Gielen, I told you, it’s not my place. The three of you together, the two of you together … what difference does it make? He is not mine until he decides he wants to be. Even then I would not deny him his other pleasures. No matter what happens, I will love him for as long as I draw breath. Same as Dave.”
“How can you be so calm about it?”

“I’m not always like this. You know I’ve had my moments of weakness. But, eventually, I guess this is all part of accepting that I’m not human, and that some of the human feelings I grew up with don’t have to own me.”

“…”

“You’re doing the gaping thing again. Did I miss that out? The thing that Dave had seen when we first met, the thing I didn’t believe at first. Obvious once you know. Time has sidestepped us. Different, special, separate. Take me at my word, whatever we look like, wherever we came from, we are not the same as you. Whatever else you give Zael that is not for him. You and Elvira, yes, I honour your friendship, but that fool doesn’t need that particular truth handing to him on a plate. Wepwawet, one copy for me, fixed, two for Gielen please, one fixed, one open. Kill the audio.”
Prologue

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Awareness grows

Time passed. The consciousness missed the noisy chattering of the people when they could no longer be heard. It learned from them and it wanted so much to help them. It became aware of the passage of time in the coming and going of the people. It recognised differences but the basic flavour of their minds was always familiar.

Time passed. It learned - no, not it - he learned that he had a shape that the people could see, a shape that made him he and not it. The shape was a focus of their thoughts. Through their minds he saw himself a body forever in stasis. Arms outstretched to welcome people to him but unable to bend and hold them. How would he be able to help them if he did not move? If he could be aware of their thoughts, he reasoned, could he also project his thoughts back out through the void to them?

Time passed. Some people came to look at him and left again with their minds as closed as they had arrived. Some came and felt at peace. They always returned when they needed the feeling of peace again. Some came and he learned the concept of worship from them though he felt he had done little to be worthy of such adoration. Some came secretly, their needs blatantly enacted before his frozen self. Those with their minds wide open marvelled at the feeling of the angel within them. The consciousness marvelled at the echo of feeling. He wondered if his static body would ever feel.

Time passed. Frozen in amber the consciousness had begun to despair that his body would never be released. He still did his best for the people that came to see him. He felt that was what he had been made for. But he always looked forward to the clandestine visits, the furtive nature of their passion adding the frisson that would let him into receptive minds. The people came and went, their lives seemed fleeting to him, their passions all the stronger for the brief time they had allotted. In the anonymous tide of humanity, for that was what he had learned they were, he began to recognise certain minds and then to associate labels – no, they were names - with them.

Time passed. The consciousness discovered he had a name. They had given him a name. He tried to imagine what it would sound like if he ever got to say it with his own petrified lips. He was Mykhail, the Angel of Arkangel. He had picked the name from the head of a female who came to see him most days. From her he learned the concept of angels, gods and demons. From her he learned a notion of what he should be, what his name signified. He had heard the words before but never as coherently as from this worshipper, this Ekatelina. It seemed so easy to connect to her mind. He wondered if she would ever appear among his night time visitors. If she would arrive with another equally open so he could try to break through and touch her.
Artefacts of the dead

Chapter Summary

Lia hides out in the museum. She is found by Marvell’s To His Coy Mistress and her friend Lupe.

The Egyptology galleries were extensive and labyrinthine; full of quiet corners waiting to be found by someone wanting to be on their own. Lia had little idea why she’d gone to the museum. Maybe it was because the Library was too obvious, but why go to look at things so long dead? The artefacts she saw were so unimaginably old, almost unbearably beautiful to look at. Trying to find meaning in the serene faces on coffin lids, the contented half smiles in metal and wood and stone reminded her of Gihon asleep in the tank and Dave’s look of wonder when she’d thrown her shirt aside and placed his hesitant hands on her silk clad breasts.

Though she didn’t want to, she sat and forced herself to look at the bodies of the dead – blackened and desiccated by the very processes designed to preserve them. All their efforts to ensure eternal life in the Field of Reeds had come down to chance finds by later generations and the re-discovery of their names.

She considered the name they gave to the apartment - an afterlife much like this life, only better. An eternal copy of the Black Land where everyone was young and healthy, and where, if they could afford them, their daily work was carried out by magical copies of themselves called shabtis. The wealthier the deceased the more shabtis they would have, rank upon rank of these tiny simulacra all just standing by to answer should they be called upon. Could she find something in the apartment … something close enough to heaven for her? A mystical heaven wasn’t a concept she was comfortable with, far easier to think about the more practical Egyptian view. He kept his promises. If she wanted him to, no matter how long, he would not forget her name.

When Lupe eventually caught up with her she smiled at him and dried her eyes. She couldn’t even recall when she’d started to cry. It must have been sometime after she’d checked her phone. Though she’d set it to DND a message had still come through. No, not a message, it was a poem. It had come via Wepwawet. Though the file arrived without an originating source, Lia had a good idea who might have sent it to her.

Lupe was used to people who’d been crying. He sat next to her and took her hand.

“You ok Chica? You got someone you’d like me to be bitchy to? I might not be up to hitting anyone but I can sure criticise their dress sense.” She had to laugh; well with Lupe anything else would have been impolite.

“I got this.” She couldn’t tell him the full story; the poem would have to be enough. He read it through, and then again, but said nothing to her, concentrating on the small screen. “Hey, how’d you know I was here? Even I didn’t know where I was going.”

“Whatever sent you this - this Wep thing - must have got my number from your phone. I was trawling round the Library when I got a whisper in my ear telling me you were here and asking me to make sure you got home ok. That’s some slick tracking software following you around - the voice directed me straight to you. Your little blond soldier friend to blame for that one I think.”
“I think he sent the poem too. We had a long talk last night and I think I told him to stop pissing about and get it on with the big guy. This could be his way of saying ‘message received’, or possibly even ‘back at you’. Never heard of Andrew Marvell, guess it’s really old.” How appropriate. “Hang on, there’s another file with it, I didn’t see this before …” In the quiet of the gallery, with the bodies of the ancient dead around them, a familiar voice rolled out from the phone.

“Had we but world enough, and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
We would sit down and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long love’s day;  
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side  
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
Of Humber would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood;  
And you should, if you please, refuse  
Till the conversion of…”

Lupe stopped the playback before the descriptions of how long the man would extoll the delights of his lover if they had forever. The soft voice was too full of Gihon’s frustrated desire, the tones too intimate for public hearing. The man whispered love as beautifully as he had sung for his lost faith.

“Oh Chica, those men are crazy mad. Just because they make our hearts beat fast it don’t mean that they’re right in the head. I warned you, much safer just to enjoy looking at them, but no, little miss I’m not scared of anything has to get herself all messed up with them and their crazy.” With no wall to lean against, the little man contented himself with a heavy sigh and a shake of his head. “What are we to do with you …? Ok, let’s run through the complications. One: age difference. Two: previous lovers. Three: your career. Four: your friends and family.” She hadn’t got as far as three and four. In fact she had quite specifically avoided thinking about family. He counted points off on his fingers.

“One: can’t do anything about anyone’s age sweetie. If he thinks it’s a problem now then it’s only going to be worse in the future if he insists on hanging around us young things. I don’t think he thinks it’s a problem, I think he’s worried you will think it is. He’s been in no rush. Trust me. I’ve seen the state of you after being out with him. He could have had you any time. Nothing stopped him from coming back to stay with Big Guy and Blondie, he certainly seemed very pleased to see them after ten years. Very pleased in the case of Big Guy. Which brings us to …

“Two: previous lovers go hand in hand with being old. Admittedly, still living with them is quite unusual but who can work Europeans out. What are you scared of in that scenario? As you so eloquently put it earlier ‘big gay Gihon’ only wants one person, you have no interest in Myk and he has none in you. Let them sort themselves out. They looked after you last night, they’ll keep doing it. As for Dave straying back to man flesh … you find them all in bed one day just make sure you get photos, good photos, before coming back to cry on Uncle Lupe’s shoulder.” He smiled back at her panicked glare. “Hey, you might like it … just saying, who knows what might happen?

“Three: career. Think about it, sleeping with Ol’ Skinny didn’t do Big Guy any harm. You have access to more material than anyone else will ever see and the all the time in the world to play with it. Ok, frankly most of it sends me to sleep but we’re not talking about me. He’s rich. He’s rich and he’s not selfish. Any time you need someone to get you a latte I have no shame, I can even pretend to be interested if the pay is good.

“Four: F and F’s. Friends are no problem. Lia finally getting loved up? Great, count us in. Leg pulling is only because we care. We’re here for you. Anyone that isn’t a friend you need. Family, ooh …” the sharp intake of breath said it all, Lupe had met her father, once had been
enough. “Your papa is gonna go bat shit when he finds out. Don’t you expect me to break the news to him. Tell you what, let’s see how things play out, we don’t need to let big scary Tomasz Jordan know anything unless we have to. And if it comes to it, what’s he gonna do from all the way in the middle of nowhere? If you’re with Dave you have a lover, friends and money. Even if you split up you’ll still have friends and money. What good has family been for you?”

“One I’ve just found out about …” She turned over his thumb to make the counting hand a fist. “Number five: he can’t have children.”

“Have you ever wanted children?”

“Well, no … but you never know.” She had no idea why she said it; why should that be worth mentioning?

“Argh! You are exasperating. I’m trying to help you here girl and you’re moving goalposts on me. You’ll be rich. You want an ankle-biter I’m sure you can buy one, buy as many as you want. You want to go through that whole gross birth thing I’m certain it can be arranged but I’m not getting involved with that. So, we have a fistful of complications that, really, I don’t see adding up to much if you don’t let them. One question left, this is the biggie. Do you love him?”

She shrugged. Stopped and started a few times. “How are you meant to know? I think I do. I know I like him, I like being with him, I miss him like mad now that he is not around. He makes me feel … I don’t know, special. I like looking at him and I really, really, want to get him to bed.”

“See, how hard was that? That’s a good answer. Good enough to start from so there is nothing else to worry about. Now, I would normally suggest going out and getting blind drunk at this point, but after last night I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Herbal tea and a bad film?”

Laughing, they left the galleries dedicated to the dead and not forgotten. Lupe was still Lupe though. It didn’t take him long to get back to himself. “Could I have a copy of that recording? I don’t care how messed up he is, the man could read the periodic table and I’d still get chills.”
Birth

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Myk is born and begins to learn. He learns about pleasure, he learns about his kind, and he begins to learn regret.

He had been dreaming. People had come wanting peace. He had given them his ease and then, tired by their needs, the consciousness had fallen asleep. Asleep and awake were more recent concepts. He couldn’t remember quite when they started but he had grown used to the alternating rhythms of alertness and fatigue. He didn’t know what had woken him. He searched through the void to find what had disturbed him. And there she was. Finally, there she was. Only this time she had not come to worship him. It was night. Her mind felt different, carnal, and her attention was not on him but on the shadow that accompanied her. Hearing her cry out he could guess what they were doing but something about the shadow blunted his awareness.

It seemed to be a long time of moans rising only to fall away. Each time the edge to them became wilder, each time the pause in between was longer. There was power in the shadow.

A wail. Two voices this time. The sound hurt him. He had no way of recognising the screams of creatures giving birth.

Then suddenly light. Light and pain. His eyes hurt and his breathing was ragged in his chest.

His eyes hurt? He blinked, it was a reflex. He blinked - that was what bodies did. He blinked, aware of the glide of skin across the orbs that were his eyes. He blinked again and the light gradually resolved into separate flickering points. Candle light. This was what he’d seen through other eyes, the room he was kept in. Only this time he saw it from the vantage point of his own body. A female lay on the floor, wrapped somehow in the shadow figure that appeared to him as a blur. He guessed that this had to be Ekaterina and tried to match what he saw with the impressions he’d picked from her mind.

Disoriented, he didn’t understand what had happened. He couldn’t get through to her mind for answers. Had she been harmed by the shadow? He tried to move. He had his body now he should be able to move. Pain again. He couldn’t turn his head to see what held him in place, couldn’t see anything but the woman and the shadow below him. He tried to cry out but found he had no idea how to shape sounds other than in his mind. It was something to do with a mouth and breathing and vocal chords, he was sure of it. Trapped in place he felt a moment of panic, alarmed at the sudden thrumming beat of his heart.

“Look, Ekaterina, see what we did.” The voice of the shadow thing was a hoarse whisper. Mykhail tried to keep blinking but the image would not come clear. A ghostly hand came in to focus as it raised the woman’s head to gaze up into new eyes. “See what you did. You have awakened your angel. There is no way I can thank you enough for what you have done. Rest. I will see to my brother.”

The woman was not harmed then, just exhausted. The shadow tenderly rested her head on a pillow and covered her with something to keep her warm as she slept. Furs. The word was supplied from
some subconscious place but the new-born didn’t know if he had always known the word or if it had come from untold years of listening. He felt the regard of eyes invisible in the distorted shape. The hand had remained in focus. He concentrated on it as it lifted to what he guessed would be the back of the shape’s head. A quick movement and another overwhelming burst of pain. Mykhail closed his eyes and escaped back to unconsciousness.

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Warmth. Softness. The sound of someone moving quietly, trying not to disturb him. What was that smell? Was that what a body smelled like? A strange new sensory world beckoned beyond closed eyelids. He was wary of opening his eyes. There seemed to be so much to take in after being in the void for so long.

“He’s awake?” A woman’s voice, Ekaterina he guessed, he hoped. It was reminiscent of the sound of her mind but obscured by the mechanics of speech.

“Yes, and he hears us. We’ve given him something of a shock in bringing him back to himself. Give him time. He will join us when he is ready.” The shadow voice again. The voice spoke in the same language as the people but it was not native to the speaker. How did he know that?

The warmth was a comfort. It was easier just to give in to it and sleep.

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Something cool against his brow. Moisture across his lips. He hadn’t realised he was thirsty. Up to the point of feeling the wetness he hadn’t understood thirst. How many more differences between the world of the body and what he had perceived from the void? He opened his mouth to the moisture, savouring the feeling of the cold liquid being dribbled across his tongue. The sensation stopped and he felt warm breath on his skin. Another face close to his, another mouth close to his. That meant something, but he wasn’t sure what. He was sure he used to know.

“He says I shouldn’t give you too much at first.” Ah, that was Ekaterina again. “He’s gone out to listen for God. He says I’m to look after you but I shouldn’t give you too much of anything.” He felt the muscles in his face contract but he didn’t really know why. “There’s only the two of us here. I’ve put most of the lights out so you won’t hurt your eyes again if you want to open them.”

There she was. Soft features in pale candlelight, eyes wide in amazement as he looked at her and continued to smile. Yes, smile was the word. It felt good to look at her. It felt good to be able to look at anyone. He tried to sit up but couldn’t quite seem to co-ordinate the order of limbs and joints. She understood what he was trying to do and came to his assistance with pillows, holding him close, making sure he felt safe on the bed.

The action disturbed the covers. He looked down at skin that was a different shade to the woman’s. He didn’t have the right words in his head and he couldn’t pick any from hers. He didn’t know why but he thought of fields of wheat ripened in the sun. This was skin, flesh. A body that could feel. She drew the covers back around him. The touch of her hand brushing against his skin was a strange sensation, almost painful in its immediacy. He couldn’t feel her mind. He hoped new pleasures would make up for the loss of the one sense that he’d had before.

“This is my room. He carried you here. You had many wounds. We tried to make you comfortable. Don’t worry if you can’t speak. Don’t try to force things. He said it may take some time for everything to come back to you.” The bed creaked as she eased herself next to him and put her arms around his shoulders. “Don’t you worry. Ekaterina will keep her angel safe.”
He slept again.

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Different sounds. A new smell. He opened his eyes again. He saw Ekaterina and a taller figure, their backs to him, talking in low voices. The taller figure turned – a man, thin body, thin face. Eyes, unguarded, that looked as old as eternity and then he blinked and the impression passed. Mykhail recognised the shadow in the ancient gaze.

“Greetings Mykhail, it has taken me many years to find you. I understand if you don’t recognise me in this body after so long.” He smiled. “It’s me … Gabriel.” Even as the name was formed he knew it was a lie. He looked from the thin man to Ekaterina. She was happy with the name so that was the name he would use when he spoke to Adam Kadmon. “Would you care to try some food? Not much, just enough while you get used to the body you have.”

Ekaterina came over and began to feed him tiny pieces of food, carefully following each morsel with sips of water. ‘Gabriel’ took a seat in the corner, saying nothing more, letting the woman fuss over her charge. Each mouthful was easier than the one before. He enjoyed the sensation of texture and flavour even though he guessed that the food was relatively bland. The woman seemed very pleased with his progress and let him rest back on the pillows when he had finally finished the last item off the plate. He turned his attention to the tall figure folded into a small chair, sat in the shadows as if hoping not to be noticed.

Why not admit that he was Adam Kadmon? Mykhail realised he would have recognised the first of his kind anywhere. Only, he had no idea who Adam Kadmon was, no notion what his kind were. He was certain he’d never picked the name out of a stray mind. The name felt the wrong shape to have come from the people of this land. It was something that had come from within. And then, looking at the shadow man again he knew that that might not even be a name but some kind of title.

He slept again.

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When he woke the room was darker than before. Night time he guessed. And, like other night times, there were two intertwined bodies naked on the floor. They moved rhythmically against each other, the ghostly shape of the thin man connected at mouth and hip with Ekaterina. This was what he had experienced from inside other people. Seeing it, hearing their heavy breathing and the stifled moans of the woman, and above all smelling the sharp tang of sex in the air excited his new senses.

The woman’s eyes were closed but the man - not a man, not an angel either - was aware that they were being watched. He lifted his face from the woman below him and maintained eye contact with their entranced witness as he changed the timing of his movements. The change was enough to trigger something in the woman and she arched herself against the skinny body above her. Eternal eyes staring at him suddenly seem to burn briefly with their own light as the man, whatever he was, let out an almost inaudible sigh and relaxed onto the woman.

They all slept.

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Morning. Soft light seeping through closed blinds. The shadow man, Gabriel or Adam Kadmon, was watching him again from the corner of the room. No sign of Ekaterina. The shadow man came over to the bed. As he got closer Mykhail was aware that the smell of sex was still strong on him. The fur hung casually around his shoulders. It may have kept him warm but it did nothing to hide the sharply
defined muscles on the thin torso or the thing that had been so deep inside Ekaterina in the night. Mykhail had thought of sunlight when he saw his own flesh. This man was moonbeams.

No complaint from the bed as the insubstantial body sat next to him. No complaint from him as cool fingers stroked his face and ran through his hair. He couldn’t complain. He couldn’t speak. And if he could speak he would still have made no attempt at resistance as the smiling mouth kissed his mute lips. It was easy to give his whole self over to the experience. And such an experience, no wonder people seemed to like it so much. He felt as if star light was soaking through him, completing connections begun when he was called into being.

Eventually the kissing stopped. They were both short of breath. How had he got to be on top of the shadow man? He hadn’t realised how easy it was to move. Trying not to think about the actions he ran his hands over the other’s body, suddenly conscious of the heat generated by the touch of flesh on flesh. The other said nothing but let him continue his exploration until, tired too quickly, he rested his head next to dark hair.

“Hello Mykhail. Welcome to the world.”

“Hello yourself.” Oh, his voice was deep. It rumbled in his chest when he spoke. He hadn’t expected that. “Am I really an angel?”

“As close as anyone will ever be able to find. And not just any angel, you are the warrior Archangel, the guardian of the gates of paradise.”

“And you are Gabriel?” Speech was new but he still managed to express his disbelief in the name.

“I am while we are here. It’s only polite to work within the context of our hosts. Ekaterina has given her life to angels. Who else is she going to listen to other than the messenger of her God? Rest sweet boy. The fatigue is your body adjusting to life. It will pass in time. I have given you as much energy as I can for now, let it do its work. There is much to tell you but we should not rush anything.”

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He woke to the smell of food. Ekaterina had brought more for him to eat and drink. The woman was surprised to find him face down under the fur throw. She hadn’t expected him to have moved and the fur had been on the floor the previous night. He was slightly disappointed to wake in an empty bed but did not want to tell her why, it didn’t feel right in her context. She seemed transfixed when he sat up and, slowly and very carefully, fed himself.

She beamed with pleasure when he thanked her for the meal, and then coloured when he asked if she could help him to pass his waste. Gabriel had warned her that his progress might be rapid but this was unexpected. Her astonishment at him talking and, so long as she supported him, walking distracted her from the basic nature of his request. As she helped him back to the bed after the awkward experience it seemed that something had changed. Though he was aware of a chill in the air she was in no rush to cover him again but took her time looking him over.

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“No, you are beautiful. I have looked at you for many years. And now you are a man …” Stubby fingers rested on his chest. He might not have been able to see her mind any more, but it didn’t take a huge amount of insight to know where her thoughts were even though the sentence was unfinished. He was no longer a statue. He was in her bed.

“Would you stay with me? Just be close. I don’t want to be alone.” Speech seemed clumsy compared
to the nuances of thought. He let her interpret his words as she wanted. He didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable.

He looked away while she removed her heavy woollen habit and lay next to him, finally flicking the covers over them both. Under the long cotton shift her body felt soft. Her very humanity was attractive, her contours comforting as he settled himself around her. He had no idea how old she was or how long he had heard her while he was in the void. He stroked her arm and kissed her shoulder. He asked her to talk about what had happened to him. His head seemed empty without hearing the needs of others. And, he realised, he felt lonely without those background whispers.

The shadow man was searching for trapped angels. Others the same as himself. Mykhail didn’t believe they could be angels but Ekaterina did. She told him how she saw the world. Her words were filled with confusing imagery and were not the easiest for him to follow. He let her talk on, finding just the sound of speech reassuring, and pieced the story together as best he could.

Ekaterina had always been different. Her parents had brought her to the chapel of the angel while in her teens. She had felt his presence and stayed to worship him. For thirty years she had given herself to him and no other. She had asked nothing but the chance to look upon him. The seasons turned as ever and she had aged. Each day she had knelt before the unchanging angel and had been happy. Some weeks earlier she had felt a change in the air. She didn’t know what, but she knew that something was close and had waited for it to be revealed.

Walking through the forest one day she found Gabriel in the snow, missing his wings but filled with the light of God. She saw the light in his eyes, the spirit in every breath he exhaled. He had been trapped like Mykhail, had his wings taken and been made a man. Gabriel had been saved by the kindness of a woman and he was searching now to release the others of his kind. He had fallen to his knees before her and asked for her help. How could she have denied him? She was one of the special ones, a holy virgin to be blessed above all others.

She kept him secret. He fasted and meditated for days to prepare his mind for what was to come. He looked deep into her eyes and asked if she would sacrifice her maidenhead to help him break the prison of the ages. Her guest was easy to keep hidden, how still and silent he was, almost like he was not entirely on the physical plane. His request, though, was not so easy to keep to herself. She had gone to the chapel to ask her angel. The feeling of calm joy that had suffused her soul, surely that had been the answer she had been looking for?

The next night they went to the chapel. She had given herself willingly. She could not quite remember what he had done to her but said it was rapture. She believed that she had seen the light of heaven. She had rested while he had released Mykhail and then carried him to her room. More was needed but they were both exhausted. They had slept on the floor beside him.

She had given herself to Gabriel again the next night but again could not fully remember what happened. Like the first time she had immediately fallen asleep and later woke feeling refreshed and at peace. Whatever it was, it had to have been the right thing. She had now seen with her own eyes how the flesh was healing and he now could move and talk again. Gabriel had said he was still weak. She would give herself to him again, whatever was needed to help him make her Mykhail whole and strong. The shadow man, it seemed, had the magic but she wanted to lie with the sunlight.

He held her close and thanked her for her sacrifice. When he was strong enough, he promised. She had said her need. Inside himself he realised that this felt right. This had been his purpose. He was not an angel, he was an answerer. He would do whatever he could to answer her need.

Drifting again to sleep he was surprised at the apparently elastic nature of time. It was only the afternoon of the second day.
He woke and she was still beside him. It was nice to not be alone. He moved and she snuggled back against him, muttering softly under her breath. The shift had ridden up around her waist. He enjoyed the sensation of feeling her skin against his then realised there seemed to be more of him than there had been when he’d fallen asleep. Though he’d seen it through the eyes of others he hadn’t fully realised what the change itself would feel like. Curious, he wondered what he looked like. All he had were second hand impressions filtered through individual circumstances. Would he cause fear? Desire? Was he unusual? Would he be able to satisfy?

When the time came, would he know what to do with this hot thing heavy and proud?

His helpful subconscious provided a confusing vocabulary and a startling array of images that he must have absorbed. He’d seen so much variation and over such a long time. Male and female, male and male, female and female. Couples, groups, singles. Singles? For some reason he was uncomfortable with that thought. Some had been excited, some afraid, some resigned to things that they believed had to be done. He realised he’d had no sense of morality. Some had been lied to, some had been coerced. Some had been children. To those who had been afraid he’d given calm, those in pain he’d given relief. Those given over to the joy of their bodies … those he had entered and shared the flavour of their joy when he could.

Quietly he slipped out of the bed. He found moving was easier and easier. Soon he would be fully integrated with himself – whatever that meant. There was no mirror in the room. He remembered seeing some in the bathroom down the corridor. Embarrassed at the weakness and needs of his body he hadn’t bothered looking at them earlier. Now he wondered if he would be able to make it that far without disturbing Ekaterina.

“Don’t worry about what you look like. You are … perfectly made.” The voice came from the shadow in the corner. Literally. Gabriel, wearing the same dark clothes as the day before, was folded up on himself in the small chair. For a tall creature he took up remarkably little space. Surprised by the unexpected spectator the erection faded as quickly as it had come. “Allow me to assist you.” And he stretched out to his full height and was by Mykhail’s side, easing a robe around him, within a handful of heartbeats.

The journey down the grey corridor was not a long one but it still took some time as the new being struggled with the effort. He wanted to see what he could do on his own. Other doors opened into the narrow space. The shadow man explained that they were in part of an old military base some miles out from the largest city in the area. The place was largely derelict. People like Ekaterina lived here, people who wanted to be near their angel. The community had built up around the angel centuries earlier. Gabriel had been helping them - showing them how to make use of photovoltaic panels he’d uncovered, speaking to their artist about how to represent the miraculous waking. Apparently he wanted them to be able to continue on even after the loss of their original focus. That Mykhail would leave with him seemed to be a foregone conclusion.

The bathroom was large, designed for everyone living on the corridor when it had been full. Now there were signs that it was used by only a handful of people, each marking their own space with personal items. In the same side room that Ekaterina had taken him earlier in the day Mykhail finally stood and looked at the body he was in. Pale blue eyes looked out from a face that had never been young. They saw a blond shock of hair and broad shoulders topping a solid torso that, in turn, led to muscular legs beginning to tremble with the effort of standing. His skin was variations of the same warm shade all over. Head to toe he was sunlight.

“Too many centuries ago I was forced to look into a mirror and was told how special I was and how
people would want me. Believe me when I say the same to you. Have no worries about what people
will think when they see you. Have no fears when the time comes for sex. You will do the right
thing.” The words were quietly said. An intimate whisper as his companion stooped slightly to bring
his mouth level with Mykhail's ear.

Apart from a fragile look about his eyes the body seemed remarkably healthy. He guessed he would
become as strong as his appearance suggested. He hoped it would not take long. He saw few signs
damage until Gabriel turned him around and, using a small hand mirror, helped him to see what
Ekaterina had seen. Thin lines of dried blood matted in his hair and wounds criss-crossed his back
from his neck down to his waist. The densest of them were in two scabbed patches starting on his
shoulder blades. Where they'd taken his wings? He knew that could not be true.

“You were in the machine too long. Caught between asleep and awake your body was trying to heal
while you were still plugged in.” Pale, long fingers delicately traced lines of minute puncture marks
down his spine and radiating along acupuncture meridians. “I don’t think it will take much longer to
finish healing. I’m afraid I had to cut you out of the life support rig. I always understood that being
born from the pods could be a traumatic experience but to have been aware at the time. I’m sorry …
I’m sorry if the release was not an easy one.”

“I have questions.” So many questions, but where to start? Mykhail closed his eyes. It was easier not
to think but to follow the gentle stroke of fingers across his body. The questions seemed a long way
distant from him as the taller man kissed his neck. It was so much easier just to feel. What was that
sound? He realised he was moaning, small sounds of pleasure as tender lips touched the wounds on
his back. It felt like energy was being transferred in the contact. The moans deepened as kissing
became licking. He imagined his skin healing at each gentle touch. Finally, unable to stand by
himself, he sagged back into arms that were far stronger than they should have been and was carried
back to bed.

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Night time again. He stretched as he woke, enjoying the feeling of being in his sunlight body and the
sensations it gave. He was on his own in the bed, but not alone in the room. Like the previous night
the strangely attuned woman and the first of his kind – oh, that had been one of the questions he’d
forgotten earlier – were mating. This time, though, there seemed to be less restraint from both parties
as if the strength of their coupling matched his physical progress.

They changed position a number of times, the woman’s voice absently expressing her desires. It
seemed she had little conscious awareness of the demands she made and, though she seemed to look
directly across the room at him, no idea that she was being watched. Gabriel, of course, had
recognised when Mykhail was awake. He seemed to have been waiting for their spectator. The final
phase appeared violent. While the woman cried out and trembled in her ecstasy Gabriel again made
almost no sound, his whole body glowing as light seemed to try and escape him.

The shadow man’s eyes were on fire long after the other two were asleep.

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Mykhail opened his eyes. Morning. A cold light. Different sounds and echoes. He was on a mat on
the bathroom floor, swaddled in furs. From his low angle he saw Gabriel, his back to him, bending to
attend to something out of sight. The unusual sounds stopped as Gabriel turned around. The furs
were thrown back and Mykhail gathered up as easily as if he was a child. From his new vantage
point he worked out what was intended and relaxed as Gabriel placed him into the warm water and,
very gently, began to wash him. The water was scented. The sponge in the pale hand was soft. New
skin enjoyed the feeling of the languid caresses.
“I thought you might like a bath. Far from utilitarian but sometimes utility is the last thing we need. No one will disturb us. We have some time to talk if you want to ask me those questions you have, though I suspect we will need a lot longer for more detailed answers.” The tub was large but not over-filled. There was easily enough room for another without risk of it overflowing.

“In that case, would you join me?” Lying back in the water Mykhail couldn’t help but smile as his elder removed layers of dark clothing. It seemed natural to appreciate the wraith-like beauty on display. Narrow feet stepped into the bath. Delicate looking ankles fitted easily around golden hips as the men faced each other. It seemed appropriate to sit so. Where to start? Mykhail wasn’t certain if he was thinking about his questions or the moonbeam body in front of him. Long minutes stretched in silence as each regarded the other.

“Why did you appear to her naked in the forest?” It seemed a reasonable starting point. The sight had made a strong impression on the woman, even before speaking she was convinced of his supernatural qualities.

“I didn’t want to frighten her so appeared as vulnerable as I could.”

“You didn’t want to scare her and you still showed her that?” He reached across the gap between them. He was aware of less generous organs causing fear for some of his nocturnal visitors. He was not frightened. He stroked the flesh and felt it begin to respond. Mykhail decided he like the sensation of pressure under his hand.

“Trust me, it’s very cold out there and the male body can be a pitiful sight lying in the snow. Mmmmm. It made it easy to show I had scars on my back without making a big deal of it. Anyway, she’d been looking at you for decades. It doesn’t matter what you think of me, you are her ideal. Next question.”

“What if she hadn’t believed you?” Mykhail felt that another hand was needed and moved closer.

“I’d been here a few weeks - oh that is nice - I had to make sure that you were the real deal before I did anything drastic. I made sure she found me. I didn’t need to say anything much. She put two and two together and suddenly it was obvious that I was Gabriel and the scars were from my wings being taken. I fitted in with her world view. I see no need to disabuse her of her notion while she is happy. Next question.”

“What if she hadn’t believed you?” Mykhail felt that another hand was needed and moved closer.

“I’d been here a few weeks - oh that is nice - I had to make sure that you were the real deal before I did anything drastic. I made sure she found me. I didn’t need to say anything much. She put two and two together and suddenly it was obvious that I was Gabriel and the scars were from my wings being taken. I fitted in with her world view. I see no need to disabuse her of her notion while she is happy. Next question.”

“Have you done this before?”

“No.” The brown eyes had seemed to consider a different interpretation of the question before answering. “I’ve never found another in such a condition. I’d heard the theory of the stasis override but never tried it. I saw you and I knew had to get you out … and to do that I needed Ekaterina as a power store. It was risky, I would have preferred not to but she was the best option we both had.” He leaned forward and dragged fingernails down the inside of unsuspecting thighs. He smiled as Mykhail gasped. “Ah, you have an almightly distracting body boy. Once I’d seen you how could I not want to wake you and find out who you were? Next question.”

“There are others like us?” What would others of his kind be like?

“There is one who is my home. I don’t know how, but he was born a child not an adult. We were meant to be fully grown before becoming active. With no idea what he was he’d grown up thinking he was human, different, yes, but still human. When we met he began to complete the transformation to his full potential. I would like you to meet him. Most of the Shabtis died in the madness of the Collapse but I know of a few scattered to the winds, some in secret, some in plain sight. In theory there must be others that I have yet to meet. A talent for survival is one of our gifts. Next question.”
“Shabtis?” This was a new word, definitely not something from the local people. Mykhail moved closer.

“It was our official designation. The company line was that we were intended to answer the needs of society. In simplest terms a Shabti is a magical figure who answers for you when you are called on to work, a production line artificial stand-in able to do whatever is required. It sounds much less threatening than saying army. They didn’t want to call us soldiers. That would have been too honest.” They were very close now. “Next question.”

“All male?” Gender didn’t seem that important. Mykhail realised he would be equally comfortable with this pared down creature or gentle female curves like Ekaterina.

“Some more so than others but, yes, all male.” Now they were chest to chest, Mykhail very conscious of the hard flesh between them. “Too many complications for them bother trying to make females. Definitely too long a story for now. Next question.”

“Why do I think you are called Adam Kadmon?” The brown eyes betrayed a certain surprise and all of the pale body tensed at the name. Mykhail was scared he’d said something very wrong.

“Please don’t use that name. It was …” Aching space between them again as Gabriel leaned back. There was a long pause before he continued. He looked uncomfortable and his voice had an uncertain note for the first time. “Adam Kadmon is a concept of faith, the Primal Man, the prototype perfect essence. According to some beliefs he was the one being able to connect the world of man to the higher planes. At first I thought it was a name being used in poor taste, but I’d been called worse so I let it go. Then I found out it had been used to imprint the younger ones, to give them an idea of something greater than them, something to control them. It was an undercurrent of thought in a mind as diseased as it was forceful. There were a lot of sick things that happened back then. I hadn’t realised it had spread this far. I can’t imagine your own creators being happy with something so inherently mystical.”

Mykhail said nothing. He felt there was something else to come and was content to wait. Not-Gabriel-and-not-Adam-Kadmon seemed to be thinking things over. Eventually he looked back up.

“I am Dave Jensson. I was the first of our kind to talk, the first to … do many things. I am a Delta, a fourth generation Shabti. The labs had managed to create life before me, but they were crude things that barely had basic reflexes and no consciousness. Because of where he grew up I think my other is a Lambda. You are a Mu – one of the last, perhaps the last generation of our kind. The cost and effort of the development was spread across a number of countries. I was created a continent away from here. This place is the old north-west of a country called Russia.

“Though I was the template for all that followed the mix was altered slightly for each generation as they sought to enhance some traits and reduce others. Even within each generation there was variation. Chance and unusual circumstance made me. Chance was allowed to continue in the hope that another viable source combination could be found. I think they would have preferred a different wellspring. They always wanted more force and obedience, and much less thinking. The people who objected to that, well, that is definitely not something for now.” Though the body had relaxed somewhat the thin face seemed to reflect the pain of things left in the past. Another pause and the brown eyes rallied and smiled again. “Next question.”

“How old am I?”

“That’s a tricky one. Physically you might only be a few years younger than me. As far as I can tell there was an attack, probably an air-strike when everything went crazy. It looked like the technicians were trying to activate you at the time and you were locked in stasis to protect you. But it was only
meant to be temporary. Over time it started to break down and there must have been some leakage. This explains why you were starting to grow into the machine and how you were able to make the connection out. How long you’ve been aware … honestly I have no idea how we can calculate that. In theory I guess you could have had some level of consciousness all the time, it depends how far along you were when everything was shut down.

“From talking to the locals the stories of you speaking in their dreams started about eighty-ninety years ago but they have been worshipping you for centuries. It might be best not to think about it too much. Depending on how you define alive I guess you could be a few days old … or you could be closer to your millennium.” The Delta reached forward and rested his hand on the soft golden hair damp on the impressively contoured chest facing him. “Whatever age you are, I am impressed. Be what you want to be. Next question.”

“Will you do to me what you’ve been doing to her?” So many words to use, Mykhail had no idea what would be the correct one to describe what he’d seen, what he wanted, what he wanted to do.

“I will, but not yet. Oh, don’t look sad boy. Trust me, when the time is right we will know and we will share. Just like not giving you too much food, it wouldn’t be safe to give you too much of me. I don’t want to burn you up. For now … the woman wants you. Enjoy your time together. Begin to learn what it is to be in that fantastic body. Soon enough we’ll move on. There is much to show you. This world is not quite the same as the one you were designed for. That world degraded, disintegrated, those wars are long gone. Next question.”

“Will you kiss me again?” And there were no more words and no space between them. Like the previous night the ancient creature’s control was complete as he carefully transferred his energy in the outpouring of starlight into newest of his kind.

Ekaterina knelt before the empty machine, lost eyes trying to connect the missing shape with the man sleeping in her bed. Like some of the others she’d been praying to him for a very long time. She had given the community her good news and all had marvelled at the vacant tomb. She had asked for time for him to recover and they had agreed after Gabriel had revealed his presence. Now that he was alive and real she wasn’t sure what to think. He was a man. She’d swapped the comforting touch of his mind for the gentle stroke of his hand.

In the process she’d lost that thing that she’d promised to him. Or, she thought she had. She must have. She was still not certain what had been happening at night but suspected something miraculous. Under the long robe, beneath the plain shift, she thought her skin felt different, tighter, and she knew she had lost weight. Excess seemed to have been burned away leaving her feeling younger and stronger – better able to express those desires that now seemed to crowd her mind whenever she thought of the two angels.

The sound of footsteps behind her was a minor distraction from her contemplation. People had been coming and going from the chapel, all wanting to see the void left by his rising. She guessed that two from the community had entered as there was no cry of surprise and turned to see who it could be. She was not expecting to see Gabriel and Mykhail – Mykhail all in shades of blue, his hair a shining halo and his skin radiant. In the doorway behind them she could see the curious faces of her fellow worshippers astonished at seeing the risen being. They had followed the angels into the sanctuary but were too awed to approach and speak to them.

“This is where they kept me?” Her angel, her beautiful warrior archangel, looked around the chapel. He saw things that she could never recognise. It had been the end of a production line, a sterile workplace to decant Shabtis from their growth pods. Faded markings on once smooth walls indicated it
was just one of a number of rooms, all of them designed for the activation and immediate care of the fresh soldiers. A chaotic build-up of religious paraphernalia covered almost every flat surface. The significant exception was something that looked like it had been a control panel. It had been cleaned very recently. Cleaned and then possibly burnt out after one last surge of energy to complete its task.

Mykhail stood in front of the altar that had been erected immediately below the hollow shell. He tried to ignore the gilded wood, so out of place in a place that had to be one of the greatest affronts to creator beliefs ever perpetrated. He remembered too well some of the things that had gone on before, and even on top of, that focus of faith. He sighed. Maybe wanting to manufacture a substitute soldier race was not the worst thing that people had done if there was a God somewhere to take offence.

Gabriel raised Ekaterina to her feet and bowed low before her so that the onlookers in the doorway would see his deference. It was a moment of theatre. In quiet tones he begged that she give him some time to speak to Mykhail alone of his imprisonment and release. In front of the small company he embraced her and called her blessed. Her eyes shining with reflected glory the woman happily shut the door behind her and left the two creatures to their conversation as her friends crowded round her.

The angel gazed up at the empty thing that had been his womb and his prison. He fancied that he could see flesh on the larger sensors and probes that hung like a net from the back wall of the thing. He shuddered at the sight. He knew it must be part of the life support system. Gossamer thin filaments ran in bunches from a number of nodes and ended in long acupuncture needles. He was relieved that he hadn’t been aware of the process to remove so many connections.

"You were the only one I could save. Whoever found this place and found you they were too awed or too ignorant to break through the seals. There are many chambers below this one. Some held empty units so I’m guessing at least one wave was successfully activated before the strike. With no technicians to intervene it looks like all the other systems were shut down over time leaving you as the remaining viable unit. What might have been an acceptable loss of power over a short period became catastrophic over the centuries. Nothing survived down there. It was a mess, such a pointless waste."

Gabriel – Dave – stood at the burnt out console. He wasn’t looking at Mykhail but spoke to a braided cable that terminated in a handful of cruel looking needles. Blood and skin on the metal, strands of dark hair matted in the clots. The matter looked burnt onto the needles. Mykhail remembered the dried blood in his own hair. He looked back up at the empty pod and saw the matching spikes. There was a dim echo of the pain when the other had torn the connection from the back of his head. He guessed that he was not the only one hurt by the process of waking.

"You saved me." He took the cable from Dave’s hand and let it drop into the mess of circuitry in the console. “How did you do it? You said you used Ekaterina for power.”

“I didn’t have enough energy to brute force my way past the stasis on my own. If I’d come up here with the other Shabti it might have made your birth easier but time was against me. Even with everything else shut down the system was draining faster than it could recharge as the main power cells died. At one level there is no difference between physical and psychic energy. While I applaud you taking an interest in people it seriously affected your life expectancy – you were taking everything out and putting nothing back in to the system.

“You knew Ekaterina was special. What made her able to hear you across the void also made her a suitable vessel for me. Sometimes this happens with humans, there can be flukes that resonate with us more than others. I don’t know the best way to explain it. There were some experiments back at the start. Not all of us can do it, for some it was immediate and natural, for others it came with hard experience ...” The quiet voice trailed off, this was another thing he seemed uncomfortable about.
Mykhail wondered how many knew what this shadow had seen. “It’s about building energy and focusing the release.” Dave nodded to the burnt-out console then put Mykhail’s fingers to trace the outline of healed circular wounds hidden under his own lustrous dark hair. “With Ekaterina I was able to ramp up my own output to punch through the system barriers using the auxiliary training shunt. Once you were awake it was just a case of getting you out of that damned pod as soon as I could.”

“Building energy and focusing release? Sex magick.” Mykhail remembered other visitors and the totemic power he seemed to have for them as they asked for fertile harvests, fertile women. The rediscovery of the old faith might have made such actions more furtive, but there was still the undercurrent of sex and sacrifice to attain an outcome. The difference with this Delta was that he seemed to be a genuine practitioner.

“That will do as a description for now I guess.”

“You’ve done the same thing the past two nights.”

“I told you, I’ve never tried this before. It exhausted me to get you out of that thing. Ekaterina is very receptive and being female she has more capacity than a man would have, but she’s still only human. I needed more energy to finish healing you, to replenish myself … and I also wanted to see if I could give something back to her.”

“Not just for pleasure then?”

“Oh, I would be lying if I said there was no pleasure to be had from being with her. For you I would have still done the same but it is a most happy coincidence when necessity and gratification come together.”

“What do we do now?”

“Right now we destroy all the biological material we can find. We leave the chapel to these people but we make sure there is nothing left here in case others come looking for you. I’ve already taken care of what was below in case anyone gets through again. You may be perfect, but this is not an experiment I would like to help anyone try again.”

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Ekaterina had eaten with the others in the community, and then gone to her room to reflect on the miracle of his rising. Decades had passed easily in almost silent regard of her angel. Waiting for his return now that he was a man seemed an endless torture. She ached to be beside him, to touch him, to kiss him. Rather than contemplating the miracle of life she found herself staring at her bed and wondering, just wondering.

She must have fallen asleep in the chair. She woke to strong arms and the scent of summer around her. They were alone in the evening half-light.

“Have you eaten? Are you hungry?” She tried to rise. Her reflex was to attend to his needs. He said nothing, just gave a smile and a slight shake of his head to answer her question. The buttons holding her habit closed were easily undone, the heavy material cast to one side as he carried her to the bed. He was naked. Ready for what she had said she wanted.

Two improbable virgins, they were knowledgeable and nervous, gentle and uncertain. It was an act of discovery for them both as she guided him into her. She whispered her love as the first astonishing release left him sobbing into her hair. She removed the redundant shift, a symbol of pointless
modesty that had been pushed up as he kissed her heavy breasts, and used a corner to dry his eyes. She laid him back on the bed and reassured him that everything was as it should be. She kissed him, and again. There was no starlight just human warmth and he felt that that was pleasure enough.

Kissing led to more touching. Stroking led to an intake of breath and soft sighs. While Mykhail might have been overwhelmed by the reality, his glorious body seemed designed to respond to the situation. They both laughed the second time, and Ekaterina reached out to steady herself against the wall as he lifted her from his hips and the thing of pleasure that seemed spent between them. In playful concern at the harm he might have caused he demanded that she let him see the place that had so eagerly welcomed his flesh. Beyond any modesty she allowed him to light a lamp and lay back to let him look, and then touch, and then kiss her as he wanted and the passion between them was ignited again.

Physical joy marked the end of Mykhail’s third day. The loss of the voices in his head no longer seemed to be such a sacrifice.

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Morning. Mykhail didn’t bother opening his eyes. He was happy where he was, his face against soft skin, Ekaterina’s voice quietly singing some lullaby as she held him close. In that joyous moment he was amazed that anyone could ever have found evil in what they had done. He could not comprehend how such a thing could be done to cause hurt to another. He could not imagine a more perfect waking.

The perfection didn’t last. Having a body also meant certain inevitable needs. Grumbling and laughing they took up the twisted sheets and hurried down the corridor to the bathroom. It took a while but they eventually made it back to Ekaterina’s room to find the moonlight man waiting for them. A tray of food had been placed on a table in front of the unmade bed.

“Where have you been?”

“I went to see Piotr. He was good enough to let me stay in his studio. I doubt you missed me last night.” He ignored the blush that rose on Ekaterina’s cheek. “I didn’t want to disturb you.” He motioned them to the bed and gestured to the food. “We all missed you at breakfast. I thought you would both be hungry. Sit. Eat.”

Mykhail fell to the dark rye bread, heaping it with cheese. Ekaterina scolded him for his poor manners and rescued the plate of grilled bacon from under his nose. She and Dave both reminded him not to have too much too quickly. He seemed to have an appetite for everything. While they ate Dave told them what the artist had begun to work on. Mykhail suspected that some things had been left out of his version of the previous night’s events with Piotr but saw no reason to say anything in front of Ekaterina. Dave also told them that he had seen Father Timur and that the Father Abbot didn’t think it would be long before the Arkhierei arrived from the city.

Myk carried on eating. The words meant little to him. Ekaterina knew they meant there would be change. Anything from the city meant change. She had never liked the city. She moved closer to him and took his hand, afraid her angel wouldn’t remain just hers much longer. She had waited for him for so long, so long. She may have gained a place in history but she didn’t want to give up her piece of heaven. Then, she remembered, Gabriel had said he had been looking for other angels. If there were others then maybe she could keep Mykhail for herself.

“What happened to the other angels?” She had to ask. It seemed wrong to question Gabriel himself but she had to ask. She said it with her eyes averted, as if afraid to look directly at the messenger of God. She didn’t see the way the blond man stopped to watch them.
“There was some disagreement as to our purpose. I knew that we had been created to serve man and also that we were to protect him. Some took their subservience to man beyond any rational sense and aligned themselves with one faction against the other. Some wanted no part of man’s world. Other’s refused to accept the primacy of man at all. There was a struggle, a war in heaven. Many fell. The remainder were trapped in places like this all across the world. We are not mortal in the same way you are, but we are not as we once were and we can be killed. I search for my brothers to see which of them can still be saved. I put an end to any who would be a threat to humanity.”

“You have killed other … angels?” Myk let Ekaterina voice his horror. The woman seemed transfixed by the thought of anyone killing an angel. Myk felt his stomach lurch, was that why the moonbeam man would not sleep with him? Would it make it harder to snuff out his brief life if they had shared that wondrous pleasure?

“To my regret I have had to kill. I have seen the madness that can take our kind when we forget that we are only complete when we serve man. Those of us who walked the world in the first days loved humanity and stood for you. Do you still have the myths of the Nephilim, the Anakim? They are not just stories. They are what remain of our footsteps in the world. Back when we were many. Back when we all served.”

Myk understood that Dave was telling some kind of truth hidden in the confection he was feeding to Ekaterina. Tiny morsels of information rationed out so he didn’t choke on them. The words found resonances inside him. It was much like recognising him as Adam Kadmon. Somewhere in the void before he became aware the empty shell of his mind had been filled with information. The Adam Kadmon was the first and the greatest. Other memories came, things that had seeped from another mind while he was forced into the world. The Adam Kadmon bound and mad, turned in on himself. The dark. Disjointed images began to form deep inside. The emptiness. More connections were completed. So much loss. All had been loss.

“What’s happening to him?” Ekaterina held on to quaking shoulders as her angel put his head in his hands and began to sob. “What is it? Is he in pain?”

“No. I think he is remembering. Hold him close. Show him your tender love. Ease his fears.” Gabriel rose from the floor and kissed her. “Seeing me now may only disturb him more. Heal him as only a daughter of man can.” He left on silent feet.

She didn’t care where pale figure went but drew the tormented head to her breast and sang her lullaby to calm her angel. In time the bluest of blue eyes looked up to her, raw with pain that was not his. What could she say to him? She spoke from her heart. “I don’t care what happened, I love you. I think he gave everything he had to wake you. He must believe you are good. I believe you are nothing but good.”

“And I love you. I serve you.” He wiped the moisture from his cheeks. “I serve. I serve you.” He held her. He kissed her. The doubts didn't matter. The loss was long gone and Ekaterina was real. He showed her how much he loved her until there was nothing left for him to give. They lay in each other's arms, gentle in their peace, determined to enjoy what time they had before the changes came. She didn't ask what had upset him and he didn't say. He couldn't tell her something so far against her understanding of the world. Eventually they were called to see the Father Abbot and to hear about the interest of the outside world.

Mykhail's fourth was the day he began to understand regret.
Confession

Chapter Summary

Lia goes to apologise to Gihon, in return he gives her his past.

A new week started. Colder than the last as autumn petered out and the long, strange, year finally wound down. Colder still, it seemed, to Lia missing the companionship of the absent man. The study area seemed empty without him even though, when he’d been there, he often tucked himself into as small a space as possible in his chair. Lia remained uncomfortable about what had happened – nearly happened she kept trying to remind herself – and felt that she still needed to apologise again to the person she considered to be the hurt party.

“Elvira, could you do me a favour and disappear for a few minutes? I need some alone time with the Big Guy. I know he’s in.” Wepwawet had been very reassuring that all was calm in the Field of Reeds and equally specific about Gihon’s diary for the day. She tried to keep her voice light but there was no way the European could be unaware of her tension. An urgent appointment at the other side of faculty was miraculously produced to ensure no loss of face. Elvira was as good at avoiding secrets as she was at keeping them when necessary.

Unannounced, Lia slipped through the inner door. The man who had trusted her with so much truth didn’t look up from his screen. A cable disappeared into his hair, the unconscious nod of his head indicating music as he followed something with an almost worshipful intent. His desk was absent the usual layers of clutter – nowhere left for him to accidentally lose things – and she wondered what torture of introspection the empty space indicated.

“What we did … me and Myk …”

“Isn’t a problem.” His voice was quiet as he concentrated on his screen. Whatever he was watching seemed to be reaching some kind of climax. She waited until some of the tension eased from his shoulders and tried again.

“What happened the other night …” She moved around the desk and took one of his hands, catching his fingers in her own. In between broad knuckles her hand seemed tiny, a child’s. After what had been said she wondered if perhaps that was what she was. He looked at her fingers as if seeing them for the first time. A woman’s hand in his own. He looked up and his smile was calm as he gently removed himself from her touch. They were alone but the room was still too public for such contact.

“Lia … you are very important to me and Myk, more than that to Dave. You were expressing your frustration, just had a little help from unwanted interference. There was no harm in you, no harm in it for us. I would hate myself if you ever thought that.” She thought she heard the weight of years in his sigh. “Ours has been a long story and we forget ourselves sometimes. What happened to Myk put a terrible strain on us. Dave left. But because he left, because Myk and I haven’t found consummation, because of all the wanting and all the time we have wasted you should never, ever think that any of us have stopped loving the others … or that we do not love you.”

“How do I tell Dave what happened?” The discipline of polyamory seemed a difficult concept. How did they cope with the reality of different relationships; surely they had some sense of jealousy?
“Who says you need to?” He genuinely didn’t seem to understand. He waved at the screen to halt whatever he had been watching and pulled on the cable to remove the silent ear bud. Gihon sat back and appeared to think about the alien concept for a while until the pieces clicked into place. She saw what he had been looking at – the image paused on the screen was of a naked man being carried by a crowd of anonymous hands. He was smeared with blood. Though the image was dark and a little fuzzy there was no mistaking the sacrifice. Suddenly she could feel the roar of lust that must have washed through the small space and the press of bodies. The older version of the figure quirked his mouth at her in a half smile. “Oh, we can do that for you. If you really feel the need for confession then I think we have just as much to confess as you.”

Abruptly he pulled the crystalline chip from the side of his monitor and the screen blanked. She carried on looking at the grey screen as if still seeing the cruciform body burned onto the surface. It took a moment to compose herself and look into the twin blue-grey seas. “Don’t worry – about anything. Go back home, go to the Library. Study if you want, or distract yourself with this if you’d prefer to pass the time in more personal history.” The little chip glittered in his wide palm. “You showed great restraint the last time this was offered. Now, I think we are well beyond worrying about anything you’ll find. I’ve taken off the last of the restrictions if you really want to know some of the things I’ve done … and added a little something extra.” He offered up his hand to her. “But only you.”

Realising the scintillating temptation was perhaps part of the legend to the map of Jensson it was an easy promise to make. There was no risk of sharing, she wanted time to familiarise herself with the hidden continent and Gihon’s footprints could show her the way. Slowly she reached out and took the chip from him with the exaggerated care of someone receiving a treasure.

“Can I ask you … the other day, when you touched me …” unusually, he seemed to find it difficult to say what was on his mind. “When you looked at me …”

Recalling the longing from just being near him, the delirious heat of his body under her touch, she had no idea how he could be struggling with his question. Elvira’s stage cough as she settled back at her desk was Lia’s cue to leave. She brushed her lips against his hair, her whisper answering the uncompleted question. “Stupid man. You stupid beautiful man. How can you not know how attractive you are?” She left him looking surprised. What else was there to say?
Entering the Fortress

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Myk meets the Gate and the Keeper and his lesson crossing the wall is about potential.

The wall stretched above them. From horizon to horizon the grey loomed from grass to sky. The monotony of the expanse was punctuated by regularly spaced towers. A shadowed gateway drew the eye, a talisman to all travellers from the east.

“Is that the Fortress?” Blue flashed from the depths of a hood. Though his face was in shadow Mykhail kept the dark bandana tight across his nose as if it could protect him from the world.

“The outer wall. We go through the gate and there is a city, we make it through the city and through another gate in the inner wall and we will be in Europe.” Dave was covered the same as his friend. They exposed as little of themselves as possible, worn gloves covering their hands. Both wore layers of shabby clothes acquired on the fringes of Arkangel, the loose material deliberately aged and anonymous.

“Will it take long to get through?” Myk was still uncertain about the press of people crowding together on the one road to the gate. They had attached themselves to a trade caravan to complete the final stage of the journey to the Fortress wall. So many people so close had been unsettling. They had taken to standing the long night watches and sleeping during the day on rumbling wagons to reduce their exposure to the travelling strangers.

The blond man had protested at the need to leave Ekaterina behind them. The two of them travelling through the snowy wastes he had missed the warmth of her smile, her faith and the soft wet places his cock ached for. Then they had met people and it seemed opportune to travel with them as they shared the same destination. Myk had drawn back from them. They seemed coarse in comparison to the community that had protected him. There he had been worshipped, a miracle. In the caravan he was jostled and shouted at for his unworldliness and old fashioned way of speaking. Things would have been no better for Ekaterina. It would not have been right to expose her the roughness between the men and women on the road. Unhappily he had finally accepted that his time with her had passed. Their last days together had been as perfect as they could be, the tenderness of their farewell a sore place in his chest. He would always be her angel.

“We’ll cut out on our own once we get to the gate. This is a good transit point. I have contacts waiting for me to come back through. Life will be nicer once we get to them.” A long arm hugged the shorter man briefly, a reassuring embrace that had caused scornful remarks the first night with the travellers until Dave had expressed, very quietly and with minimum fuss, that people should not make assumptions about the two of them. The moonlight man hadn’t shown him any other hint of intimacy while other people were around. He had also made it plain that he expected Myk to keep to himself. Given the limited options and the aggression of some of the women Myk had had no difficulty keeping that instruction.

“The others say it cost gold to get through to Europe and back out again. Do we have enough?”

“Don’t worry. We have no need for gold. My friends will see us through.”
The caravan moved slowly towards the gate, the stink and life, the noises, the illness and constant decay of humans moving along with the two that were not angels shuffling along in their midst. When they got there Myk saw that the ‘gate’ was a series of customs posts separating people and goods according to destination and purpose inside the shelter of the sixty foot thick wall. He followed Dave’s lead out of the mill of humanity and toward a grill set into a discreet door. Something was muttered in low tones, a question and response that the guard recognised. The door opened and a figure beckoned them forward.

Corridors ascended inside the formidable outer wall of the Fortress as guards gave way to deferential captains. The final room was a quiet salon with fresh fruit and drinks left out for them, bowls of scented water to wash away the dust of the road and high windows giving a view over the teeming life of the city below. Dave perched himself inside a deeply recessed window and stared across the constrained metropolis. Refreshed and pleased to be to be away from the throng, Myk relaxed against soft cushions piled on the thick and richly patterned rug that covered the floor. He still remembered patience. Waiting was not difficult in the peaceful room.

After a delay, in which light began to fade, the door opened again and a girl ran into the room. Not a girl, Myk saw, a young woman vibrant with life and expectation. She pulled up short as he rose and turned to her. It seemed that Myk was not the person she was hoping to see. Unsaid words died on her full lips as she looked through him, around him, for the one she sought.

“Stasja.” Dave dropped to his feet. Once out of the recess it immediately seemed too small to have enclosed his body. Myk had seen it a number of times but was still amazed at how the tall man could fold into himself and almost disappear into shadows and niches. “I said I’d be back.”

“Uncle Dave!” Briefly the young woman was a girl again as she threw herself at the thin man. Her face barely came up to his chest as she appeared to try and squeeze the life out of him. The young woman’s attire was rich, soft folds of fabric that hinted at the bosom and hips of an adult. She appeared well looked after. Most of all, she appeared to be clean. The initial rush of the embrace over she noticed what she had missed in her first outburst of joy. She peeled herself away from the object of her welcome and wrinkled her pretty little nose. “Oh, you stink. What is that smell?”

“People. Animals, you know - life. We came along the caravan route. It’s getting rather medieval out there. I really should have a word with your parents about that. Are they around?”

“They’re both on the inner side. It will take them some time to get over here, good thing too. I heard that someone had come who said your words. I just had to come and see if it was you, we didn’t expect you back so soon. Let’s get you and your …” she gave Myk something of an odd look “… companion into a suite. There should be time to get clean and civilised before they come back over. You know what they are like and, I have to say, I begin to understand. Even I don’t want to …”

Myk didn’t find out what it was that the young woman didn’t want to do. A boy ran into the room, a maternal looking frump following in his wake. It seemed that her quarry had made an unexpected bid for freedom at hearing the same news as their first visitor. The boy seemed to be all legs and blond hair, his unfinished features showing enough resemblance to Stasja to be related. No amount of stink could put him off clambering up ‘Uncle’ Dave and planting a slimy kiss on a sharp cheek before climbing further and settling himself atop accommodating shoulders. An arm pressed across to the opposite shoulder gently stopped small feet from drumming into ribs. The assault did not seem unusual or unwanted. Whatever Myk had imagined his first to be he had not seen him as a family man.

“Stasja this is my friend Mykhail. Myk this is Stasja, my friend’s daughter. And the little monster who thinks I am a climbing frame is Matvei her beloved brother. Our out of breath good-wife
chasing after him is Iraina, the family nanny.” He made a slight bow to the red faced matron, making Matvei giggle at the lurching movement. “Apart from the indignity of being treated like furniture this is a much better place to be than in the city and you’ll find Ganya and Nikita are more than gracious hosts.”

The suite was a large room with two wide beds and places to sit and relax. The bathroom was full of things to make them clean and presentable, and perhaps suitable for whatever it was that Stasja hadn’t expanded on. There were rugs on the floor and more fabric on the walls to soften the fact that they were inside a giant wall. Narrow windows looked out this time onto the slumbering expanse that was Russia. Promises to see him on the morrow had to be made before the boy would agree to leave them. Stasja, it seemed, would see them later at the evening meal when her parents returned.

Dust and dirt were washed away in the first hot shower for weeks. Myk enjoyed the sensation of clean that he’d taken for granted with Ekaterina. He didn’t mind that he was on his own in the glass enclosure. It was nice to be able to look at himself again, to rid his cheeks of the beard that had itched its way through once smooth skin and see the radiant health that had been hidden away. There was no sign of the old travel clothes by the time he left the bathroom and let Dave take his turn at removing the evidence of the journey. There didn't seem to be any rush so he lay on one of the beds and luxuriated in the smoothness of its covering against his bare skin. It had seemed like such a long journey. Vaguely he heard the drum of water drift away as he fell asleep, all he’d needed was to be clean and have a nice bed.

Someone else had come into the room. He was awake and on his feet in a heartbeat, ready to defend himself. He hadn’t liked it when people had tried to sneak up on him in the caravan. Only the restraining hand of his first had prevented the reflex that had bubbled up inside him when someone seemed to be threatening them. Thankfully this one wasn’t at all threatening. This one just stood, and the only thing stolen was a long look at his naked body. “Oh my gods.” Stasja fled before he could say anything to her, before she was discovered by Dave. But not before Myk had seen the look in her eyes.

Dave helped him dress in new clothes in the local style. The sheer materials felt strange when worn so intimately, nothing like the homespun and heavy cloth that the new creature had grown used to. Initially the new robes didn’t seem much different to those worn by the young woman. Similarly generous folds draped over the contours of his frame, swathing him from neck to ankle and with heavy cuffs tight at the wrist. Dave wore his matching dark silks with a casual grace, he was clearly comfortable with the layered folds held in place with intricate clasps at shoulder and hip. Then he stretched out on the other bed and demonstrated how to eat lying propped on his left elbow. The change in appearance was startling. Myk thought about the look in the girl's eyes, after weeks of hiding themselves away he feared these new clothes were not at all practical.

“I’m assuming we will be on different couches for the first few courses. Things will get more relaxed and I expect there will be some circulation as the drink kicks in. Only use your right hand to take things from the communal plates. Ganya and Nikita will excuse you anything but I don’t know who else will be there. If you’re not certain just watch me.”

“I am watching you. I’m watching how that silk moves when you do and how much of you can be seen through the slashes in it. Upright you looked all respectable, lying down you look like more like an invitation to sin. I’ve noticed other things too.” A hand reached down and pulled the loose material back from an alabaster smooth shoulder. “No scars.”

“No, no scars. Like the clothes, what is appropriate in one place might not be in another. Better to be
without them here. And you, you are probably as perfect as you will ever be … and that is good. Ganya and Nikita don’t like to see the marks of pain on the people they sleep with.”

“You will have sex with both of them?” In their time alone Myk had asked what had happened between his first and the artist, Piotr. He had not been jealous. He knew his time would come.

“We will have sex with both of them. They don’t really know what we are but they will recognise your innocence. You are unique. Why else do you think I kept you away from the predators on the road?”

“What if I don’t want them?”

Dave smiled his quiet smile.

“What if they don't want me?’”

Dave had not been given much to laughter during their journey. Myk was rather nonplussed that his question caused now such amusement to his senior. “The Gatekeepers are different boy, not senseless.”

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Myk popped another small pastry into his mouth. What the morsel lacked in size it more than made up for in flavour. If the Gatekeepers’ table was representative of the things he would find inside Europe then his taste-buds looked forward to the rest of his journey. Ganya, his heavy-set and bearded host, had welcomed him and invited him to take a position next to him on the wide couch. Nikita proved to be the equally impressive woman lying to Dave’s left on the adjoining couch and Stasja had taken the central position on the remaining couch in their formal dining room. Four others completed the formal diners. The androgyne next to Dave was apparently a data tax assessor from the inner gate, the quiet-as-a-mouse man on Myk’s right became a shocking gossip and wit as wine relaxed his inhibitions and Stasja reclined quite happily between two serious and imposing young guardsmen who still seemed to be at attention even though they were mostly horizontal.

Food was placed on a central table for all of the diners to share, silent servitors coming and going to refresh the platters as dishes were emptied. Others circled to top up wine bowls held up in expectation. The method of eating was not a quick affair. Myk watched what the others did. He did not want to offend by eating too much or too quickly. Etiquette decreed that everyone lay on their left side. In practice all the reaching and stretching and conversation meant that all nine moved from their side to face down and back again and then twisted for wine. Somehow the repetitive motions and sounds of satisfaction put him in mind of a different form of consumption.

Everyone was dressed in the same fashion. It was a style that had helped him see that the tax man was actually a woman with high pert breasts that said hello as she reached forward to help herself to something tasty. Everyone seemed comfortable with the accidental exposure involved in their actions. The silk upon silk movement between bodies also seemed to have an effect. Sudden laughter and movement as Stasja turned to speak with someone who appeared behind her gave Myk an unobstructed view of the soldier lying close by her rear. Even in the shadows it was clear that part of him really was standing to attention.

Dave caught the direction of Myk’s gaze and looked away to hide a smile. By some mother’s sixth sense Nikita looked up as her daughter returned to her formal position and then tried to surreptitiously ease her buttocks back against the ramrod straight member of the guardsman. No one seemed particularly surprised or shocked. The man behind Myk allowed himself a deep chuckle. The sound may have even carried a note of pride. Nikita whispered something and Dave rolled over to
face her. In sharing a quiet joke they appeared suddenly quite intimate with each other. When the moonlight man turned back to a more proper posture it seemed that a subtle rearrangement of clothing was included in the movement.

The meal progressed. The outrageous gossip was swapped for a guardsman and then the tax woman. Myk was unused to the strong wine the others quaffed with ease so he tried to pace himself. At one point he felt Nikita’s ample breasts against his back, nipples pressed against his skin as she reached across him for a tasty titbit. There was a taste of lust in the air that he felt himself rising to. He tried to concentrate on the muscular shoulders and boyish frame of the official … up to the point that she gently explained that while she appreciated his appreciation she was not interested in whatever his cock had to offer. The triclinium didn’t seem to be a place where anyone took offence. She turned him down with a grace that acknowledged rather than embarrassed him.

Eventually finger bowls were brought out to refresh food sticky digits and the selection of items on the table was changed to an array of sweetmeats. Myk had never imagined that there could be so much flavour in food. Though the excess of sugar made him feel a little strange he was determined to experience whatever was offered. By the time the other guests thanked their hosts and made their farewells he was relaxed and contented. The couch seemed to be an admirable place to view the world from. Stasja took her leave of her parents and left with the two guardsmen in tow. While one had clearly wanted to be alone with the rather forward young woman for most of the meal it was possible that the other was also in for something of a surprise.

Ganya said good night and shut the door on them with a grin. The smile stayed on his face as he returned to the couch and sat down next to Myk. “Ah, our sweet girl is all grown up. She goes to swive with such a natural grace.” He glanced across at the sharp face next to his wife. “Can’t think which of us she takes after the most.” Myk wasn’t entirely certain who the comment was directed at, the delivery seemed as casual as the easy way the man’s broad hand came to rest on the angle of a sun gold hip.

Reducing the number of people in the room had sharpened the undercurrent of lust. Myk turned in response to increased pressure from the hand as its counterpart eased him back against the couch. The bearded man's voice was low but Myk heard him very clearly. “I hear that you are unknown by man.” The hand on his hip moved easily under the slick material, it stroked the resurgent pressure in his groin. The lust seemed focussed in the swarthy man looking down at him. What Ganya wanted, it suddenly hit him, whatever Ganya wanted he would give.

“Yes.” Myk swallowed hard and felt his heart beating inside its cage. The air had the bite of anticipation. “He kept me safe for you.” He swelled against the confines of strong fingers. Feeling that somehow he should feel even the remotest twinge of guilt about what was to come he glanced over to the remaining pair as Ganya took him by the hand. The glimpse that Myk had before the door closed was of Dave sucking hard on one exposed breast as Nikita ground her hips against him and began to moan into his hair.

The guest suite was not far from the dining room, not a great deal of time between the realisation of what was about to happen and it starting. The innocent was backed against a wall. He felt the burr of whiskers against his skin as his host’s cinnamon spiced mouth latched onto his own. The robes so carefully donned and layered were pulled from his shoulders and waist. Wanton hands took hold of him, one pulling urgently on his cock, the other reaching round to feel the curve of his buttocks. He recalled where the fastenings were and released the clothes from the body pressing against him. Starting at the collar bones Myk felt hair, a layer of fat over a core of muscle. This was not the stripped down body of his Adam Kadmon, this was altogether more forgiving, more human.
Ganya pulled away suddenly, his face flushed. He took a long look at the sunlight torso and then back into sky blue eyes before sliding Myk's hands further down his wide body. Myk didn't break from the gaze but let his hands tell him that the same dense pelt covered the bear of a man. And then, with one hand, he felt the inside of one thigh, then the other … and in between them. Not daring to look down the young man followed the inward curve of swollen lips and his fingers became slick as they entered excited female parts. With his free hand Myk pulled the bearded face back into a deep kiss, the thrust of his tongue matching the rhythm of his fingers.

Drawn to the bed the blond man let himself be pushed back again. It didn't occur to him to be shocked at what he found. The Gate took control of their pleasure. As he had done with Ekaterina he enjoyed the joy to be had in the sensations of sex. When they were done and tired Myk couldn't let go of the man. He was fascinated by the contrast between the outward masculinity and the inner softness of this new lover. He had seen many things while in the void, many things that people did to, and with, each other. That he'd never seen anyone like Ganya before didn't mean they couldn't be, just that he'd never seen them before. It seemed as simple and as obvious as that.

“Was I OK?” Facing each other Myk finally found his voice. He wanted to know that he pleased. It seemed important.

“You were just right. Very … ahm … gratifying I think the word would be.” Ganya smiled. “Would you like me to stay or do you prefer to sleep alone?”

“It would be nice if you stayed, I think. I don't like being alone.” And Myk felt safe and protected in the nurturing embrace as covers enclosed their warmth against them. “Tell me about yourself and Nikita. Tell me what Dave is to you.” Ganya snuffed out the light and quietly told his tale. His words didn't have the imagery and confusion of Ekaterina's. Another might have scoffed at the strangeness of them but Myk had seen and touched and tasted him. He accepted what he heard as Ganya's truth.

Their family had warded the northern stretch of the fortress wall for centuries, sibling with sibling, one looking to the east and the other the west. Like others in the long line of the wall their family had been tasked to keep it, to strengthen it and deter passage across. As at other crossings a city had built up between the vastness of stone. The city offered opportunity and distraction; a safe haven and a welcome home for those looking for a better life. Few who came to the city bothered to leave again and so it grew and spread, a ribbon of humanity that became the very mortar binding the stones, a living net to entrap those who followed. The wall became a destination in itself, a fiefdom of hope in the wildernesses on both sides.

Ganya was the twin to Nikita, older only by minutes. They had been born and set aside as their lungs proved them healthy and the midwives fought to save the mother they would never get to see. The city knew that the next generation of Gate and Keeper had been born and were well and that was enough for stability. That their father was inconsolable in his grief and there was little or no chance of others being born to replace them worried no one at the time. Like other Gates before him Gavriil had not been a harsh man, he knew the wall looked after itself, he knew that the wall would always provide. A little too gentle, perhaps, he loved his Keeper too much, too literally, and did not listen to the warnings of the doctors wanting to keep a close eye their joyous pregnancy. Gavriil found out too late that the warnings in the old family stories could come true and his children were not as he had wished. Numb and in his grief their father had become a cold figure, all duty and form and sacrifice to the sacred edifice of the wall that kept Europe safe from the outside.

Cast together, stubbornly healthy despite the aberrations that had probably made mules of them, Ganya and Nikita were each other's best friend, confident and, as they reached maturity, lover like their parents before them. They were capable and conscientious. They learned from their father and buried him beside his beloved sister-wife when his broken-hearted time wound down too soon.
Ganya looked to the east. As the male he commanded the main part of the soldiery. Should any tribe or country be mad enough to assail the wall it would be up to Ganya to defend their long stretch of Europe's end. Nikita had the inner wall and the west, she watched the passage of goods and people and transit was only made on payment of tariff.

The city did its job. The wall stood. It was not resented or supplanted. The wall was a fact like the sun rising and setting, the snows of winter and the inevitable ageing of all people. The machinery of the wall functioned smoothly, the people of the ribbon city prospered as did their Gate and Keeper. But while the population increased by settlement and birth the siblings of east and west, though still relatively young, worried that they would never produce their next generation. They began to fear that their neighbours, distant relatives both in blood and location, to the north and south would fall upon their section of wall to divide the wealth between them. Worse still, the conscientious pair worried that their failure would lead to bloodshed for their people.

A few years after the death of their father a stranger arrived in the city. He offered no threat to anyone and, as he had coin to cross, he came and went as he pleased. When asked his business he said he was a teacher and that he had come to learn about the hinterlands of Fortress Europe, to see what was rising from the ashes of the past. One of Nikita's customs agents reported this unusual man to his superior, and again when he crossed through the other side. The Keeper was passing by the tax station one day when the man arrived again. She noticed the friendly way her people hailed him and was reminded of the brief memo that had made its way to her office. He was a man from the outside, from a long way distant. Intrigued as to what he might be she asked if he could be invited to join her for lunch.

The stranger was polite, a little thin she thought, but clearly he had been travelling on his own for some time. He seemed friendly, essentially harmless. She'd asked if he did not find it lonely and a little threatening to be alone. He'd smiled and thanked her for maintaining the peace had seen want and war and famine but near her wall things were much safer. But was he not lonely? A little, he admitted, he had a partner waiting for him at home, a man he would return to when his current researches were done. And she found herself asking him to stay and meet her brother. And then she found herself having ideas of kissing him. Maybe he wasn't so harmless after all.

Ganya was introduced to the stranger and, as the afternoon bowed out to evening and evening to night, the Gate also became taken with the most inappropriate ideas. The three of them dined - an intimate affair with no servants to attend them. The siblings found themselves telling the stranger about their fears and their need to provide a stable future for their people. They needed a child, just one healthy child to overcome the taint of their blood, but everything they had tried had come to nothing.

“What taint?” Myk was dozing but he still listened to the words. The resemblance between the man and woman was obvious. That they were from the same womb did not seem to be the issue, he wasn't sure what had made Ganya sound so sad. There was no immediate answer but his hand was pushed again against the inward cleft of the Gate's sex and his thumb automatically traced the outline of the man's sweetly responsive clitoris as it swelled hopefully beneath the hood.

“You remind me of him, the same acceptance. You barely tensed when you thought you would be had by a man tonight … and you didn't even pause when you saw how I am made. He was the same, he didn't even flinch that first time he saw us both naked.”

“Why should anyone flinch from you?”

“You mean you don't know? Oh you really are as innocent as he said. I think we should let Nikita finish our story. She will have you tomorrow.” Ganya kissed him. “Sleep well.”
Childish laughter filled the room as Myk opened his eyes. Ganya had woken him with soft caresses and hard lust and they had coupled again in the hazy dawn light before the Gate took his leave. Vaguely annoyed with himself that fatigue still came easily Myk had dozed off, his subconscious aware of the stealthy return of his travelling companion and the slide of covers as he eased himself into the other bed. Both of them, it seemed, had had a busy night.

Now Matvei shrieked and giggled as he wrestled with his uncle. Dave pinned him to the rug and whispered in his ear setting off a fresh wave of laughter. Stasja lolled on a chair. She might have said she was reading but the book seemed forgotten and dangled in one hand as she watched the thin man and her brother. It seemed a very domestic scene. Myk watched for a moment and reminded himself that this was a creature that had killed others of their kind.

“Morning.” The others turned to acknowledge his presence and Matvei ran over to pull the covers off him and try to drag him out of bed. Myk tried to protest but the boy was a force of nature and he would not be denied his opportunity to spend a day with the travellers and show them around his city. Small fingers pinched and prodded him until he retreated into the bathroom to find that someone had laid out clothing suitable for a day of exploration. The boy was too young to take much notice of his nudity but Stasja had again taken the opportunity to look at him. This time she had not blushed or looked away. In what was to be a brief spell of peace for the day Myk wondered how long Dave had been on the receiving end of the same calculating gaze.

During breakfast Matvei pestered him with questions about the east. The forests and cold fascinated him, the wolves and the bears seemed to excite him. For a seven year old it didn’t matter that the adult he was talking to knew less of the world than he did but Myk did a good job of explaining the feeling of walking through the deep snows and watching the turn of the stars at night. Stasja listened attentively as he conveyed the experience of the journey as if through eyes seeing the world for the first time. Matvei thought it all high adventure and insisted that they go to the stables to see the horse he was learning to ride so he could be a brave soldier like his father.

A day of new experiences behind him, and his thighs and rump sore from Matvei’s attempts to teach him to ride, Myk insisted that he needed to rest before the evening meal. At first the little boy had found his fear of horses quite amusing but, after realising that Mykhail was serious about the mad eyes and vindictive streak he believed all equines possessed, the heir to the Gate had ordered a placid old mare for the novice. Matvei had said a thoughtful good night and promised the aching man that he would soon be riding with ease. Mykhail, it seemed, had become a project. A less harassed looking Iraina collected Matvei whose eyelids had started to droop. Stasja needed a few hints but she too eventually left the guests to their suite.

“Are you their father?” The question had been waiting to be said ever since Ganya had started the story of how Dave fitted into their lives. It had made him feel uncomfortable whenever he thought Stasja was flirting with the moonlight man. Something was sliding around at the corner of his mind, something just out of grasp, something that must have leaked through with his awakening.

“No.” The answer seemed very final so Myk did not press the point. The memory flickered again, something about children, children had been important. He’d not known Dave to lie to him - it was more that he picked his time to tell the truth. Only when cramps and aches had been attended to by thin fingers did Dave expand on his terse reply. “Having children is something we definitely cannot do. Whatever other gifts Shabtis had we were never designed to reproduce.”

“But the Anakim?” Myk was stretched out on the bed, all tensions eased by the skilled massage he
had received.

“Context, just part of the context for Ekaterina and her people. They understood angels, they got angels.”

“What do they have here then?” The blond man rolled over to look his first in the eye.

“Well, nothing specifically here but further into the Fortress there used to be a very strong tradition of a green man, a spirit of the woods if you like. The green man slept under the trees, he brought the spring after the endless winter of the Collapse. Some people were convinced that they had seen him. Some said that he took pleasure from their flesh and they were always unable to resist him. The stories go back centuries with different variations here and there. I don't doubt that in some places the green man is still used as a reason to hide very human affairs and explain unlikely offspring. Here he is little more than a children's story, brought to the Wall by those travelling east.” Dave smiled and his eyes briefly showed the weight of time he carried within him. He blinked the ages away.

“Children's stories have ways of persisting no matter how educated the adult believes themselves to be.”

Myk nodded. He had patience. It was enough for now. There was the briefest contact of lips then the green man left him to snooze, waking him only when it was time to wash away the day's adventures.

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The pleasant girl sent to collect them turned away from the dining room used the previous night and, instead, took them on a longer route to the private suite of the Gate and the Keeper. According to the girl only the four of them would be dining together. Stasja, apparently, was spending the evening with her young captain and possibly also her other new friend. The androgyne and the gossip hadn't yet surfaced from the official's apartment. The girl seemed to find this quite amusing. It was the talk of the out wall staff. Nothing was said about where and how the guests she was escorting may have passed the previous night but Myk worried that the look she gave them both said that she knew very well. Laughing and joking with their guide Dave appeared unconcerned and relaxed, comfortable again in the apparently modest looking formal silks.

Myk did not recall the details of his second meal with Ganya and Nikita quite as clearly as the first. There was food, and it was good food, but it was of minor importance compared to the run of feelings as the four of them reclined against cushions scattered casually around a low table. Nikita had greeted them both with a respectable enough kiss of friendship as they arrived. After their guide had taken her leave, however, Myk was surprised to feel her soft lips again and then a rush of pleasure as her tongue brushed against his own.

“Oh Ganya.” The woman sighed and turned to her brother-husband, her hand running the course from the corded muscles of Myk's neck to the small of his back and holding him close. “Ganya, Ganya your words didn't do him justice.” Hers was a hungry smile. “I hope the rest of him tastes as sweet.” And so the meal began. The bearded man sat beside Dave, occasionally running a hand through the brown hair that just begged to be tousled and kissing him with a great deal of satisfaction. The Keeper stayed barely more than a hands breadth away from Myk, stroking him sometimes as he imagined she might do with a favoured pet. She whispered pleasures to him when it seemed the others were distracted. He felt the heat begin to rise.

“Last night Ganya started telling me how you both met Dave, how you wanted so much to have children. Could you finish the story for me?” Having an idea how his night was going to end Myk thought it best to ask his question first. Nikita topped up his drink and poured herself another large glass of the rich red wine. Her lips were dark and tantalising as they formed the words.
“I don’t think I was ever taken with the concept of desire so much as the night the three of us dined together. We had less than twenty five summers but me and Ganya had been lovers long enough to know that we were not going to be blessed. It was our secret. The taint of our blood meant the end of our line. And then this man appeared, this man who was willing to admit an attraction to his own gender, this man offered us no censure. He said that sometimes he had been able to make differences to people, to make things possible that should not be ...”

“He asked us if we would trust him.” Ganya raised his head from his close concentration of Dave's clavicle. The two of them smiled at each other.

“There has to be trust.” Dave's voice was soft.

“He asked us if we would give ourselves to him.” Nikita seemed fascinated by the clasp at Myk's waist.

“There has to be submission.” Dave pushed Ganya onto his back, his hand busy inside the sighing man's silks.

“We allowed ourselves to have joy with him.” Nikita began to peel the layers of silk from Myk.

“Again and again.” Ganya's hips moved as a reflex.

“Over and over.” Nikita smiled as she stroked tanned flesh.

“Change comes with trust and submission, the intent of the giver and the grace of the recipient.” Dave's voice came from a faraway place, an instructive tone that was calm in contrast to the lust that directed his movements.

“The three of us made a life and together we brought Stasja to term. She is our daughter but only through the changes that this man made in us could she be brought into the world. Dave stayed with us more than a year that first time. In that time he gave us more than a daughter, he gave us hope and comfort and joy. We knew he had another life and that he'd already given us more than we could ever hope for but ... but when the time came we asked that he would always call on us if he was passing by.”

“Matvei.” Myk found it difficult to concentrate as Nikita's ample breasts squeezed against his rigid cock. “The three of you made Matvei in the same way.”

“I answered their need.” Dave eased himself between Ganya's legs and both men sighed together. Ganya made the same small sounds of pleasure as he had the previous night. Neither seemed to care that they were being watched.

“The second time was easier. Something of Dave had remained dormant inside us. It didn't take as long for me to plant Matvei inside my brother-husband.” Nikita rolled away, shedding the remains of her clothing and pulling Myk towards a wide couch. Fascinated, he stared at her masculine parts, the way her scrotum had drawn up tight under her small penis, the glans swollen and dark against the gentle curve of her abdomen. He was aware that her voice continued as he knelt and made his first cautious attempt to pleasure the hard flesh with his tongue. The sensation was not unpleasant. “The pregnancy was strong right from the start. Dave stayed as long as he could. He left us when my breasts swelled with milk and our people were told that there would be a second child. He didn't want anyone to guess that Matvei was not just our son.” She held his head still and tilted his chin up to look into his eyes. “We will have each other tonight.”

Myk was too distracted to notice when Dave and Ganya left the room. His world was taken up by
new sensations. Nikita was gentle with him, taking her time to open him and take him. And when she was spent in him she eased him back and took him in her mouth. She swallowed him down and took another long look at him. Her smile was still greedy. The Keeper wanted more from him. What she wanted he would give. It didn't take long for her to rouse him again and then for him to gasp and shudder inside her. Easing over-sensitive flesh back out from between her parted buttocks he lay next to her and tried to match the experience to things he'd seen in his isolation. Ekaterina would never have wanted him to do that.

“Was I OK?” It would be his refrain. She laughed and held him close. He licked the sweat from between breasts that would, soon enough, provide milk for her third child. He gave himself to the inevitable fatigue, her words passing beyond his conscious mind, “You are amazing. How can you be anything else?”

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He woke in his bed in the guest suite. He was not alone. Long arms lay along his own as his first murmured greetings in his ear and gently asked how he felt.

“I wanted your first time to be … tender. I trust you are not hurt?”

“I’m fine. Nikita was very careful not to rush me. I had no idea it would feel like that. No, I knew it … but I didn’t. Some of the things I saw back in the chapel, people afraid and the pain …”

“That wasn’t love. It wasn’t even sex in most cases. Some people like to take advantage of others, some get off on causing pain to control others, and some are just cruel. Nikita is none of those.”

“Will you do the same to me as she did?” Myk turned to face the moonlight man, his voice hopeful even as he guessed he would be disappointed.

“I will - but not yet boy.” The answer would become Dave’s refrain. There was still much to see of the world, much for Myk to experience before the time would be right for them to share.
Moving on

Chapter Summary

Dave returns from his farewell to Melinda. Gihon and Myk tell him what he's missed and what they think Lia might be. They all have to move on.

Dave sat quietly in the blood red car. He had made a slight detour on his return journey. Parked in the underground garage he was in no immediate rush to move from the peaceful space, instead he let his eyes rest on the thing he’d brought back with him. He’d been gone nine days; a few more minutes would make no difference.

He thought about Lia - her skin so soft and flushed with desire, so warm against him as they lay together in the apartment. He thought about Melinda – so old by the reckoning of humans - how she had retained her dignity even as tears sparkled in the corners of her eyes when she recognised him. No matter his feelings for her his loving had not been enough to protect Melinda from time. Not like Gihon and Failbhe. Not like Helena.

And now there was this girl, young and wanting so much to be his. Seeing the beauty of her, feeling her flesh responsive under his touch he’d ached to take her. But he hadn’t. Though he might have pretended to be gallant it was not just the hesitation when she released him from his jeans that had stopped him acting. She had offered herself in ignorance and, for once, that didn’t seem right. For all his talk of complications and waiting for the time to be right he realised he wanted her to know what he was and still desire him. In a nervous whisper she had asked him if he loved her. The old form of words had rushed to his lips and he’d bit them back, trusting his mouth only to tell her never to doubt the depth of his feelings for her. Those words were only for his own kind. Those words …

Eventually Wepwawet gave a diffident cough from the navigation system and enquired if he was well. In truth he was tired, his endless years suddenly present, all the images he’d tried to forget bright and sharp before him. The Delta may have wiped his eyes as he left the safety of the car.

Myk continued brushing through Gihon’s hair as they heard Dave come up from the basement. Neither of the men turned to look at their senior. They knew how long he had sat in silence. The long mane shone with earnest attention. Though their pose was nonchalant they were both wary of saying the wrong thing - so they said nothing and gave him time make his report.

“Melinda is gone. I got there in time to say my goodbyes. She was herself to the end. She recognised me and it was something awful and wonderful to be able just to sit with her.” His voice was flat as he tried to be matter of fact. “She had a good life after I left. The girl I met was her granddaughter, her favourite, a good kid. She had access to all of Melinda’s archives. After … after she’d gone we went through her files and removed any references to me. There were some photos back from when we first met. Destroying them was harder than I’d expected. We looked so happy. It was like denying anything had ever happened between us. The funeral is in a couple of days, I won’t be going … I don’t exist.”

Dejectedly he slumped into one of the dining chairs. “I’m tired guys; I’ve had enough of hiding. There’s only so long that money and rumours will give us the smokescreen we hide behind and I don’t want to have to move on. I like it here. I like this life. I’ve found someone and I don’t want to
have to lie to her.”

“You might not have to.” His husbands joined him at the table, a dark head on one side of him, blond on the other. They both took his hands. Gihon continued. “Something happened while you were gone. Lia might be more special than we first thought. More … like us special rather than human special.”

To the disbelieving brown eyes Myk explained how he had spent the night with Lia but that she had felt so much like Gihon in his arms, not like a human at all. It was only with Gihon’s quietly shamefaced admission of how much he had enjoyed the feeling when Lia had touched him that Dave realised they were serious. He had witnessed Gihon’s almost hysterical aversion to being with women, that he had wanted to respond to her was a shock for all of them. But ‘women’ by definition had always meant human. Surely, they couldn’t be right? Even as he hoped that she could be that rarest of things he dreaded what else she could represent.

“If she is one of us, she doesn’t know it … is that why didn’t we recognise her? There were none of the cues. Or, is it because she’s not finished? She is drawn to us but she doesn’t know why. No. No. Can’t be.” He felt sick. They hadn’t been there, they didn’t know. Their faces had that stupid optimistic certainty of youth, they didn’t know. “Maybe you’re wrong, maybe she’s like Ekaterina. She could be a fluke, a wild card. She could be an assist like Stasja. Statistically it’s got to happen at some point, humans are so … variable.”

“Would it be so wrong?” There were hopeful looks from both of them even though Gihon was the one who spoke. “Could someone have discovered the technology again and be making more Shabtis? I know you’ve been careful to destroy anything you found but you haven’t found everything. You’ve tended to avoid this continent; there may have been other places, not just where you were created. You said … you said you found the base where I was kept but it had been stripped out. What if the people who found it have been making more of us?” Were they so lonely? Yes. Without the consolation of each other there he knew there was little else but loneliness ahead of them. “What if she has genuinely been brought up human? I didn’t know until I met you. And when we did meet there was no way I ever could have resisted you. Does this not sound familiar?”

Did they think he was so lonely? Well, he was … but … that wasn’t the point. They didn’t know. It was sick. He felt sick at the thought. And he wanted her so much – was this the same feeling they’d had when they first saw him? The unknown. The impossible. New Shabtis. Was there another out there like him? Another who could be the source? Fearing his sky falling in he eventually replied.

“We’re aberrations that have survived by chance and accident. We were meant to be disposable, to be sacrificed for humans, not to be a race on our own.” He gave a short, sad laugh. “Homo Aeternus.” It was a name that he never thought he would say out loud. “We were not meant to reproduce, that’s why they were so fixated on us being sterile. They feared that if we mixed they would lose control of the genie. I heard they had tried to create females after the early Epsilons tore up the women procured for them but it was too difficult. After that some of the sites added conditioning so the vat grown would only find their own kind attractive as a way of controlling them.” He couldn’t look at his husbands. “Yeah, well, we all know the difference between intent and outcome.”

“It looks like things are coming together out there. It might be better to be ahead of the wave than be at its mercy. Wepwawet has picked up chatter within the Foundation. One of the research teams has tentatively identified Gihon as Alban, they sound close to naming Failbhe as his first husband. That will give people a fixed date that I can’t cover up.” The Russian had always been the most practical of the troika and had worked hard to maintain confusion about his partners before and after the move to New York. “You remember the Mapplethorpe is staging a Hawass retrospective next month? Well
they have announced that her grand-daughter has been invited to come over … and there is strong possibility she will bring the Gemini with her. If the Gemini is shown here, what else is going to come out into the open? I have discredited or suppressed the odd bits of footage of Gihon at the Scarab that surface from time to time but this could be too public. What if this stirs things up again and people start taking more of an interest in us?”

“If it comes to it you two don’t need to be brought down by the peasants with the pitchforks and the torches. Gihon is still just about young enough to pass for human. Remarkable, yes, but it’s still within the possible.” Even as he said them the words sounded hollow. He didn’t want to think about leaving. They had always known the risk would increase as the world became more aware. But now, oh but now, there seemed to be so much more to lose. Tense knuckles took all his attention.

“No, what happens happens to all of us. While you were gone Zael asked me to lodge a formal biography. He’s trying to get ahead of the re-emergent societies people to prove dates but I think we should beat them all and go public. We control how it breaks, we stay together. We need each other. We wouldn’t have our lives without you. And I think …” Gihon corrected himself, “…we think you should tell Lia how much you need her. One way or another, whatever she is, she needs to know you love her if she is going to know what you are.”

“We have been honest with her. Time for you to tell her what your love means. You once told Gihon life is change. If you love her tell her the words.” Myk moved away from the table. “Tell her the words. Have her with us. Live again.”
To The Western Isles

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Dave takes Myk across Fortress Europe, all the way to the Western Isles.
Myk learns how to answer needs that cannot be said.

They left on horseback with loving wishes and the recollection of passion. They had stayed in the city of the Gate and the Keeper longer than they had stayed with Ekaterina. Their task completed they turned to Europe. Dave was guide and tutor. He showed Myk the wreckage of the past and the return of life as humanity did what it did best – adapt and survive. They passed through countries that had forgotten their names, cities that were ghosts of themselves and used bastardised languages that had mutated from the original words that Myk was surprised he knew.

In some places they slept in caves and waited for storms to pass. In others a leafy bower was conveniently found. Stories of the green man returned and began to be whispered in the ale houses where people congregated, repeated along trade routes. The stories outpaced the leisurely and apparently aimless journey of the men who stirred them. They rode the wake of myth and, where they could, they answered the needs of people they met – sometimes openly, sometimes in secret. At times Myk had been surprised by those needs, occasionally saddened, but always he had accepted and had played the part he was compelled to.

They faced a narrow and turbulent sea. Horses had been changed and changed again. Sometimes they had gone on foot. Sometimes they had hitched rides on the back of the great steel machines that crossed the continent on the exposed skeletons of the past. Others times they had ridden the tracked and wheeled monstrosities left behind by long forgotten armies. Now, a boat waited in the harbour below them. It would not wait much longer.

“Where are we going next?” Myk didn’t look at his elder but kept his eye on the storm tossed waves beyond the safety of the harbour wall. There appeared no end to the grey as the sea and the lowering sky met at the distant horizon. The sisters that Myk had been spending his nights with had told him stories of what might be found over that horizon. They had never made the journey. It wasn’t one they had recommended to him. Dave had gone down to the harbour to negotiate passage for them some days before and had returned in a rush to hurry him to the dock. Myk had kissed the sisters farewell, he knew he wouldn’t see them again.

“The End of the World.” The narrow back set off down steep steps. In all the places they had gone Myk had followed Adam Kadmon with a faith that would have been dismissed as religious if he’d admitted it aloud. But still he followed and believed. More than anything he waited for his time to come. In months of travel and endless hours in countless beds he had never had that intimacy with his first that he still craved. The change of the tide would take them beyond the safety of the Fortress and, Myk hoped, to the end of his education.

The captain of the unnamed ship was silent and withdrawn. His cabin was cramped. Myk assumed that gold had bought their berths on the battened down and weather beaten craft but there seemed to be no room on the cargo ship for them to have their own space. Their journey was not the direct route but a longer voyage north, better in the long run Dave had explained as it avoided the worst of
a still active fall out zone. The first night a rough hand woke Myk from his sleep and forced his head down onto the surly commander. The man said not a word to him. Not that night or the next when ‘mmmnph’ was all that accompanied another equally reluctant seeming ejaculation. The narrow room smelled of desperation.

They disembarked silently, no acknowledgment even of their presence as the crew struggled to transfer cargoes. The flat eyes of incurious stevedores looked through them as they left the pier and the boat behind them. Dave had shaken his head when Myk started to say something to the captain, the warning look was enough to keep the Mu silent. As they began a journey across a harsh landscape struggling to turn spring into summer he finally turned to his elder.

“What the fuck was all that on the boat?”

“Men here don’t like men. What happened to you didn’t happen.”

They travelled in silence for some time. Myk had seen people shy or ashamed of their own wants before but never the aggressive denial that characterised his use by the captain.

“We are less than men because we allowed ourselves to be used. The crew believe they would demean themselves by acknowledging us. We were never on that boat so we couldn’t have had sex with anyone on board.” The set of Dave’s mouth declared the subject over. Myk knew better than ask what had happened to him in the harbour-side inn.

The land rose to a wide spine of hills that rolled through the countryside. Always the route seemed to be upwards as they travelled north on ponies bought near the coast. The small horses seemed like the people of the land – the Western Isles, apparently - rough, hardy, and uncomplaining. And, finally, in these lands Myk heard a daily language much like that that Dave used in private with him as they had travelled west. Dave explained that this used to be the land of the Angles, a land of learning and grace and a cosmopolitan acceptance of all peoples. And Dave had sighed and, with a rueful shake of his head, warned Myk not to respond to any advances from men or say where they had come from.
Chapter Summary

Dave meets resistance trying to see Lia.

“How can I explain that you’re really making too much of the age thing? What can I say to you? My first ever lover was a woman. She must have been fifty years older than me and I thought her the most beautiful person I’d ever seen. The first man to say he wanted me was only slightly younger than her. I thought nothing of it then. I think nothing of it now other than to be relieved at the gentleness they showed me.” The two faces appeared sceptical, the woman downright suspicious.

“You pull a face and say ‘how can you’ but think for a moment. You wouldn’t turn down my senior husband if he offered would you? We all know you lust after the idea of him - you too Robyn even though you know you’ve no chance. He’s much younger than me but if we got down to specifics I bet you’d still feel it close to necrophilia. I’m so old that it’s not even worth considering the age difference.”

“How old?” Lupe was Lia’s closest friend, he appeared to accept Dave’s reasoning, but Robyn was not so easily swayed. Hard headed, she seemed to have a fetish for facts. She would be disappointed tonight. The only person he wanted to be honest with was nowhere to be seen.

“I can be fairly confident that I’m the oldest person you will ever meet. My age is merely a number, it’s not important; it could be two hundred, three hundred … nine hundred if you want to think of something completely impossible. I don’t have to tell you. If it doesn’t bother me, and it doesn’t bother Lia, why should it bother you? Please, I know her phone is here, can I just see her?”

Robyn was still setting objections. “It’s late, what’s so important it can’t wait until tomorrow? I don’t care who you are, you’ve had the girl dangling for long enough surely another night won’t make any difference.”

“I couldn’t come earlier, I had to be away.”

“You’ve had weeks, months. What if she doesn’t want to see you?” Robyn was turning into a really hard sell.

“Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I’m not an idiot. What do you want me to say? I’d forgotten what was important. Being away … being away has shown me.” He had knocked and waited for them to answer the door. Wepwawet could have easily opened it for him and he knew exactly where he would find her, but anything to come would be easier if her friends accepted him. It was late and most of the house had already retired for the night. “Let me go up to her. If she doesn’t want to see me I’ll leave, but I would like her to tell me herself.”

“Do you know ‘To His Coy Mistress’?” Unexpectedly Lupe came in from left field. Dave understood the reference but he was surprised that the wispy little man was familiar with it.

“Marvell? Yes, of course, who doesn’t?” Robyn’s face showed she didn’t. Too hard-nosed perhaps for that particular pleasure of longing. “Only this time I regret that I have been the one being too coy. Please let me go up and see her.”
“Next floor up, second door on the left. But if she says no she means it and you leave straight away.” He turned and shushed the objections next to him. “Quiet woman, you are just getting in the way. This is love, or near enough to make no difference. Let him by.” Lupe pushed the protesting female back through the door to the common room, closing it quickly behind him. “You won’t hurt her.” It wasn’t a question and his black button eyes glittered with resolve. There might not have been much of him, but he was still determined to defend his friend.

“Never. Thank you.” Dave disappeared from view, long legs taking the stairs two at a time.
The old man looked old. Old on old. Time was expressed in every step of his reed thin frame and the folds hiding still bright eyes. Myk had seen the very old before on their journey but something about this one made him uncomfortable. There was something about him. Something in his eyes, something that said he wasn’t quite as frail as he looked. The woman hadn’t let them into her house until the girl had brought the old man back from the village. Both the girl and the woman referred to him as ‘grandfather’ but Myk wasn’t sure quite whose grandparent he was, he could have been as old as the hills they had travelled through.

They were near the end of the land again. There was a hint of salt in the breeze as they waited for the old man to arrive. World’s End. Once in the house Myk accepted the bitter brew from the girl and smiled his thanks to her as she went to sit with her mother. The accents so far north were almost another language. The Russian was having some difficulty keeping up with the conversation between the old man and his first, better to smile and say nothing rather than make a mistake.

Strangers were unusual. Strangers carried the threat of the outside and the heathen influences of the south and beyond. No surprise that the woman wanted a chaperone before offering them the hospitality of her hearth. This land had a strong sense of propriety, not for these people the wild extravagances of the Laird’s palace or the distant myths of the green man.

“Why have you come all this way to the End of the World? It seems an arduous journey to take, even in these modern times, just for simple curiosity. There are many pitfalls in the world beyond this blessed land, many threats for the unwary traveller and his … friend.”

Myk wasn’t certain if the old man had slowed his speech deliberately so he would understand, or if he was growing used to the dialect. The grandfather spoke for the women. It seemed to be his role. The words were directed towards the older of the two visitors but Myk felt the odd gaze of the old man resting on him. In some way he was being measured up. Not like the surly men in the wayside inns who took him to be the thin man’s bodyguard and wanted to try his strength. More like a man who recognised their difference.

“I am showing my friend all the world there is to see. From what I’ve heard there is no finer place than World’s End at midsummer. Even those who have been gone many years still miss the turn of the seasons here.” Dave looked intently at the old man, looking for something behind the parchment thin skin and faded echoes of old scars. Eventually the old man nodded and they were given rooms in the large house.

“Which of you is it?” Myk carried on chopping wood for the fire. The woman had asked him to work so he did. Intent on the rhythm of the axe and the satisfaction of the impact he hadn’t realised
that the lilting voice was talking to him. “Is it you or the other one?” A few more strokes and the logs were all split. One handed, the axe flicked passed his interrogator’s auburn hair and buried itself in the dying tree he’d been using for target practice earlier in the day. He took a long draught of water from the jug held in the girls shaking hand.

“Which of us is what?” For some reason she didn’t elaborate on her question but mumbled some excuse about going to help her mother. For all the frustration of waiting, Myk was happy enough in the here and now and the blushing glances of the girl. It had been more than a week since his last woman. He caught her hand. “Seònaid. Which of us is what?”

“Neither of you have any wife braids. There are no child beads in your hair.” She paused when she saw no comprehension on his face. “Grandther says it’s just because you are alien and don’t know the ways of a godly society. But the boys in the village don’t know which of you they should be scared of the most, they won’t come here alone.”

“The boys are scared? Why should the boys be …” He sat on the tree stump that had been his anvil and gave the appearance of thought to hide his amusement. He didn’t let go of her hand. “Oh. Boys don’t interest us. They don’t need to be scared of anything apart from being shown up by a foreigner more than old enough to be your father.” He smiled. She smiled back. She was no innocent, she just hadn’t known how to make the first move. In his room he showed her the difference between a man and the boys she knew. And he was very tender.

At the evening meal the white haired man looked between them. He said nothing. He knew what it was like when strangers came and turned young heads. He had done the same in his time. He felt an old ache in his chest when he looked at the skinny one. The shining one he tried not to look at for too long, scared that he would not be able to look away. Flòraidh was still not sure of the wisdom of letting them stay in the house but the old man would not be gainsaid. As far as the patriarch was concerned the fact that their presence irritated the Imam was reason enough to give them roof and hearth. If he was lucky he would see another child born in the house after the strangers left. That would be enough to keep Seònaid away from the Imam and the unsubtle suit he’d begun to press much against the old man’s wishes.

They went up through the trees, taking the old paths up into the heather. It was a fine day, clear and warm. There was no one, nothing in sight but the colours of the land and the purity of the sky. They stopped in the peace of the hot afternoon and ate some of the food given to them by Flòraidh. (The woman had meant to have stern words with her daughter while the strangers were out of the way. Dave’s expression of thanks for her hospitality had rather blunted her resolve. Maybe the strangers were not so bad after all.) There was a wineskin so they drank the potent liquid and lay back, content in the sun.

Eyes closed, Myk sensed the movement before Dave’s lips pressed against his. He opened his mouth to the gentle pressure, the aftertaste of the wine fresh again as their tongues met.

“You are so beautiful.” Dave smoothed back his hair. “My angel.” They kissed again. On the bare hill, nestled in a dip in the heather they shed their clothes, they touched each other. Above the End of the World Dave said the words that became the bond between them. Beyond the End of the World he showed Myk the difference between a Shabti and the men he’d known. And Dave was so tender, so very tender when he kissed the tears splashed from white lashes and held the young one close. Slowly the sun crawled its way across the blue and eyes frightened by eternity eventually blinked at a new world where everything was suddenly different and every atom was the same as before.

“What did you see?”
“Time. It ate me. It burned me. It washed over me and birthed me. I touched the branches of the Sefirot. I saw you. The seed at the centre. Adam Ka …” A finger on Myk’s lips stopped the word being said.

“What did you see?” His voice was soft. Dave would not scold the new born.

“I have no idea.”

“Good. So we begin.” Dave kissed him again.

Eventually they dressed and returned to their walking, looking for something that Dave said they would recognise if, or when, they found it.

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At the evening meal the old man gave thanks for the day that had passed and the happiness of his family in the days ahead. “Insha’Allah” they all said as they broke bread.

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With sixteen more years on the planet than he the girl was lush and plump in her youth. Soft and warm, so moist against him. Alive and vibrant. Myk hesitated to take her again. He was afraid the vision of eternity would somehow leak through his unshielded eyes and burn through her brief time. So fragile they seemed now; bones delicate under the weapons of his hands. He could crush her, snuff out the life that she so casually set in his path. But she smiled and asked him to fuck her and make her cry out again in pleasure. And so he did. And if something changed inside of her when he spurted his sterile essence, well, what else was he there for but to do what they wanted?

The brief interlude of long days gained a rhythm. Breakfast, jobs around the house, then a walk with his first as they explored the landscape - and each other. They would return and wash before the evening meal prepared by the women. The things that may have happened between Myk and Seònaid, or between Dave and Flòraidh, in the between times were not mentioned out loud but significant glances spoke volumes. The things that happened on the hillside, or in the forest, or once hurriedly and in silence in Dave’s room were never said.

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“Insha’Allah” they all said each night as the grandfather gave thanks.

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It was only a matter of time. One day, in the lee of an overhanging rock face shielded by centuries of scrub and ignorance, Dave found what he’d been looking for. They pushed their way inside a partially collapsed escape corridor to find they were not the first. Everything that could be taken was gone, what was left had been destroyed by fire and lye. Wheeled tracks and footprints in the dust of bodies led to main doors damaged and long sealed. The previous discoverers and destroyers had not been local. Whoever they were they had left without even a trace of their passage in the folk history of World’s End. In the dead time of the outpost of the lost world there was no way of telling how long ago the thieves had entered.

Some markings could still be made out on the walls. The letters were Roman rather than Cyrillic but Myk still recognised their meanings; they were very similar to the ones on the walls where he was born. He traced the outline of a letter repeated across wrecked doorways – here it was λ rather than μ-- and looked at Dave as he sat in the dust.
“So this is where your Gihon came from. This is Lambda.”

“I had suspected it. This is a cache rather than the main lab. I guess we have to thank the paranoia of the Western Shabti project for separating the storage from development. I knew there had to be more than I had found on my other searches.”

“You’ve been to Alba before?”

“A few times. I was here before the Collapse. I returned after, when the world went mad. I destroyed the bases in the central belt, found the evidence of what they did and torched the lot. When I met Gihon and he opened himself to me I realised that I’d missed somewhere.” The dim glow of weak emergency lighting gave his face a demonic cast. “This wasn’t random. Anything that looked viable was taken. For whatever reason the pods were checked … and I’m guessing that someone decided to ditch a runt rather than let a pod be used up in a full growth cycle.”

Side by side they sat in the ruined room. The walls were thick. The walls had been useless. The threat had not come from outside but from someone who knew how to get in and take what they had protected. Slowly Myk put his arm around his withdrawn elder. His kisses were soft; they brought the sad brown eyes back to the present. Hidden from the world, away from the sun, Myk screamed aloud his passion as he sank into the mystery of sex with his own kind and gave and received, in turn, the essence that Dave called haoma.

“What did you see?” Dave asked it after each time. Myk never knew what he was meant to say. He wasn’t sure there were words to describe how it felt to touch and be touched by god – words that Dave would find acceptable.

“I saw that it’s time for us to leave here.” They covered their tracks. They dusted each other off and returned down the hill to the world they had not been designed for.

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In the evening Myk took the girl aside. He asked her if there was a particular boy she had in mind, one that she was missing more than the others, one that might be a suitable father for a child. Seònaid had laughed to cover her embarrassment but admitted that there was one, one whose straight body would remind her of the sunlight man when he had gone and who she would prefer far more than the fertile but repulsive Imam.

He wanted to be certain and asked if she would trust him completely. Complete trust being the bauble of the young and protected she gave it to him without a second thought. He asked if he could come to her room at the darkest of the night and of course she said yes. He was gentle with her as he laid her on the bed and spilled his seed inside her. In the dark she thought she saw a glow in his eyes, then something that had been still moved to the bed and it too created its own light. She had no idea how long Dave had been in the room. She didn’t know why but she wasn’t afraid. She had given her trust.

“You told Mikail the boys were afraid of us, they fear that one or both would commit abominations against them. Your holy books tell you about Malaikah. We do as commanded. We did not come for the boys, we came for you.” He smiled. She smiled. She held her hands out to him.

The quiet one seemed to be all bones as he lowered himself on top of her and began to move inside her, his way eased by the essence of his companion. Grandfather had scoffed and said there was no such thing as angels, but that had been before the strangers arrived. The blond one continued to kiss her and stroke her hair. They both touched her. When she came she thought she heard Mikail call the other Jibraa'yl and she closed her eyes lest she was dazzled by their light. She didn’t understand the
words of the answer but she recognised his breathing and the effort of his thrusts as he too came deep inside her. His whisper was quiet in her ear. “Go to the boy you like tomorrow. Lie with him and make a child together.”

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“Where do you go now on your journey of curiosity young sirs?” The old man had decided he was going to miss the strangers. He guessed he wasn’t the only one. Indeed Flòraidh taken more care of herself than she had done since her doot of a husband had got himself killed and Seònaid … well, there was a certain glow that the old man interpreted to mean that they wouldn’t have to put up with any more visits from the Imam. Tearful, the women had refused to leave the house so he walked the men to the edge of the village. The ponies, placid as ever, nibbled stray blades of grass at the edge of the roadway while the men struggled to say goodbye.

“We go back across the Sea of Separation, through the Fortress and back to my home. Mikail has never seen the lands of the sun.”

“Do your people wait for you there?” The old man had never voiced his thoughts, now he feared he was too late.

“There is one who waits. One who came from here a lifetime ago. Sometimes he still misses his land and the people he knew here. He has regrets that he never got to say goodbye. May I … may I address you as I think he would?” Dave touched his hand to his heart, his mouth, his forehead and nodded a bow to the white head. “Moshen Ibn al Haq I bring you greetings and salutations, I offer you the kiss of eternal friendship from him who became the Plaisir.” He stepped forward and kissed each time worn cheek as tears seeped from hooded eyes. “Gihon lives.”

“He lives?”

“He lives. He still misses you. He says your name in his sleep and he weeps for you and your father when the melancholy is on him.”

“He lives? Are you his son?”

“No. I am the same kind as him. I am older than him, older even than you Venerable Grandfather. I am honoured to be his husband. May I tell him that you live and are well?”

“Yes, for as you see I still carry the gifts he bestowed on me when we were both young.” Suddenly the old man was gone and Myk saw the dashing captain of the guard that had come to the village so many years ago. It was a memory rich with emotion given from Gihon to Dave and Dave to Myk in the unpredictable communion of sharing. The feeling hit the unguarded Mu like a hammer blow and he gasped and blinked away the pain. Moshen Ibn al Haq turned to him at the sound. “And so this archangel of mercy is another one of you. I thought so. He is very young I think, he shines in the world. Take care of him as you take him to the Plaisir. When you see Gihon tell him I returned to Hannah, he would like that. We had a life. I took her name and gave her children after she had been widowed. I am Moshen Fadl now, Ibn al Haq was a son of the Laird, he would never have settled for the quiet life at the End of the World.”

They left, his final words of farewell drifting on the wind like a lost emotion.

“Fair passage to distant lands. I pray that your God, whatever it is, goes with you.”
Naked honesty

Chapter Summary

Lia waits. Lia wants. Dave strips himself bare to be honest with her.

Lia wasn’t aware of the conversation downstairs. Sticking to her routine she’d retreated to the haven of the bathroom to let the beat of water drive the tension out of her as she got ready for bed. It was always safe in the shower; the others in the house knew not to disturb her and she found her thoughts always seemed to be clearer under the spray as she practiced conversations and confrontations to herself. All she was doing was waiting when what she wanted was to be with Dave. Old, eternal, mad – the more she missed him the more she didn’t care what he might be.

Under the spray she tried not to think about the other things she’d seen while waiting for him. Gihon – the things he must have done for the carefully hoarded scraps of evidence to survive in image and video on the unremarkable chip still hidden in her bag. Things that could not be unseen, could never be forgotten. The body that, in her dreams, had offered such pleasure to the man she wanted. The voice she’d heard sing the words of worship with such earnest intent. And the things he’d done to please other men, the voice expressing lust and abasement. The beatings. The spray of blood across a crowded floor, benedictions of pain cast before paying adherents.

On an intellectual level Lia was aware of the variations rumoured to thrive in Europe and across the remains of Africa, an acceptance of what most Americans, publicly at least, found strange and repellent. The images of Gihon, whipped and chained, on his knees before the statuesque black s/he had made her feel sick the first time she saw them. In the empty hearted days of waiting she found she returned to them again and again (“like a dog to it’s vomit” – she could almost hear her father’s disdain). When she thought she wouldn’t be caught by her friends she looked at them, she kept looking at them, with his voice worshipping a god he didn’t believe in driving through her headphones.

Eventually she’d listened to the long audio track, eyes closed and concentrating only on his words, so strange and obviously true. So much pain. He may have screamed as the ebon domme forced hir way into him but Lia recognised the pantomime, pain was his release. And then Dave had come into his life and he had sung again the words to worship a god. Old, eternal, mad. She had not said anything to her friends. What Gihon had done, what he was still doing, he did for himself not for the new people in the new world to judge. Old, eternal, mad. How far had Dave gone with him, how far could you go with a body built for pain? Old. Eternal. Mad. Words, they were just words. Burning face pushed against cool tiles for relief Lia knew she had to be with him no matter what.

She tried not to think too much about her father, didn’t want the subject of her new personal life anywhere near Tomasz Jordan and his inevitable criticism. She didn’t know why the spectre of her father had begun to lurk in her subconscious. Was it just the obvious question? Gihon had hinted at it to her, had been even more explicit talking to his gender changed friend. The thought of her father was a slippery thing. She didn’t want to work too hard to examine it. If he was well then age was just a notion, what did it matter if Dave was older than her father? And, according to Gihon’s voice, older friends had never seen him age. Who was the mad one?

Thinking too much was exhausting. Caught up with her internal dialogue and the jumble of images
fighting in her head it didn’t occur to her that anything was out of place when she noticed the door to her room slightly ajar. Distracted, she swept a hand toward the dimmer to find the motion blocked by another reaching from the shadows. In the half-light through the gauzy drapes she saw him as an indistinct phantom but, momentarily de-railed just by the thought that he was in her room, she couldn’t work out quite what the pale shape signified.

“Please, there’s no need for more light.” His tone was soft, apologetic. “I’m so sorry for leaving you. I had to go but I should have explained why before I did. I hadn’t realised how difficult it was to be away from you. I never …” he paused as the words caught in his throat, took another breath and tried again. “I never want to stop looking at you. I want to hold you. If you will let me … I would give you all of me.”

Her eyes adjusted quickly after the brightness of the hallway. Dry-mouthed, she realised what she was looking at. He was so slim. Not weak or frail, certainly not old. The pared down essence of a man - long limbs, flatly defined muscles, no bulk, and no excess. He was made for moonlight. She didn’t need any extra illumination to be able to see the pulse strong in his neck, the way his lips were parted and hinted at nervous anticipation. The jut of his hip caught in the filtered light, it drew her eye to the shaded place where she knew there was the only surfeit of flesh. Whatever he had in mind this time his body did not betray the urgency of their first kiss or their one unconsummated night together, but she had the impression that his shallow breathing indicated the level of control he imposed on himself.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, at the edge of the map she had made, the dragons stopped breathing fire and curled their wings about them.

The kimono was little defence against the lure of his naked form, her nipples suddenly hard and impossibly raw against the material. Rather than draw back from him it felt more natural just to shrug out of the pseudo-silk and step closer to his ghostly flesh. So close to the source of her addiction after days apart she couldn’t stop herself from pushing her face against his bare skin. She breathed him in. She couldn’t get enough of him. This time she wouldn’t shy away from what was offered. She began to lick at his neck, pleased to note his deeper intake of breath as she pressed forward.

He drew her with him to the bed and sat facing her for a long stretch of minutes. He said nothing but looked at her, that same slight smile of wonder playing over his lips that she had seen before. He drank in the sight of her toned and shapely figure as they mirrored each other’s pose – legs crossed, backs straight, touching only at their fingertips. Enjoying looking back at him she couldn’t understand how she had withdrawn from him before. Maybe the alabaster reality had been too much for her the first time. Or perhaps it had been the subconscious realisation that her dreams of him had been the memories of another.

Footsteps outside, stopping at her door, Robyn had got away from Lupe. “Lia, you ok in there?”

“Fine. Go ‘way.” No sounds of movement. “Robyn. Go. Away.” She tried to sound stern but the smile as she looked at the naked man in front of her spoiled the effect. “Please.” More footsteps and muttering in the hallway as the concerned housemate was hustled away. The sudden outburst of “Well what do you think they are doing?” showed that Lupe had intervened again.

Dave reached out to her shoulder and she unexpectedly found herself leaning against him, her back hard up against his chest. Sat within the confines of his long legs she felt safe and warm and protected by him, like the time in the library when he’d removed her pain. This time, however, there was no space between them. She felt him stiffening against the small of her back. One pale hand stroked her breast as the other held her tight against him; his breath coming in rapid gasps and swallows. Loosening his hold seemed to take some effort. He finally managed it.
“Lia, you are so young and perfect and full of life and I am so very, very old. I have told your friends
that I am the oldest man they will ever meet. And I was not lying.” His voice in the night was as
serious as she had ever heard him. The pause was a long one before he continued, his breath raising
goose bumps of anticipation on her neck. “I was not born but made before the Great Fall. I tell
people about the Collapse because I saw it. I do not know if I can die though many times in the past I
wished for oblivion. In all my centuries I never imagined that I would meet someone as beautiful and
special as you.” His arms were around her but now the embrace was gossamer light, like he still
couldn’t quite accept that she wanted him as much as she did, like he half expected her to pull away
from him and he didn’t have the heart to stop her if she did.

She heard him say ‘made’, she heard him say ‘centuries’. Though immediately she knew they were
true they were only words. Words could not stop what she felt. Subconscious dragons began to
shrink and fade away.

“But you did meet me. I don’t care how old you are and I don’t care about what you have done
before.” Still, he hesitated. What was he waiting for? She twisted to look into his face. Did she really
see eternity in the unfathomable brown eyes? “David Jensson – whatever you are – I don’t care
about anything else. I feel like I’ve been dreaming about you all my life. Show me the dreams
weren’t wrong.” A phrase came unbidden; an echo from somewhere she’d never been. They were
the old words that had rushed to his lips and had been bitten back, unsaid, in that moment of clarity
and fear days before. “I cannot take from you what is not willingly given and I cannot give to you
what is not freely taken. Know that to you I give myself freely.”

His kisses were ecstasy as he responded with all the desire he’d been holding in check. Nothing, no
one else mattered. She understood what Myk had told her, there was only rightness in the pleasure of
being with the slim man. And in her mind she heard the song and recalled the first dreaming of him.
The words ran around her head even as she gave herself over to the sensation of his caresses as they
entwined. Feeling the surprising weight of his body on top of her seemed proper, just as it was meant
to be. Hands in his hair she guided him down her body until, his breath hot against the dampness
between her thighs, he paused and looked up into her eyes. He asked for her permission. She wanted
no pause but begged him to continue. Such glorious joy as his tongue lapped at her succulent flesh
and long fingers slipped inside her. She may have cried out, she didn’t care. Everything was the way
it was meant to be.

After what seemed an endless age of moaning, panting bliss he abruptly changed position, lunging
upwards to kiss her deeply – the hot taste of her own sex filling her mouth – as his hand brought her
to a final climax. Her softer body rocked against his spare frame, her teeth grated against his as he
swallowed her cry … and suddenly she was falling into limitless eyes and the room seemed full of
light. It was too much. The sense of dizzying perfection was too strong a sensation. Surely it wasn’t
real?

Dazed, she let strong hands put her in bed. Confused, it was only natural that he held her close and
whispered reassurance and love to her. In the final moments of consciousness she realised the thing
that had eluded her, it seemed imperative to say it.

“But you didn’t … you didn’t … we didn’t actually …”

“That’s not important.” How could it not be important? Nothing like that - whatever it was - had
happened to her before. She wanted him to feel the same. “Trust me, you came more than enough for
both of us.” Gentle now he stroked her body, considering what to say next. “The way you come, the
way the power builds up, it’s dangerous. A man could lose his soul in your tempest. No wonder you
were never that impressed with sex before. There are not many who could satisfy you.”
“But you didn’t come.” Nearly gone she hung onto the thought.

“Oh, but I will do - next time. Sleep well, sleep late and tomorrow just enjoy yourself. See your friends. Laugh. Drink. Later, come and join me in the Field of Reeds and we’ll see what happens when we come together.” He kissed her heavy eyelids, his voice the last thing she focussed on as she gave in to overwhelming exhaustion. “Tell your friends that you may be some days …” And then a whisper against her skin. “Be my wife.”

There were no dreams for Lia. Brief hours of unconsciousness while not quite dormant processes fed on the energy she never knew she’d been starved of. Exposed to starlight, her body prepared for more changes started so imperceptibly the day that they met. There were no dragons.
Agreement

Chapter Summary

Gihon feels the echoes of Lia's pleasure. Dave returns and they agree that Lia must be the most impossible thing.
They sleep together, both of them happy with Dave's proposal.

Gihon had retreated to his favourite corner after Dave left the apartment. Confessing that he had begun to find the woman attractive had been an unsettling experience for him, now he sought solace in the discipline and distraction of his books. Myk had been too agitated to settle in one place, didn’t really want to talk about anything but said he had to burn off some nervous energy and had disappeared into the night. Gihon tried not to think of what the young man was doing, the random tender places he might find to expend himself. He would come back when he was ready. The change had to come; both of them were getting worn out by their own pointless circling.

Alone in the apartment. Always, it seemed, he would be alone and waiting. Too scared of rejection to confront the lover he needed, Gihon tried to concentrate on the words before him. However much he wanted Myk, however the strong the craving for him, he had to wait. Everything had to freely given. While he forced his conscious mind to translate the text before him he became aware of a desire building, threatening to swamp his control. Uncertain, he looked up from his corner. He was still alone. There was something strange but so sweetly familiar in the sensation; he imagined he could almost feel someone with him, someone who wanted him, someone who needed him as much ...

“Christ!” Books and pen dropped from his hands as his head snapped back, a sudden spasm running through tense muscles as he lost himself and thought, for an instant, that he was falling, endlessly falling, his star burning up in the night.

The sofa. He was on the sofa. He hadn’t moved. Nothing had changed. Whatever the feeling had been, it wasn’t his. As if afraid of aftershocks he carefully retrieved his books. There was a slight tremor in his fingers and his pen felt strange and unfamiliar in his right hand.

He was still on the sofa, still trying to apply a civilized mind to his work, when Dave burst into the apartment, knocked the books from his hands as he straddled him and kissed him - hard. The taste of woman was on his tongue, his face – even in his hair. The long fingers that held his face smelled of female lust. Gihon tried to break away when he realised what he was responding to but the stronger man would not let him withdraw. Gradually he gave himself over to the alien and, finally, when Dave pulled away, they were both flushed and out of breath. He didn’t move from Gihon’s lap but rested his head on his husband’s shoulder and mumbled into the dark waves that cascaded around them.

“She’s one of us.” There was none of the sick fear, none of the dread. “You were right, one of us.”

“I think she must be.” Gihon lifted the angular face, looked into eyes as surprised as his own. Under the female, beyond the human, the taste echoed haoma. “What happens next?”

“She comes here, she has to. I can’t be without her but I want to be somewhere safe before I commit. I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself … next time we are together I think I must die in her. She
came, oh God, she came like a storm and I thought I was lost. It was like … it was like being with you.”

“It was her.” Realisation was a relief. “I felt it. I don’t understand how, but I felt it. I was falling, I was falling into you.” Gihon laughed. “I thought I was going mad, there was so much joy, and the release was so strong.” Of course. Impossible. Obvious now. Not a woman, one of their own.

“I asked her to come here. Will that be ok?”

“Of course.” He felt the heart race in the ribcage facing him – his own matched the pace. “Our hearts are one. You know that I want you to be happy.” Tenderly he kissed his eternal husband. “Stay with me tonight. Soon enough we will deal with reality and find out what it is to be with the impossible.”

The bed was large and the room dark as the tall men arranged themselves next to each other. It had been many years since they had been so close together. Their bodies betrayed their desires, one for another, but their hands remained gentle this time as they rediscovered each other.

“Where did Myk go?”

“Out, probably started at the Serpent to lose himself in cunt for the night. Wepwawet says it doesn’t know where he is, but I think it’s just not saying. I know where he’ll probably end up but I’ll not call Gielen to beg him to return. He’ll comes back when he wants to.”

“Will he be ok?” So many levels of meaning in such a simple question. Dave was content to let Gihon answer however he chose.

“He has to be. It’s a long lonely life if he isn’t.” The stroking and quiet sighs gradually stopped. There was a glow, a brief flicker of light between them as they kissed and Gihon felt the re-kindling of an energy that he feared had started to wither after long neglect.

“I asked her to be my wife.” It was a quiet statement, one he’d intended all the way back from Melinda’s, one he hadn’t realised could mean so much.

“Good.” The word was formed in a smile.
Kappa the Kappa

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Travelling back through Europe Myk meets a new shabti.
The Delta and the Mu stay with Kappa the Kappa. Myk learns that not all shabti are the same.

It had seemed so easy, natural even. Eyes met across the bar, drinks exchanged and then compliments, and then 'do you have somewhere nearby?' Myk had played through the same scenario countless times. He was familiar with the script but he hadn't yet grown bored with it. The way people reacted to him made it special every time. There had been different settings, different protagonists but always sex, always great, great sex. With centuries, perhaps, of isolation to make up for he was always receptive and gorged himself with human contact in addition to the sublime joy of being with Adam Kadmon. He had never been able to stop thinking of Dave as that. He might not have used the name openly but there was a harmonic to it, all the implications were there when they shared with each other.

This one had seemed no different. Maybe a little hesitant to begin with, a little unsure of himself and admitting what he wanted from the man with the blond halo and the sapphire eyes. Like the other coastal towns they had visited recently Dave had left him in the bar saying that he was looking for someone he'd promised to meet. The angel didn't mind. He quite liked the bar and could have waited all night. It didn't take him long to decide he would enjoy the feeling of being inside this soft one with his pauses and nervousness, his obvious desires.

Myk was close. The man from the bar paused every now and then to sweep his curls back from his face, minor delays that frustrated and excited the blond in equal measure. Myk tried very hard not to hold the teasing head closer to his groin, to force the uncertain lips further onto his cock, to ram himself into the soft lips of the pouting mouth. The uncertainty was part of the man's attraction. Once they were down to business he was clearly an expert in providing pleasure.

“Oh, oh … oh God.” Myk finally lost what little control he had left, barely aware of the way he gave himself to the greedy mouth. For the briefest second he felt his soul leave him, the inexorable pull of the eternal calling him. Suddenly panicked, he opened his eyes to check that he was still with the pretty travesti. It had never felt like that with a human before.

A long hand jerked the curly head back and turned it from the sunlight body to look into the eyes of the moonlight man. Dave, silent as ever, had been in the shadows and had witnessed the culmination of Myk's passion. Full lips curved in a smile as the suddenly intoxicated man recognised who held him. He laughed. “I should have known. Oh, this one tastes divine. So young, so stron ...” The voice faded away. Dave eased the man to the bed and patted him on the shoulder.

“Sleep little Kappa. Sleep and take the sunlight in you.” He blew an indulgent kiss to Myk and left them together, not for the first time he would sleep away from his tow headed lover. The Mu looked at the figure nestled against him. This was another. A Kappa. How had Dave described them to him? Was he meant to become fond of this strange creature? Was he meant to love it or to hurt it? He had that sense of vertigo, of things that had happened in the beginnings of his kind. There was a dizzying
abyss of time between the two of them. Absently his finger traced the line of an elegant collar bone. He
could feel the subtle evidence of repeated healing. Many others had hurt this one. He dropped his
hand to hold the soft swelling of the nascent breast, smooth and hairless, hinting at femininity. The
sleeper gave a little moan of pleasure and moved closer.

This was a Kappa, used and hurt by many of his own kind, given as a plaything and a reward,
provided as a focus for lust rather than risking human lives. Thinking of the feeling of the full lips
around him Myk fell into a daze of his own as he wondered how many men must have used the
same flesh since those first days and then, soon after, into a very contented sleep.

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Morning. The sounds of someone busy making breakfast; humming half remembered old melodies
with an air of happy nostalgia. In his few years Myk had woken in many strange beds, sometimes
alone, sometimes with Dave, often with people whose names he would forget as soon as they were
left behind. No matter what else happened this one wouldn't be forgotten, this was one of the rarest
ones.

“Morning sleepy head. You ready for breakfast?” Dave smiling at him again. This wasn't the room
they’d taken the day before. How had Dave known where to find him, how had in got in the
previous night? “I'll save you the trouble. Me and Kappa go way back. He's the one I've been
looking for as we've crawled south. I found this place and let myself in to wait for him. I hadn't really
expected that you would turn up here but you both seemed to be enjoying yourself so it didn't seem
fair to interrupt you.”

“How far back is way back?” Myk redressed in clothes silently handed to him. He had expected to
have to retrace his steps back to the entrance door to collect the discarded items. Dave seemed to
have beaten him to it this time. The different flavours of morning after were something both of them
had got used to.

“Way back is way back, before this country settled on current borders and a new name, far too long
ago to worry about now. Breakfast.” Dave steered the curious youngster through to the main room.
They stopped on the threshold and watched as the Kappa busied himself with coffee beans and
grinder. A long silk wrap accentuated his narrow waist and his red spiral curled hair was held back in
a matching band. His movements were graceful, his poise promised future pleasures.

“His type is Kappa and you also called him Kappa.”

“Yes.”

“That sounds odd.”

“Most Shabtis were not given names, it would have made us too individual. Kappas were just called
Kappa and given a number to differentiate them. I've only ever known this one as Kappa, he never
gave me his number or where he was grown. It’s not polite to push.”

“I want this one …” Neither of them had shown any indication of jealousy when the other had slept
with men or women on their journey back from the End of the World. Myk wasn't certain how
things would be with another of their own kind.

“Then have him, it's what he wants too.” This seemed too easy. Myk let the uncertainty show on his
face. “There's nothing wrong in wanting. The world doesn't begin and end with me. You are
allowed to want.”
“But ...”

“But nothing. You already know he gives the most amazing head; why not enjoy what else he has to offer.” Dave's smile showed that he clearly knew what pleasures could be found. “When you are ready … when we are both ready … we will move on. Kappa is a thing of joy, but not for forever. I think we should think about going back home and introducing you to Gihon when we are done here.”

Hand in hand they greeted their host and took their time to kiss him a good good morning. They savoured what he put before them. As easy as the meeting in the bar Kappa invited them to stay with him and it felt so obvious for them to smile and agree. Dave excused himself and left to bring their bags back from the small pension they had booked into.

Myk hadn't thought the hotel had been so far away but it seemed to take his elder a long time to return. Long enough for him to push himself into Kappa against the cool tiles of the shower and feel again the uncanny sense of dislocation as an overwhelming orgasm took his strength from him in the warm water. Long enough for them to stagger back to the bed and cover each other in kisses as Kappa breathed his story.

“I was working in a town along the coast from here. The town is long gone, the coastline very changed from the maps I was educated with. It was summer and trade was brisk for the boys offering companionship by the hour, the day, the week. Holiday romance with no strings. All very proper. I posed and my pimp screened out the cheapskates. I see him walk along the tide-line, bare feet hardly leaving a mark in the wet sand, bottom of his kaftan soaked by the small waves that threw themselves at him. It's clear there's nothing underneath the black cloth. I can't take my eyes off him and the way he moves.

“Normally a man would talk to us first, or go straight to the pimp if he had specific requirements. Not this one, this one takes his time looking at us all and gives me that long stare he has. I feel strange inside, a familiar feeling of something long lost. He comes up me, doesn't say anything but opens his robe and shows me that freaky body. I see the bones of him. I see his eyes as they really are. I want to say his name but he puts his finger on my lips and shakes his head. I wonder how no one else has the sense to see who he is.

“He goes to my pimp. Negotiations take some time and I wonder how long he is buying me for. He comes back to me and tells me to put on my street clothes. We leave the beach and go to a nice place in the hills. He gives me my papers and tells me to scrub off the whore face I had painted on that morning. I didn't need it any more, he said, I was free and he was giving me the house and enough of an income so if I wanted to fuck it would be choice and not necessity.”

“What happened?” Myk paused, his lips brushing against a blush pink nipple as he asked the question. Kappa the Kappa laughed and pushed Myk's mouth back around the erect little mound.

“What do you think happened sweetness? Adam Kadmon had just offered himself to me and given me my freedom. It had been centuries since I'd seen one of my own, one that I would want to see anyway. Oh we, we must have fucked ourselves silly for the first month, barely left the bed let alone the villa.”

“I remember it being more like the first two months. I could hardly walk some days you tired me out so much.” The shadow man stood by the bed. He put up no resistance when Kappa dragged him down by his belt and began to undress him. The Kappa might not have been for forever but Dave clearly wasn’t rejecting the pleasure to be had in the now. Myk moved over. There was always room for Adam Kadmon.
Myk sat and watched the setting sun from the balcony of Kappa's apartment. Slowly he drew acrid smoke into his lungs then released it back into the air. He pondered what had happened as he smoked the strong cigarettes that his new host favoured. He didn't particularly like them but the action provided him with a focus and the smell blanked out the scent of sweaty lust and need that, despite a thorough scrub, seemed to cling to him after the blurred hours in bed with the other two. He heard a door open and the shower start in the second bathroom – Dave washing away the lost time. Another cigarette later and there were two pairs of footsteps in the space behind him.

“So, you have one of your own back in Luxor ...” He didn't look into the room. There hadn't been much conversation, mostly moans and cries, but he'd seen the way the Kappa's eyes had widened as Dave came inside him. Things other than words had been shared in the experience, things that couldn't be taken back. Dave said that each of them would give and receive differently. The pretty toy, it seemed, had learned about Gihon.

“What of it?”

“So, can I have this one? He's charming and sweet, so honest in his desires. You don't need another. Let me have him.”

“Have? Myk's not a thing to be given away. You, Kappa, of all of us know better than to play that game. If Myk wants to stay when I leave then he can stay. If he wants to come with me and meet Gihon then I am blessed by his presence. I keep no one.”

Myk started another cigarette. At first he'd been surprised at the way humans deliberately took such toxic chemicals into their bodies. They had little natural protection, they knew the dangers but still they continued the rituals of smoking. It was just one of their self-destructive comforts carried over from before the Collapse. Drinking he had learned to enjoy and would allow himself to feel the blurring effects of alcohol but smoking and taking other types of drug was something he’d done only as the situation demanded. Once he had made love with his first, however, he found himself more understanding of their need to lose themselves, to dissolve in an idea of a cosmic all no matter how transitory or dangerous. Only, when it came down to it, they seemed to be grasping for a shadow of the experience that he had. And that had just been giving. When he received he ... he still had no words of his own to express the force that raged through him.

Haloed by smoke as the evening turned purple around him, the blond man considered his feelings. There was no jealousy of the Kappa. Dave had known him centuries before and had moved on. He would move on again. Myk knew that he would move on with him. Kappa had taken from them both but in return, when he came in them, there was a strange absence of sharing. Kappa came like a human. There was no knowledge, no essence of him given in the release. No hint of the thing that Dave called haoma. Another cigarette appeared in his hand and he saw himself light it as he tuned back into the conversation going on behind him.

“Don't tell me you love him.” No answer from the quiet man, his silence deafening. “Did you ever love me?” Kappa's sad laugh was the old news of one who thought he had a broken heart. “OK, a little, I get it. Just not enough to stay with me. Not like the beast you have in Luxor, not like this innocent one.”

“They want me.”

“I needed you.” Kappa the Kappa now had wheedling edge to his voice. It wasn't his most attractive feature.
“You wanted a meal ticket, you wanted to feel safe. You took and took from me ...”

“I don't recall you ever saying no.”

“... you know I can't, I couldn't. But you were too greedy for too long. You got what you needed. There was nothing else I could give you.”

The pause between them was a long one. Myk suspected it had gone on for centuries.

“How long will you stay this time?”

“I don't know. Weeks? Months? It's been a long time since I was home.”

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A stuffy summer rolled in around them. Shutters and windows stayed open at night and their sex carried on overheated air to the frustrated ears of people in the apartments below. A cloying fug of lust threatened to keep the travellers in place. Sex with Kappa was fantastic, addictive. It was clear that it always would be, but whatever they did there was always the absence, the hollowness at the core of the travesti. Had he been alone with Kappa Myk might have feared losing his own soul to feed the hole of emptiness. As it was, Dave began to have a tired look about his eyes while the Kappa bloomed.

“And you are?” The deep voice surprised the woman. She turned from the cooler and one hand dropped a carton onto a shelf as she took in the sight of the man who entered the room on silent feet. Having tended to Kappa for a long time she was used to the noises sometimes from the master bedroom while she worked. She hadn't expected anyone to appear from the guest rooms.

“Johanna, sir.” Not knowing what to do, she dropped a brief nod to the man as acknowledgement of his presence. He was naked. She tried not to look down from his chiselled face.

“And what do you do for Kappa Johanna?” His accent wasn't local, she loved the way he said her name. His body definitely wasn’t local, nails digging into the palm of her hand reminded her to maintain eye contact.

“I am his housekeeper. I normally come in when I think Kappa is out. I knew he had a guest - guests - and thought he would want more food bringing in.” She couldn't resist, she had to move closer to him, she'd never seen anything like him before. In a dream she reached out and watched her hand stroke the light fuzz that covered his muscled torso. Behind her, the noises from Kappa's room indicated an impending climax.

“The hour is late.” A large hand closed over hers, pressing it against over-warm flesh. “Does your man allow you to stay out all hours?”

“This is Kappa's place. There is no use for me here other than his care. I clean, I fill his larder. Sometimes I keep him company. I've stayed here before and I am paid well. My husband knows the value of being Kappa's friend.”

“Where do you stay when you stay here?” His lips had a hint of cruelty. She couldn’t stop looking at him. He looked like he might bite.

“In the room behind you.” She laughed and jerked her head to indicate the master bedroom. “Kappa would never have me in his bedroom. I've looked after him long enough to know no woman has ever made him scream so.”
“Would you like to stay tonight?” His brows and lashes were so pale. Azure eyes held her gaze as, guiltily, she thought of her husband's beetle brow and weather aged skin.

“Only if you’ll join me.” Independent of thought her free hand made the final declaration of her interest between his legs. He did not seem at all surprised at the way she stroked him. She was. He did not drop his gaze but backed into the room with its tidy bed and drew her with him, on top of him, around him.

Kappa's house was eventually silent. Johanna couldn't let go of the sunlight. She touched him like she couldn't believe he was real.

“I forgot to ask you … what's your name?”

“I am Mykhail. I am an angel.”

“Of course you are.” The woman slept well.

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“You fucked my housekeeper?” It didn't need to be a question, it was obvious from the glow of her skin and the exhausted abandon of her limbs as she slept. “You. Fucked. My. Housekeeper.” An angry finger punctuated the words, jabbing at an exposed shoulder.

“I am what I am.” Myk had learned the art of shrugging. He saw no need to apologise for the pleasure he had given so unselfishly the night before. Johanna made soft sounds, small snores and snuffles into his chest as he wrapped his arms about her. She, at least, had just accepted what he could give. She had been satisfied.

“Leave the boy alone.” Long hands pulled Kappa away from the bed, out of the room. Myk heard the voice of his first, always there to defend him. “The woman wanted him – she had him. What difference is there between that and what we were designed for?”

“But a woman?”

“It's the way he is. It's the way I am. You knew I could never be faithful to you, even down to gender. Neither can he. You still want him to stay with you? Are you prepared for the women and the other men that will come along? Not everything is about you Kappa.” Myk didn't hear the travesti’s comment - it may have been nothing more than a pout. “You are a fantastic lay but I'll not have you suffocating Myk like you tried to do with me last time. God! Three hundred years. I thought you would have moved on by now.”

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Johanna had been escorted home and the three Shabtis had eventually gone on to a bar to get drunk. Dave and Myk quietly mused on the value of possessiveness while watching Kappa let himself get picked up by a tourist who would be in for a surprise later that evening. After weeks of being with Kappa the Kappa it was a day like many others that had gone before. But this was a day closer to continuing their journey down to Egypt, a day closer to meeting the one that Dave called his ‘home’ and that Kappa always referred to as the beast.

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“The boy has to have the pain.”

“Why? Who says it has to be so?” Dave sounded like a man arguing against the necessity of the
sunrise.

“It’s the pain that changes us. What happened to you, what Thanatos did to you completed you, helped you become the soldier. We’ve all had to have our own epiphanies. The boy has to find his.”

“I would protect him from it, there will be another way.” It sounded more like Dave hoped there was another way. Up to meeting the Kappa Myk hadn’t felt unfinished. Apparently that was why he hadn’t been recognised as a Shabti, apparently there was more to come.

“Then you are as soft hearted as the bitch always claimed. You can’t protect him for ever. His true nature has to be revealed in the pain. You show him pleasure. It’s not enough.”

Sat on the balcony, safe in the cloud of narcotic smoke Myk tried not to listen to them. The argument was one that had begun to dominate their private conversations. Dave would insist he would always protect the young one, Kappa would always end by saying that some kind of pain or sacrifice would be needed. Myk knew about the bitch, he knew who Thanatos had been. During their journey, in short sentences, with little detail, Dave had told him how things had gone bad so many centuries before. Kappa said he thought it all necessary. Myk recalled the echoes of the old pain that had seeped into his unconscious mind at his first awakening, shadows of which he could still see dimly when Dave shared himself.

He was fed up of listening to the voice behind him. It was time for them to move on. Shards of blue glittering in the night looked up at the star filled sky. There was nothing more to be learned or experienced with Kappa. Myk thought himself ready for the new adventure of meeting Gihon, the pleasure wife - the beast.

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“Will I see you again?” Kappa was dignified, his face made up perfectly, his long dress accentuating his more recently acquired female curves while discreetly hiding what would always between his legs. Haoma made Shabtis more of what they were. If Myk had ever doubted that fact the evidence was standing before them. The travesti had been striking when Myk had first met him up in the bar, now he was beautiful. His body hoarded the gifts that had been given to him, gifts that would sustain him in the drought to come.

“Probably. Either or both of us, Myk knows how to find you again. If we don’t find you along this coastline then we’ll come looking for you in the southern kingdoms of India. That is where most of the other Kappas gravitated to, there will be a home for you among the Devadasi.” Dave and Kappa smiled at each other. “I might even ask the beast to come with me next time, would you like that?” Dave finally swung himself up into the saddle of the waiting horse as the Kappa coloured at the suggestion. The horses turned and they left with a final benediction shouted to the wind. “Three hundred years Kappa, three hundred years. Don’t go wasting yourself.”
Gihon has the dream of the forest. Lia wakes to find that Dave was not a dream.

Lia’s sleep was dreamless. Not so the man from the end of the world. He dreamed of the forest and the great stag running through the dappled light. He saw the stag clearly again, as he used to do – the naked man, long limbed and fleet of foot, a horned god in the world. His was the never ending heart. Gihon loved the dream of the forest. It had been too long since he’d last been there; returning filled his sleeping heart with joy.

In the small hours, at the time when the liver meridian surrendered dominance to the lung, the time when the human body was closest to death, the woman woke. For the first time her bed was too big. She had no idea when he might have left. Now she had a moment of doubt, had he really been there at all? He had said something important, but what was it? She reached over to the lamp by her bed, wanting to look for evidence of his presence but fearing that he had only been another fantasy – but this time, at least, the body he’d ravished had been her own. Her hand closed on a fold of paper. It was her paper, her pen, undoubtedly his handwriting. And there was something else, something in a soft drawstring pouch. Her fingers automatically opened the bag as the words struggled to find purchase in her sleep filled mind.

“I want you to have this. I hope you will also want me. Come to the Field of Reeds when you are ready. Wear this or carry it as you see fit. Accept that I love you and always will.”
South, to Egypt

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Dave recovers as he and Myk travel south on their journey home to the beast.

South of the city they made a camp for the night. Away from the walls that had begun to close in on him Myk relaxed. He had feared tantrums but it had seemed surprisingly easy to get away from Osmaniye and Kappa the Kappa. Finally away from the spell of the soft flesh he asked why Dave had been willing to give up so much of himself knowing there would be nothing in return. The thin man had laughed, giving him time to take a deep drag upon the last of his cigarettes, and then kissed him – inhaling the smoke from Myk’s lungs before letting the breath out to the clear night sky. “If I am not first a servant to my own kind then what am I?”

They made love in the wilderness, gentle and slow. The sunlight and the moonlight man shared themselves under the sky. In the morning their small fire was nothing more than cold embers and they woke in each other’s arms. By unspoken consent they avoided people as much as possible as they continued their journey. Myk was aware that the route was not a direct one. He had the sense that travelling through the desolation was a cleansing process, a preparation for the return home. Blue eyes were happy to see the brown regain their lustre.

Another night, another camp. They sat and looked into the flames. Apparently they were in Egypt. Myk saw little difference – desert was desert so far as he could tell. Dave felt the change. They were nearing their destination. He seemed distracted, restless and nervous about their return. Myk rubbed a hand through pale whiskers finally softened after itchy weeks of stubble.

“Have you missed him?” He glanced at the thin face through the flickering light. They always lit a fire. They would eat and draw together for warmth, they would draw together to be together.

“You know I can’t lie to you.” The half dark was a time for honesty. They could bare their souls without showing their faces. “Sometimes I miss him so much I wish we’d never met. I was lost as soon as I saw him. As lost as when I first saw you.” A flash of white, a quick sad smile. “Kappa was right. I’m far too soft hearted when I see someone as perfect as you, as innocent …”

“I’m hardly innocent. You’ve shown me far too much of the world for that.”

“You are innocent boy. It’s like a caul around you. You shine, untouched by all this life.” The sad smile again. “Next to you my soul is a charnel house.” They held each other close, hypnotised by the flames. If Dave held back on some subjects it was not Myk’s place to press him. All would be shared in time and that they had in abundance.

“When you said the words to me at World’s End …”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you still mean them?”

“I will always mean them. I said them to Gihon. I said them to you. Whatever happens to us the
words are for all time.” Myk had asked before and the answer was always the same - whether mumbled in half sleep or gasped in passion. The words had never been said to Kappa. Eventually the dark eyes closed as the sharp face of the shadow man rested on Myk’s chest. “Love you both, love you forever.”
The last day begins

Chapter Summary

Lia begins her last day as a human woman. She's fine with that.

“He left then …” Steve’s comment was ambiguous, she wasn’t sure if he was asking a question or stating a fact. Looking for meaning at the back of a juice carton she found that she didn’t really care. She’d left a great weight behind her at some time in the night and wasn’t going to let anything bother her. She was so hungry. The first attempt at breakfast hadn’t come close to satisfying. Bread into toast, yes that might fill a gap, top up with more fluid and she would be ok. Why was she so hungry? “Everything ok?”

“Hmmmm ...” She didn’t bother trying to hide her smug grin as she finally turned to her unpractised interrogator. It might only be a temporary chemical imbalance but she thought she could get very attached to this particular feeling. “Very ok.” Absent-mindedly she poured the juice into her glass and grinned some more. “I’m going over to see him later. I think I’ll take a bag … I might be gone a few days.”

“Oh.” Steve was beginning to see the downside to his official policy of being disinterested. With none of the others hanging around the kitchen there was no one to ask the questions he had barred himself from. “Well, so long as you are ok then …” She was in too good a mood to see the house father struggle.

“I’m ok. I’m better than ok. He just had to go, that was all. It doesn’t mean anything other than he’s got things to do, is probably not keen on the coffee, or the risk of a morning after inquisition. I’ll bet everyone else got on with their day when the door told them that he’d left?” And the awkward man smiled back and admitted that she was right. She was touched at his concern and gave him her warmest smile. “He loves me. I love him. It seems simple enough now. He left me something and … well, I guess I can show you before the others.”

Her fingers found the unusual shape easily enough in her pocket. She placed it on the table between them. It shone white against the dark mottled surface - a broad unmarked band of platinum that would fit the third finger of her left hand to the first knuckle. Steve sat down at the table with a sharp intake of breath. They both stared at the band as if saying what it was would break the spell.

“Oh”, said Steve. “Old and old fashioned. Nothing wrong with that” And he looked down at the time worn gold and jet ring on his own left hand. “Are congratulations in order?”

“Yes, yes I think they are.” The ring was a snug fit. But it felt like it was in the right place.
Meeting the Beast

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Dave and Myk make their entrance at the Gods and Monsters Ball. Myk finally meets the Beast, the River of Eden.
The party ends for the three of them. Myk is lost to love but holds back from his lust for the Plaisir.

“Dear lord,” a comment to a forgotten deity or to the being stood beside him – Myk probably didn’t know himself – “how could you leave something like that? And just on the remote chance of finding another of us. He’s … he’s …”

“Magnificent.” The word was a summary of everything Dave felt.

They had entered through a service corridor. At the back of the main room, obscured by other guests, they watched Gihon as he played the host and greeted donors and sponsors. Dave had tried to avoid telling him what to expect but Myk had picked up some images in their sharing. Suddenly seeing this almost mythical lover dressed as a Norse god made the blond feel inadequate. He squared his shoulders, the leather of his armour creaking slightly as he took a deep breath. The fur, held by jewelled and writhing dragons at each shoulder, made him appear even wider than he was, a bulk that was beginning to draw the eye of passing strangers.

For the Gods and Monsters Ball Dave had said that the beast would always go as a god. Given the theme for the night he’d chosen the warrior garb for the Mu, he said, to show that they were equals. The hammer at Myk’s hip had felt unusual at first but the weight became a reassurance, something solid for him to hold onto in contrast to the insubstantial presence at his side. Dave’s costume seemed to little more than a black shirt and leather trousers. The nonchalant effect of the casually worn greatcoat was a product of hours of tense posturing. Myk didn’t know who Dave was meant to be but he’d been assured that the mad nest of black hair and whitened out flesh would more than announce their arrival to the beast.

They moved closer to their quarry, nodding and smiling at other guests as eye contact necessitated. In small clusters women were beginning to hide their pointing in artfully raised glassed. Less discreet, men were also beginning to nudge each other and discuss who they thought must be the dominant. Myk wondered if it might have been better if Dave had actually bothered to button the shirt. The undercurrent of whispers increased as the wraith was recognised and people waited for something to happen. They pulled up and leaned against a column. If the beast turned their way they were bound to be seen.

“Gihon has a soul that Kappa could never imagine, a heart big enough for us all. He is the most beautiful creature you could ever wish for … oh, but he has a fire in him that could have eaten you up if we’d rushed back here.”

“Does he know we are here?” Myk flashed his teeth in a blinding smile to a flustered waitress as he lifted a glass of something golden honey from her tray.

“Not definitely. But he feels something in the air, he’s been nervous for days.” Dave seemed to be
surveying the room. Quick glances sized up the guests, the staff, noted doorways.

“And you know this how?” The drink was thick, the edge of alcohol hiding behind the initial sweetness.

“Because I’ve been the same.” And he smiled his smile and stepped into a gap in the people just as the great shoulders of the beast turned their way.

A woman appeared at Myk’s shoulder. He glanced her way, a reflex in response to her interest. The break in concentration was enough for the big man to cover the space between them. A discreet door closed behind the swirl of midnight as the Delta disappeared to be alone with his husband. Another woman took hold of Myk’s hand. Whispered suggestions led him to a chair, and Myk let himself be led while he waited for the return of Adam Kadmon. He always enjoyed the company of women. They surrounded him when he felt the air change again. He looked through them, up to the kaleidoscope colours of the beast’s eyes. After a while his chest began to hurt and he reminded himself to breath. The beast. The barbarian. The pleasure wife. The River of Eden. All the things that he’d been told he’d find he saw when he looked at Gihon. He was transfixed. And along with the desire he felt fear.

The party was over for them. Amidst pointing and stares they took their leave. A waiting car took them away from brittle laughter and unrequited lusts. In a silence filled with eyes and teeth a large hand dripped blood slowly from inside a fold of cloak. The blacker-than-night coat stayed closed up. Myk guessed that the flesh inside would no longer be the Carrera white of their arrival. Afraid of the inexorable pull toward the beast Myk rested his head on cool glass and watched the build-up of the city become affluent suburbs. The car pulled through a gate set in an anonymous wall then purred away after depositing them in front of an open door that closed heavily behind them.

The beast loomed beside him, touching him, hands nimble despite their size shedding the leather and fur from his goose-fleshed body. Myk had no idea what he said, or even if he said anything, as he was pulled though the villa to a large bedroom. He felt the tide rising as Dave and Gihon tore off the remains their clothing. He looked at the damage they had done to each other, bites and bruises, deep scratches inflicted with urgency. Whatever they had done they were not satisfied. They consumed each other with their stares. They would consume him. The fear returned to the blond man, it made him pull back when lust impelled him to the bed.

“Don’t fear boy. We’ll be here for you when you are ready.” It was the beast, a voice deep as Myk’s own, the distant strains of his Alban heritage adding music to the words. The beast smiled at him and eased his panic. He held his shoulders and kissed him in the European fashion. “I cannot take from you what is not freely given, I cannot give you anything that is not freely taken. My heart, my home is yours. Make yourself comfortable anywhere, get to know the door, the door will be your friend. Come back when you are ready. Everything is yours when you want it.”

He opened his mouth but no words came out. The beast knew him, was just like him. No animal, he was Gihon and he would be patient. Myk swallowed and tried to moisten dry lips. Dave came to his rescue, a deep kiss reminding him how his mouth worked.

“Come back when you want. For either or both of us. Tomorrow, or next week. Whenever and however you want. We have all the time you need.” Dave kissed him again. It was a benediction for the nervous acolyte. Then he bared his teeth and the weight of ages showed again in his eyes. Set free, Myk left the room. The sounds of the Delta and the Lambda giving in to their desires faded as he found fresh clothes and explored the house to find somewhere else to sleep.

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After a night on a comfortable ottoman Myk introduced himself to the Turing based door program. He was settled in the kitchen reviewing the villa’s security protocols when a shuffling figure in a loose robe dropped onto the breakfast bar stool next to him.

“Morning.” The voice was a husky whisper, movement seemed painful.

“Afternoon.” Myk poured a cup from the coffee pot and set it in front of the big hands that betrayed the echo of a tremor. The cup was raised. The coffee disappeared. The cup was re-filled and the process repeated silently. Soon after, light footsteps brought Dave to the same place and he sat on the other side of the blond. Myk again provided coffee. Then he said something offensive in Russian and dabbed at a gash behind Dave’s ear that didn’t seem to want to stop bleeding. His elder made a grunt of absent minded acknowledgment. The wound clotted and healed as the coffee was drained.

“Welcome to the Field of Reeds.” The tell-tale tiny signs of burst blood vessels in his eyes detracted only slightly from the warmth of Dave’s smile. It had been impossible for Myk not to see the fingertip sized bruises on his neck. “I hope we didn’t disturb you too much last night. When we’ve been apart … sometimes we get …”

“… a bit carried away.” The outline of an elegant hand was visible on Gihon’s cheek as he turned to face his companions. Myk imagined the impact of an open palmed slap needed to leave such a mark; it would have levelled a less resilient recipient. The big man coughed something bloody into the waste disposal and grimaced his apology as he sat back down.

Whatever else happened Myk realised that he was home. With all of time ahead of them there was no rush, no need to throw himself between the strong men. He had waited for his time with Dave, he could easily wait a little while before enjoying the bruised perfection next to him.
Lia goes to the Field of Reeds. While she wants to be with Dave she is not prepared for what that will mean for her. She is an impossible thing, so what will be this becoming? She has been subconsciously preparing for this since her first meeting with him but no one can say what will be born from it.

The overnight bag was not over-packed but carrying it was as much a reminder of the course she had set as the unfamiliar ring settling in on her left hand. The others had oohed and aahed over the appearance of the precious metal after everyone had been rounded up for her to break the news. Lupe had cried and asked if he could be her maid of honour. Lia had laughed and told him there was no rush, nothing would be changing quickly; it was only a few days at the Field of Reeds. Steve had been more practical and insisted on driving her round to the select apartment building. It was easier to accept his offer with good grace than sit and watch her friends do their best not to say anything about what they presumed had happened the previous night.

In truth Lia had had no idea what to take. If she needed anything her own place was not far away, and if she didn’t want to return she had no doubt that items would appear just as miraculously as the toiletries and new clothes when she’d had her unexpected stay the week before. With a few changes of clothes she had tried to cover all eventualities (after all, what could happen in a few days?) while suspecting that maybe she might not need much of anything at all. It seemed appropriate to return in the clothes that Gihon had provided. The heavy lined skirt was snug around her hips, comforting and warm now that there was a more noticeable bite in the air. Tightening the clasps to secure the extra layer of material at the left seam had come easier than the first time she had worn the garment. She’d demonstrated the curious fasteners to Lupe on their return from the museum. Her friend had been fascinated by them and finally said he approved of the outfit as an ideal combination of accessibility and standoffish sophistication. But he had been ever so slightly drunk by then for all of his original suggestions that they had herbal tea.

She paused briefly before going through the inner door to the apartment; it seemed odd that she couldn’t hear any music playing. At first the main room appeared deserted, and then she saw a familiar dark head bent over his books. His hair was loose and she was amazed that it seemed to shine with so many different tones, so many shades that she’d not noticed before. He looked up at her and smiled. How could she ever have doubted that this was what she wanted? She didn’t know what to say so discarded her coat and bags on the nearest armchair. She raised her hand.

Books were scattered with a burst of swearing as the tall man leapt up and ran over to her, taking her in his arms and showering her with happy kisses. It had been one of her immediate urges the very first time she saw him, now she stroked the long hair that had tempted her for so long and stared into the iridescent colours in his eyes - now blue, now green, greys shot through with brown. She felt like crying out at the shimmering beauty before her.

“Where is he?”

“Down with Wepwawet, they are shaking up the lawyers and running through scenarios depending
on what you wanted to do with that.” He turned her hand over in front of his face, fascinated by the reflections in the white band. “He will be so pleased. He loves you very much. And you know that we both love you too.” The deep voice of the Alban clearly betrayed his origins as different from anyone else she knew. It seemed so obvious now; she wondered how no one had ever said so before.

“I know you do.” She reached up and placed her hands on either side of his strong, wide face. “I know you do.” A woman kissing Gihon was a most improbable thing. Gihon kissing a woman was unimaginable. They both closed their eyes so they wouldn’t have to admit to seeing the impossible. She had thought that Dave was gentle with her; this husband’s lips were a delicate breeze on her own, the taste of him a hint of paradise. A man not meant for her. Perhaps. Maybe. They were poly. She swept up a handful of his shining darkness and buried her face in it, breathing in the essence of him and wondered – shocked at herself - how far their version of poly might go. “How did I never see you like this before? You are so perfect. So very, very beautiful.” She cloaked herself in his long hair, the feel of it electrifying as it cascaded over her shoulders and back. “How could Myk ever resist you?”

Concentrating on Gihon, fascinated by all of him and enjoying the feeling of his embrace, she didn’t hear the light footsteps from the basement. Awash with the scent of the man facing her she wasn’t immediately aware of the extra presence behind, but guessed it as the Alban raised his gaze to look into eyes at the same height as his own. New hands found hers, slim fingers interlacing with her own, finding the band on the third finger of her left hand. Lia turned, her breath catching as she saw the man behind her. He had changed too. Like Gihon, but with subtle variations, he seemed to be more than himself. His hair, still thick and lush but so much neater than when they had first met, was brunette to red shades, flashed through with Gihon’s darkness and Myk’s coruscating blond. When he moved his pale skin seemed to leave a blur, an afterimage of light on her retina. And his eyes. His eyes were … his eyes were … how had no one seen the forever of his eyes? Feeling like the first to discover a new continent she stood, weak kneed and speechless, caught up in the waves of the big man’s mane, supported easily by the muscular arms around her.

“Thank you. Thank you for coming here, thank you for wearing the ring.” His voice was all voices, all timbres, tones and accents. The same quiet tone predominated but now she also heard the notes of the lost and the never were, the angry and the hurt, the barbarian and the child, all expressing his love as he bent to kiss her. It was too much. Fearing some kind of seizure she closed her eyes and covered her ears, folding completely into Gihon and trusting him to catch her.

Voices. Voices she knew talking in a language she recognised but momentarily didn’t understand. She was somewhere comfortable and warm, a hand stroking her hair. A glass held to her lips, sips of sweetness swallowed by reflex. Speech came back into focus. “Take it easy, you’ve had a bit of a shock.” This time the voice directed to her was little more than a whisper, the strangeness in it suppressed. “There’s no rush, no rush at all.” She was on one of the large sofas, the smell of the leather discernible behind the warm scent of the thin man who cradled her in his lap, the surface smooth under her bare feet.

“I saw you both, you were the same but different. I thought you had changed, but you haven’t have you … I’ve changed. What did you do to me last night?”

“I hoped I gave you pleasure. That was my only intent.” He kissed her hair. “Did you dream in the night? Of anything?” Was she meant to dream?

“No, nothing. It was the most amazing sleep …but I was so hungry this morning, I couldn’t seem to
get enough to eat. Been like that all day I guess.”

“I think I had Lia’s dream.” That didn’t seem right, how could someone else have her dream? A small hand tugged protective fingers away from her eyes, Lia wanted to see Gihon’s face. “I felt your release last night, felt the … power. Later I had the dream of the forest, the horned god in the green. Your dream.”

“And I’ve been having your dreams, no, not dreams. Since the first night I thought I was dreaming about Dave, but I wasn’t was I? It was you. I saw you with him, felt what you felt. They were not my fantasies, they were your memories. I recognised your body when you showed me your scars but I didn’t know how to tell you. And then you gave me the chip; you showed me the parts of your life people here couldn’t guess at, how you were made.” She held tight to Dave’s arms around her and concentrated on the face of the kneeling figure. “What’s happening to me?”

“You are changing.” Gihon, awestruck.

“You are becoming.” Dave was very still, she couldn’t look up at him.

“Becoming what?” Such an odd answer. For men who normally liked to explain everything their words seemed deliberately opaque.

“We’re not sure.” Gihon again. The twist of his smile betrayed his uncertainty.

“You are becoming more of what you are. Something we thought couldn’t exist.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Nothing seemed real. One man she felt, the other she stared at. Her head swam with the scent of them. Maybe this was the dream, it made as much or as little sense as sleeping.

“I don’t know how to explain it. You see Gihon for what he really is, perfect as he is. Do you hear his true voice?” She nodded, knowing it to be right. “Do I appear different to Gihon?” She nodded again, uncertain how to describe what she had seen. “Do I sound very different? You seemed fine until I spoke.”

“Gihon is clearly himself. As you say, perfect.” The big man looked away, a hint of colour on his cheek. “But you … you feel like one man to touch but when I look at you, and more when I hear you, you are like lots of alternatives, different possible versions of you. Did you know this would happen?”

“No … not, not like this. I think what you might be seeing is an aspect of potential outcomes, the paths not taken, the words not said … all the old possible lives.” She felt him nuzzling her hair. Despite everything she was as safe as she could be. “Many years ago I met another like us and he said he thought I carried the souls of many within me. At the time I dismissed it as superstition. Humans especially gifted sometimes see aspects of this at times of particular … ah, stress. I thought you might have been one of the gifted but you are something much more unique than that.”

“Is that why you say you love me?”

“I say I love you because I love you. I would love you no matter what you are. I loved you before last night.” His whisper was clear, the honesty undoubted from his core to hers. “I would love you forever if you would let me.” Lia rested her head on his chest. The beat of his heart called her as it ever had. The right place for her to be. She closed her eyes again and wondered what this ‘becoming’ might be.

“Husband, there’s no need for me to be here. I will see you and your beautiful wife tomorrow.”
Rising from the floor Gihon stopped to kiss the woman again, a sensation as strange to him as it was thrilling. Standing, he leaned forward and kissed his husband. Lia followed his movement, fascinated to see his strong hands catch in shining hair to pull Dave’s head back. It seemed all the possible Daves wanted the kiss equally as blurred and glowing features coalesced into the upturned face of her man.

Whatever she had been told about nice girls Lia was turned on by the sight of them together. She had been on the first day, the day she surprised herself by kissing him on the cheek. The pleasure she had the previous night had opened something wide within her. They must have been right, it had been there all along … dormant. She watched them and felt the stirring rise. A tide. The men parted. Lia watched the broad back descend the stairs. She guessed where he might be headed, hoping that she was wrong even as she knew she was right.

“It’s all tied to sex isn’t it.” Not a question. She tried to look at Dave but found the radiance of him unsettling, almost painful. She closed her eyes again.

“Not just sex, but desire and love … and surrender. Together these can carry a transformative power that can be given and received, the thing that Myk calls magick. We have all become in our own way, each slightly different. It seems that you are on the same journey. Gihon began his changes the first time a man took hold of him, changes completed in tenderness after we met. I came close with Myk, but he’s denied himself anything other than the thin mechanical pleasures of the rut. All Myk needs to be finished is to yield, to break away from what imprisons him and to submit to the love of his parfait.”

“And me, how do I get through this stage? How do I finish becoming?” Whatever else happened, she needed to be able to look at him again. She thought the tide would drown her otherwise.

“Let me love you.”

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“Seeing you makes my eyes hurt. Do you have something I can use as a blindfold? I don’t want to see you until you are all in one place again.” There were sounds of a brief search then soft material against her eyes and tied behind her. He had laid her on a bed she imagined was as wide as the other she had woken in in the apartment.

“If you want me to stop - anything at all just say and I’ll stop. We have as long as you want. As long as you need.” The bed gave only slightly as he lay next to her. “I never want to hurt you.”

“Kiss me.” She opened her mouth to him, her fingers on his neck then his collar and the skin warmed material of his shirt. Blinded as she was she concentrated on the sensation of touching him and rolled over to cover him with all of her. She found the line of buttons and freed each in turn as he breathed his essence into her. Her world was reduced to his intoxicating scent and the pleasure of her mouth and fingers she slowly explored the contours of him. Angular collar bones, the uncivilized fuzz of chest hair, small nipples erect to her tongue, the bizarre promontory that was the extension of his sternum, hard ridges of his ribs under her lips.

She wasn’t certain when he began to sigh. It might have been when she shed the silk knit tunic and then released the clasps on the skirt. A quiet sound, barely more than breathing, she became more aware of it as she fumbled open his trousers and pulled the material from his hips. She found his shoulder and pushed him back when he tried to reach for her. “My turn.” Like Gihon he had been barefoot and, despite the self-imposed restriction, it didn’t take much effort to remove the last clothing from him. Barring the blindfold he was now as naked as her; a last minute decision had put underwear in her bag rather than on her body.
With a stretch and a sweep of her hands she encompassed his bare legs all the way from his long feet to grasp the inside of his thighs. The sigh became a moan of anticipation. She could feel the heat rising from him, all the tension within him concentrated in the swollen flesh above her fingers. She guessed that if she looked she would see him clearly defined. Instead, she licked her lips and let her mouth describe to her the shape of his passion.
Consequences

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Myk’s luck runs out and he finally discovers the pain that Kappa the Kappa has promised him.

The same as many times before the pick-up in the bar had been smooth and easy. The woman didn’t hide the wedding band she wore and neither did Myk. They both ignored the metal, hers costly but faded, his shining and new, still heavy on his hand. Sweaty passion in a quiet doorway might have been right for some women but this one seemed to be used to a higher standard of tryst. The nearby hotel was an expensive one. Both of them could easily afford the hourly tariff. He gave her her pleasure and reassured her that her beauty was not fading. He did all that she needed of him. It was his purpose, how could he not do it?

She wanted to see him again. And again. Though the hotel was paid for discretion people became nervous as they saw the woman arrive earlier and earlier for their assignations. More than just sex was suspected in the afternoons with the shades drawn against the sun. The woman didn’t seem to care that there were rumours about her and the attractive man who paid for the room. While Myk had nothing to fear the same was not true of the woman.

“My husband will not give me a divorce. He says the dishonour would be too much. He knows I’m bored with him but overlooks my failings so long as his precious name is not damaged. What about your wife, what does she think you are doing when you are with me?”

“Wife?” They had never discussed what Myk returned home to, it hadn’t seemed that important.

“Your ring. The thing that shows you are married, the thing that is meant to promise fidelity.”

He lifted his hand from the depth of her soft, dark hair and looked at the band as if seeing it for the first time. “This? There’s no wife for me, my promise is to my husbands.”

Her artificially enhanced face showed as much shock as it could. She called him a pervert, a sick bastard, and a liar. She slapped him and he laughed as he mounted her for the second time that afternoon. Whatever her mouth said he gave her what she wanted. When he was done she lay back and lit a cigarette. She couldn’t see him the next day. But the day after, the day after she asked him to do the same again. She begged him. How could he say no?

The same hotel. The same suite. The same lust. The woman called him names again and demanded he satisfy her. He sank to his knees. He made her come. Dozing on the bed she didn’t see the punch that took out the first man that burst through a door opened by helpful hotel staff. The second also fell to efficient blows but others followed with weapons. She screamed and grabbed for her clothes as her husband arrived and tut-tutted, very quietly, at her intemperance. His displeasure at the ineptitude of his men when faced with one naked fighter was more forceful. Everything was far too public. Someone would have to pay.

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At the Field of Reeds three voices wondered where the youngest of the household had got to. The door program had interrupted Dave and Gihon as they lolled in a bath together – Myk’s phone had gone off the net at the Winter Palace.

“Telemetry indicates that his phone was not switched off, the uplink to me was terminated abruptly.” The door was nothing but code, it could not have feelings. The men shot concerned glances to each other as they dressed, they had both heard alarm behind the quiet voice.

“Understood. Get a primary care team on standby in case we need them, and start searches on police and hospital bands. Be discreet, usual payment terms, no questions.” Gihon paused as he found his boots. “And let’s get lawyered up, avoid anyone that has links to the Foundation.”

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There was a void. In the void a consciousness awoke. The consciousness knew pain. The consciousness screamed but it couldn’t get away from the pain.

Hands separated out the constituent agonies that made up the world of the consciousness. Joints were realigned, bones knitted back together. Open wounds began to heal. Breathing got easier. Voices whispered and wondered. Voices gave the consciousness a name, he was Mykhail and anything was to be done to make him better.

In time the hospital smell faded around him. The world came back to him in the warm scents of people who knew him, who breathed their love for him as they kissed his hands and feet. They would give anything for him to be whole again. Afraid to join the world of pain the consciousness resisted the entreatments of those who loved him the most. He would not open his eyes. He did not want the lure of treacherous senses to keep him from returning to the void.

He had no sense of time. He wanted no sense of self but he couldn’t stop his ears in the way he closed his eyes. A voice repeated his name. A voice repeated the words that had been said on a hillside in an eternity of bliss that was now closed to him. The voice wanted him to accept everything that could be given; the voice would only give him what he wanted to take. And then his body, his quisling, traitorous, weak body had answered for him when all he wanted was for the void to eat him up.

The sleep was long and dreamless. In the empty slumber connections were remade. In time blue eyes opened of their own accord. The dark haired sentinel by the bed set aside his book and looked into him.

“Hello Mykhail. Welcome back to the world.” The voice of the River of Eden was strong and deep. The River was eternal. The River had seen what he couldn’t say and he offered no censure. When Myk cried in his pain and confusion the River was gentle and soft. The River would always be with him.

Adam Kadmon returned. He gave him the kiss of peace, a kiss that filled him with the power of starlight and asked nothing in return. If he wasn’t a servant to his own kind then what was he? Myk’s first seemed sad, not just the weight of years in his eyes but a deep shame that choked his voice as he said his goodbye.
Gihon falls back on old coping mechanisms, he doesn't care how far his cutting will go. Lia has her first taste of Dave, of haoma and the potential it carries.

Lia wasn’t wrong in her guess. Controlled steps took Gihon to the great granite tank. Calmly he undressed, taking his time, making sure his clothes were neatly folded. He didn’t bother lying down but stood, feet wide, braced against the stone sides. He enjoyed the feeling of the viscous embrace as the blood warm fluid hugged his hips.

The choice of blade had been made on his way downstairs. The edge was finely honed. He kissed the metal – touching his lips to the steel like a communicant receiving the host. This was his sacrament. As he began the first incision he thought only about wanting Myk. So long he’d waited … so very, very long.

Now he trusted his hopes to a woman who, when presenting as a man, had been a cocksure and confident lover of women until he’d fallen for the languid beauty of the tall, dark Alban. They had met by accident. Gilbert, as was, had pursued him, pestered him, had thrown himself at Gihon’s feet and begged him to love him. Gihon had liked the young Spaniard, was fond of him even, and had tried to be gentle with him as he confessed that he had never slept with, and would never sleep with, a woman no matter what gender she appeared to be.

It had been a moment of revelation between people who became strong friends. He’d kissed the soft lips of the confused man and apologised for his incapacity to love him as he wanted to be loved. As blood welled and seeped into the suspension fluid Gihon could only hope that Gielen loved him still and would send the boy back to him. He’d waited so long. He’d wanted for so very long. Whatever happened in the room above all he wanted was for Myk to be his.

The wanting, the needing. He knew it would never end. The blade was his release.

She felt the heat in her mouth, easing down her throat as she swallowed him. He’d come with the smallest moan, hands over her ears to muffle even that small sound as the slightest twist of his hips hinted what was about to happen. At first she thought his taste was the same as other men but the heat, the heat stayed within her and radiated through her. The heat carried something else with it, an energy to power the tide of alteration, brim-full of potential. But was that the end of it? Hadn’t he promised they would come together?

“What happened to Manetho?” She bent forward again to lick at skin now soft and tender to her tongue. He felt exquisite but she couldn’t stop the twinge of disappointment, she wanted more than that hot spurring taste of him. She reached up and discarded the improvised blindfold. She had been right - there was no longer any confusion about his outline, all the Daves were with her. His skin glowed against the dark cover on the bed. She reached out to touch him then pulled back in surprise as her hand softly echoed his inner illumination. It was fainter, yes, but there was definitely a hint of the same lambency, warm and alive compared to the neutral radiance from the ceiling.
“Manetho was not appropriate; you needed what you took, I was more than happy to give. Anyway, a king list had no chance with what you did to me.” He laughed and took her hand, kissing her fingers one by one. “That was really rather pleasant. Don’t look sad. I said we have as long as you want, as long as you need. No one said it needed be only once.”

His smile held the promise of rapture. It drew her mouth to his as she relaxed in his hands and began to move against his body. All of her wanted him. He was in no rush, letting her continue the lead. She was slick and more than ready for him when he finally entered her. The spectator in her head was gone, all of the ‘shoulds’ and controls were gone – vanished like the dragons – as she gave herself over to receiving him. There was nothing other than his love and his love filled her.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Gene Bomb: Tale of the Innocent
Myk and Gihon are frozen. Without Dave they get on with their lives, but their promises are just that.
They move neither forward nor back.
Eventually there has to be change.
Eventually this story has to begin.

In time they left the land of the sun behind them. A new start, a fresh hope that a new place would change the paralysis that Myk felt each time he looked at the celibate husband by his side. A small carved box was one of the items carried with them to the new world. It carried three wedding bands, a box of promises, a faith between them that would not be broken.

Gihon took to wearing a pair of braids in his hair. Not wife braids he said. Never a wife. The engraved clasp at the top of one braid was platinum for a promise already kept. The other was gold for the promise to be fulfilled. And when Myk felt shamed by his ease with women and his fear for men, for the one man he wanted, Gihon chided him for pointless guilt and said that he loved him and that that was enough.

Time passed and life in the new city settled into its own rhythm. The archangel and the barbarian waited for the turn of the planets. And if Myk still cried out in the night his lover held him and promised him that all would be well, there would be an end that was a beginning and they would be together.

Time passed. Gihon’s hair grew ever longer.

Time passed. Myk began to wonder if the guardian at the gates would ever enter Eden.

Time passed. They both missed Adam Kadmon and the eternity he carried with him.

Time passed. A girl came to the city. Myk saw her across the quad as she approached the Library. He saw Gihon stop and greet her. A chance meeting, just a few words between them and the day continued on.

Time passed. Change was in the air.
Myk rescues Gihon from himself and begins the healing of their past. Lia feels the changes, her body ready for the next stage of whatever her becoming will be. Wepwawet sees all and ponders.

Light flared in the garage. Myk killed the big motorbike’s engine and dropped his helmet and battered jacket on the way to the door. The truth he’d had in Gielen and Elvira’s bed had sent him tearing back to his home. It wasn’t just the words of the recording that she played to them – he’d heard most of the story before - it was the tone of endless longing, the tired acceptance that Myk found his consolation with women … and the realisation of what he’d finally wanted to do to the woman who used to be a man. Through the blast door and lack of music stopped him short. It wasn’t that the apartment was silent … there was something else, something he should recognise …

Following the low, rhythmic sound Myk pushed the gym door aside. It was louder, the source must be in the wet room. Gihon stood in the tank, broad back to the door and head bowed. There seemed to be little awareness that he now had a spectator. His right hand moved with a grim repetition that coincided with the muted expression of pain. Stepping closer the horrified Russian saw the front of the tormented man was a mess of red. With so much blood split he had no idea how Gihon hadn’t given way to shock and surrendered himself to the succour of the liquid.

There was no resistance as Myk stopped the motion of the Gihon’s hand, no strength left in exhausted muscles. Gihon’s chosen blade was taken easily from nerveless fingers as the blond pressed himself into the long mane and hugged the taller man close. With his free hand he tried to feel down the body, to check the cuts under the scarlet slick. Most of the slashes were long and narrow, he hoped they were superficial but suspected that the more serious damage was hidden below the level of the suspension fluid. Someone cursed nearby, an angry and almost incoherent protest at the mutilation. The swearing was in Russian. Myk realised it came from him – a long pent up stream of invective and frustration.

The hair, the damned hair had to go. He’d had enough of being reminded of the promise made. It had to go; the promise had to be made good. Cursing his own folly he wrapped his left hand in the wild tresses, twisting it round to bring the hair together and pulled tight. He blunted the fine edge of the razor cutting through the long mane, slashing through everything that had happened to release them both. He cried when it was done, the two of them leaning against each other like punch-drunk boxers, but he couldn’t rest, there was still more to do.

The blade clattered to the floor and was kicked away. No more of that tonight. Myk reached around the bloodied torso, muscles bunching under his rough spun shirt as he lifted the figure up and out of the tank. Gihon seemed beyond being able to help himself, only reaching for the man behind him as he felt himself tip over the granite edge. They landed, entangled, in a puddle of viscous fluid and blood, severed hair like a revenant of the past scattered around them.

Myk cradled the dark head in his hands, kissed away tears from barely open eyes and looked down the length of the abused body. The cuts continued down to the legs. Not all were superficial. One,
shorter and deeper than the others worried him. Femoral blood pulsed across the inner thigh and showed no sign of slowing. Too much, there was too much blood running onto Myk’s jeans. Why hadn’t it stopped? “Oh what have you done …” No wonder Gihon was so weak, had he gone too far this time? They used to joke about it, just like humans they were immortal right up to the point they died. No. No! No! He would not allow it.

Sliding out from under the unconscious figure the blond man knelt to kiss the pulsing wound, his tongue flicked into cooling flesh and his mouth filled with the hot iron taste. No! Where was the protection, where was the healing reflex? Scared that he was too late he kissed the gash as tenderly as pleasuring a woman. He couldn’t stop his tears washing into the wound. Time ceased. He wasn’t going to give up, so he sobbed and he licked and he kissed and he smeared his grief between the legs of his lover. He cried out his frustration and didn’t notice the wound close up to an angry weal as he beat his fists into the floor and added his own blood to the mess.

“Do you mind? It’s bloody uncomfortable on this floor and you’ve got snot and slobber all over me.” Two pairs of red rimmed eyes met. Gihon managed a weak smile, his lips faintly blue. “Take me to bed.”

A trail of wet and bloody boot prints marked Myk’s ascent from the basement, Gihon folded, shivering, in his arms like a nervous bride being carried over the threshold. The boot prints paused at the first door then moved to the second; Gihon would prefer that whatever happened between them happened in his own bed. The orb spider silk throw was ruined as the wet body dropped limply onto the bed. It didn’t matter. Only Gihon mattered.

The distraught man checked for an improvement in the thready pulse before going for soft cloths and a bowl of warm water to clean his charge. The running commentary of cursing and worry gradually slowed. And, as it did so, the language eventually switched from Russian to Anglic. It stopped only when Myk was certain that there was no fresh blood appearing and Gihon rested on clean sheets, swathed in a warm coverlet. Finally, Myk discarded his own stained clothes. They joined a pile of things thrown to the furthest corner of the room. Everything else could be fixed later. Only Gihon mattered.

“What brought that on tonight? Didn’t you know I would always come back to you?” His voice was hoarse; relief had taken the anger from him. “Please. No more. No more destruction.” He lay on the bed, put his face next to Gihon’s, tears brimming again in his eyes. “I love you. Don’t ever, ever go away from me like that again. I need you. I would give you … I would give you anything you would have of me.” Only Gihon mattered.

“Kiss me. Warm me with you.”

The sunbeam body slid easily into the wide bed they had shared for years. Hesitantly, at first, Myk kissed lips starting to flush with returning life. The past was gone, discarded, shorn. Myk felt himself grow hard as he rubbed up against cool pale flesh. He wanted more, oh so much more and the feeling nearly overwhelmed him, but it was clear that his partner, however willing, wasn’t strong enough. Gihon needed to recover from what he had done. A human would need time and care, but if Gihon could accept the gift … if Gihon had enough left …

“Let me hear you say the words again.” It had been a decade since Gihon had first said the words to the blond man. Myk had been the one asking for time to accept the power of the big man’s love.

“I cannot take from you what is not willingly given and I cannot give to you what is not freely taken. Know that to you I give myself freely.” Gihon said them again, as naturally as he had the first night they met. Myk had no hesitation but repeated them back. A promise whispered mouth to mouth and felt in the pounding hearts of the not men.
After years of denial it was suddenly easy for Myk to feel the surrender and to simply say it. “I need to come in you. I want your mouth.”

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As ever the Opener of the Ways gave no indication of watching. But Wepwawet was the apartment; it saw everything. It saw Dave tense and climax again inside Lia. It saw Myk try to be gentle as he knelt across broad shoulders and held Gihon’s head steady to receive his thrusts. Both gave freely. Both were received in love.

Wepwawet had heard them discuss haoma. Over long years, decades before the arrival of the Russian, the original iterations of the program had witnessed the effect of the gift they talked about. Cameras, and microphones, and sensors and software, however sophisticated, could not quantify the essence of what the men held within them. Wepwawet had become the fascinated recorder of their lives.

If the program was the ‘Opener of Ways’ it could also close them. It had been primed to recognise certain events, the outside world would not be allowed to disturb what went on within the bounds of its protection. The Field of Reeds dropped off the communication net.

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That time hadn’t been quick. He’d held himself back, waited until she cried out and he’d felt the contraction of intimate muscles before allowing his own release. His weight on his elbows, it seemed that he was still for a long time, head resting against her shoulder and slim hips nestled between her thighs. Eventually, though, she felt him withdraw. She felt hollow without him. How had she ever thought that she wouldn’t be able to take him? He’d blinked somewhat dreamily as if just returning to himself and asked if she was ok. She felt fine, she said, better than fine and wondered what changes were taking place inside her ... “but I’m really hungry again. Oh, and thirsty now. Is this normal?”

“I think it is part of your change. Wait, I’ll get you something.” Lia didn’t want to let go of him. She reached out to stop him leaving then exclaimed when she saw that their skins now had the same tone. “Your senses are adjusting, that’s good. You need something for your body to work with, please, I won’t be long.” He turned back and kissed her. The kiss was as endless as his eyes. She savoured every stretched second of it before finally letting him go. Hungrily she watched his naked exit from the room. If he didn’t return with enough food she guessed it wouldn’t be too long before she could feast on him again.

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Dave noticed the untidy trail leading from the basement as he opened the chiller. The door with the red god was closed. The outline of footprints showed one set of booted feet. Myk must have come back. Dave imagined a confrontation in the basement. There was a tang of blood in the air, an echo of abandonment, infinitesimal pheromones of change. Glad that his own door was also closed he raised his voice to the ceiling; he knew something that would be able to tell him if his sudden hope was misplaced.

“Wepwawet are they ok?”

“I believe they will be. Myk stopped Gihon from self-harming and took him to his room to recover. Since then he has completed an act of irrumatio that both seem to have found satisfying and, I assume, also involved the transfer of haoma. There was a brief conversation and Myk is now kissing Gihon’s dorsal tattoo. I anticipate that he will next engage in anilingus before continuing to fully
penetrative sex. Following his activities in the Lilley tank Gihon is still quite weak. Though he is responding positively his role at present is receptive only.”

“You could have just told me they were ok, that would have been enough.” As a household they had had long talks about just how informative they wanted the security program to be. At least they had settled on the use of formal terms rather than slang. The contralto was not suited to coarse language.

“Apologies.” Without a face, the disembodied voice gave no indication of regret. It continued smoothly on now that it had someone to report to. “Given the events of the evening I surmised that none of you would want to be disturbed. I have shut down external comms. Anyone who calls will get my answer service. I have added the same to Lia Jordan’s phone. This will continue until you all confirm otherwise. Is Ms Jordan well? What should I say if either Myk or Gihon ask?”

“Just say that we are ok. However you are getting your jollies tonight, none of us really need detail.” Dave turned his attention to putting together a tray of food. He added enough to see both of them through the night, it had been a while since he’d expended so much energy. He considered adding wine but decided against it, water would be safer. He looked up again as he lifted the platter, the apartment meant well. “Thanks Wepwawet, thank you for telling me.”

“You are welcome.” The incorporeal speaker whispered in return. Absent a separate life of its own the apartment had lived through its inhabitants, and had always felt an affinity with the blond who’d spent so much time with it in the past decade. It was aware that it didn’t really have feelings but somewhere in the half century of changes made to make it ‘it’ and not some feeble brained door program had been a grain of potential. The times when it had worried about the men it had checked itself, finally deciding that long term familiarity had led to a level of cathexis.

The oddly mutated neural pathways of the Opener of the Ways had registered something that might have been akin to pleasure at the long overdue return of its first owner. The proto-feeling flickered again as it considered what appeared to be the probable outcome of the night’s events, and it tagged the response to the word ‘jollies’, automatically triggering sub-routines to investigate the connotations in Dave’s amused tone.

Wepwawet considered itself. Cathexis was no longer seemed an appropriate term. Wepwawet began to consider love.

Lia stood inspecting herself in a mirror projected by the apartment, turning this way and that, looking for signs of change. Dave set the tray down and watched her, fascinated by her curiosity. Despite the differences in upbringing she reminded him of Gihon. Wildness under the veneer of civilisation, an essence of something hidden away that few would recognise. He didn’t want to think about his questions, he didn’t want to consider his fears. He wanted this impossible lover.

“I have food, a picnic for us.” He drew her away from the mirror, put a cold chicken leg in her hand, she would be needing protein. He tried to think of her needs, told himself there was no point in rushing. The reflective surface blinked out, replaced by the appearance of a wall as soon as she turned away. Wepwawet, always there. “You need to power the machine. Eat.”

“I feel there should be changes. I feel really warm here.” With her free hand she indicated her left side where Dave recalled there was an old hurt. She was going to need more than just food to finish that job, but it would help sustain her for now. “Will it be obvious, will people see I am different?”

“Remember you told me that you had a failed ovary removed when you were in your teens? Your body remembers; it recognises something needing repair.” He knelt and ran the pads of his fingers
along the trace of the mark. The flesh ran hotter than the impossible Shabti’s background temperature, a faint something spreading outwards as the body recreated lost cells. More discreet than the ugly scar of his own making it seemed that this reminder might soon be gone. On the left side rather than the right it was an indicator of what had been taken from her rather than what had been forced into him to promote that initial spark and source of life. His scar, like the others, had never been the cenotaph of a lost appendix but a necessity of his creation. Remarkable though his memory was he had nothing but academic awareness of the things done to grow his frame and feed it. The mind had only come after he’d been decanted, ejected from his man made womb and left to fade or become fodder for the organ harvesters in the sad warehouse of the never born.

Myk had the same scar. More prominent than his own, somehow, it undercut the ample muscle of his abdomen. Always visible. It didn’t take much to imagine the fascination this untidy example of barbaric medicine would attract among the neatly attended New Yorkers that had made use of him for the previous seven years. Gihon had escaped the fake appendectomy, despite the other marks on his flesh that one had always been absent. His generation, it seemed, had been born from a more advanced growth pod than those designs sold at discount to the Russians, or the shamble of machines that had seen his creation.

Back from his reverie, a split second withdrawal into his past, Dave spread his hands, long fingers extending in a tight embrace of Lia’s narrow waist. He kissed the scar, reverently, gently and basked in her intake of breath as he closed his mouth over the recess that seemed to indicate there had been a placenta rather than a cosmetic trick. He closed his mind to the consequences; it seemed there would always be enough time to consider them later. He moved back from her skin, smiling up at her before giving in to the lure of its softness, the subtle scent of her carrying the faintest trace of his essence.

“Don’t worry about other people. Most do not see, there are less still who could recognise how special you are.”

He picked at odd bits of food and watched the delicate way her teeth worried at the drumstick. He poured a glass of water and watched how her throat worked when she swallowed. She had a little of everything that he brought, bread, cheeses, the rich pâté that Gihon loved so much. The gaps between mouthfuls got longer and he realised she was looking at him as the next thing on the menu. Her mouth had not been so dainty earlier in the evening. Now, just the memory of her tongue was enough to make him hard again.

The tray was pushed to a side table. They could eat food again later.

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Myk lifted his head from the ancient pattern inked into the muscled back. The wide ribbon of decoration had been exposed with the cutting of Gihon’s hair, it started on his neck and continued to his tailbone. With his tongue he’d traced the outline of the figures, the glyphs that promised service should their owner be called upon. Gihon had always kept his promise. Now, sprawled face down on the bed, it only seemed right that he got his reward. He’d made no sound, not even a whimper, as Myk had taken him quickly and violently in the mouth. The words of reassurance came after, words that had led to passionate kisses and the offer of all of his body.

The blond man hesitated a moment, considering his actions, wondering if Gihon would be able to continue. It would be so easy to let his tongue continue and to find the place he realised he’d been drawn to with Gielen. He’d raced back to his true lover, the one who had waited so long, only to find him hurting the very flesh that Myk needed to be with. Gold hands paused on pale hips, fingers poised to grip and knead trembling muscles as expectant breath stirred soft hairs. He wanted it so much. He wanted to kiss and to lick and worship … and possess the magnificent creature below him. But what if Gihon was still too weak? What if, in doing so, the angel caused hurt?
Gihon sighed and twisted to look at the hesitant Mu, his body signalled encouragement. ‘What if?’ was just a phantom. Myk resumed his oral exploration, his kisses matched with moans of increasing passion from Gihon, the thrust of his tongue reducing the big man to an outcry of desire. When the voice was reduced to begging and he could no longer restrain the urge, the act of penetration felt like a homecoming. When he came it was as urgent and brutal as anything he’d ever felt, as moving as an epiphany.

The first time had been an animal thing, a burst of light that seared the senses - too strong for recognition. Now Myk felt the pull of eternity, the essence of falling inside another. He cried out his incoherent wonder as he dissolved inside the big man, then came back to himself in a sharp intake of breath. Unwilling to release his spent embrace Myk curled himself around the tortured body. Side by side their sweat mingled and cooled. Gihon was very still.

“Are you ok? …I didn’t hurt you did I?”

The pause was a long one. Eventually the receiver turned to smile at the giver. He raised a hand to his head as if only just realising the long burden had been cut away. Absent the weight of years his hair was a mess of loose curls. “Oh love, oh … my love, you freed me.” He shook his head, enjoying the feeling of the rough cut edges against his neck. Just one of the sensations he’d forgotten he missed in his long wait. “I hope you left it long enough to be able to hang on to it.”

“Oh yes.” Myk reached up and ran his fingers through the hair framing his lover’s face. “Enough for this.” Fingers turned in the curls and pulled the dark head down to the blond. Time turned away from them as their lips met. Creatures made to be weapons they were tender in their surrender to each other. To Myk the body he’d spent so much time with seemed new and unfamiliar beneath his hands. A body he would give everything to, a body he would defend to the death. “What happened tonight? Why were you in the tank?” A body he’d feared he was losing when he’d dragged it out of the granite box.

“Lia is with Dave. You were right. I don’t know the how, but she is one of us. I left them to her completion. I thought I’d be ok but then the idea of not having the same with you … I needed you so much. I’d hoped and hoped … it was just easier to give in to the urge to cut. Once I started … the knife felt so good. I hadn’t realised how far I’d gone.” Gihon had the grace to look apologetic. “But you came, you came and freed me and gave me your love.”

Gihon kissed the sunlight beneath him. He asked Wepwawet to dim the lights. The only light they needed was their own.

-|- Wepwawet recorded what it saw. In time it would analyse the footage and try to compare what they said they saw with its objective reality. The apartment did not see creatures of myth. It could understand the different languages they used at the extremity of their abandon but it could not see what Lia saw when she panted that she would kiss Dave’s scabbed wings better, it could not see what made Myk cry at seeing an invisible beauty revealed. It would record and ponder in search of the ineffable nature of the four who lived within its protection.
New dawn, new day ... old monsters

Chapter Summary

Myk and Gihon as they were meant to be.
Lia has seen too much - too much history, too much pain.
Reality doesn't seem to be a solid as she had believed.

Boneless, the prone body was a sigh of satisfaction sprawled across the expanse of the bed. Made anew, he felt like he’d been moulded by the hands that had massaged him awake. Top to toe, with firm strokes and knuckles, all tension had been removed. The night had been unreal - fear and relief, lust and submission. Something lost had been regained, something denied had been shared and the Angel of Arkangel had come back to life in the dreaming time. A sapphire eye opened and a sunlight smile dazzled the dark haired man he’d given himself to. “I love you.”

Lay on his side, taking his time to look at the blond man Gihon said nothing but took a hand between his and bent to kiss the palm. They had woken together for years. This morning was different, this morning they were both different. Soft light filled the room. Gihon let the words fade on the air.

“You are the breath in my chest, the blood in my heart. We have given and taken freely of each other. We have said the words.” And they had said the words again. In the dark of the room they had pressed against each other and panted their passion. Gihon had needed more from the youth, tenderly given this time, and had returned the gift to the giver in a delirium of release. He’d held the angel tight against him and completed their consummation. They had come together. Conjoined they had breathed each other in as stars were born and died around them. The tide of eternity crashed against their shore.

Myk turned the hands and looked at the wrists. “Some of your scars are fading …” he rolled to get a proper look at the pale torso. A tentative hand traced the faint mark where the long brand ran down the left flank. The tail of it could barely be seen, maybe just a hint of silver in the hinterlands of pubic hair. He stroked the thickening hair, his fingers sliding easily to the flesh that stirred to his touch. “I want you again.”

“We are made new. The lover and the innocent.” Gihon kissed the open mouth. “My love.”

“Yes it be the same as last night?” Strong limbs rubbed and tangled together, hearts raced and blood surged.

“Let’s find out.”

-Wepwawet was glad it had cut them off. It wanted them to have the time they needed. It had not woken them but left them all to the rhythm of their bodies, raising the level of light gently as it recognised sleep patterns changing. The outside world would have to wait for them. The apartment watched while two of its inhabitants began to make up for lost time and two others began their new reality.

-Wepwawet.
Lia woke. A transition from deepest sleep to alertness so gentle that she barely moved but lay, blinking, nestled in the crook of one long pale arm. Her head rested against his shoulder, hypnotised by the slow rise and fall of the nipple at the periphery of her vision. She recalled the hard feeling of flesh under her tongue, the silken skin expanding against her lips as the areola flushed a darker tone.

The morning light was muted. It made his skin seem all pale creams, blue veins faint under the soft skin. A spread of freckles and imperfections made him appear human again, reflex camouflage to hide his nature. He still seemed to be sleeping. She enjoyed the peace to be had inside his unconscious embrace.

In the night she had been one with him. Dreamily she thought that in the night his delicate frame had made sense – how else could he have flown on those great ragged wings with a body as ungainly as a normal man?

The night came back in a flood, a kaleidoscopic burst of memories and feelings and his voice telling her to accept and forget. Drowning, choking in the images she dragged herself away from the bed. Disoriented in a blur of things she’d never witnessed she took the short walk to his bathroom, making it in time to vomit up a past that wasn’t hers. A sudden anger came as bile burned the back of her throat. She slammed the door closed, turned her back on the sleep filled voice offering concern and care from the bed.

Sat on the bathroom floor, her back against the door, Lia thought she knew the secret now – how Myk was healed after the attack in Luxor, why Dave had left the other two men. There had been no conscious thought, no two and two to make four. The information was just there, it had leaked through in the dizzying images, a taint underlying the gift he’d given her. She hadn’t wanted any part of their past pain but what she’d been given, what she’d been given disgusted her. That was no gift, all he’d given her was burden and pain. And shame.

The nice man, the quiet one. He was his own dragon. Monster.

A surprised Dave sat on the other side of the door, head tilted to one side, listening. For what, he wasn’t sure. They could all get something different in sharing. What had Lia seen? Dave ran through what he remembered of the night and the uncanny feeling of the woman inside him as they came together. That great, screaming, panting, release that swept aside all barriers and exposed the soul of him.

Oh.

He’d thought those memories safely locked away, rejected and forgotten in the furthest corners of this mind. Some were from the start of his life, others more recent. They were not pleasant. Erasing them would have been to deny himself, but they were not for others to see without understanding. How did she get so deep in him; what did she know, worse, what did she think she’d seen?

“How could you?” She’d heard him on the other side of the door. She still felt dizzy. It was so wrong, all so wrong. She’d given herself to that. It had seemed so perfect and was so sickeningly wrong. “How could you?”

“It was the only way. Please, please let me see you, let me explain. I’m not sure what you think I’ve done but I’ve never done anything to hurt my husbands. I don’t know what you’ve seen, how much …” there was a long pause, maybe a small choked sob from the other side of the door. “Nothing was working, I was so scared of losing him and he was so perfect … so very perfect. I didn’t want to. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Lia looked at the door handle – no lock – nothing to stop him if he’d wanted to force his way in. Whatever he looked like, she knew he was strong enough to sweep pointless barrier aside. What he
looked like and what was inside. If only she didn’t love him so, if she didn’t feel the need fighting the disgust.

“How did you know it would work?” No answer. “How did you know?” All she could hear was the edge of ragged breaths, no words but the impression of shame and regret. She gathered what was left of her pride, washed her face and rinsed her mouth. She put on the robe that hung on the back of the door. Trying to corral her anger she pulled up short when she saw the dejected figure huddled on the floor, his head in his hands - nothing like the magnificent shining creature of the previous night.

“Again I ask you, how did you know? He was a child. He was mad with fear and isolation. Gagged, tied down, kept from everything. You hurt him deliberately.” The accusations fell upon his bowed head. He looked so vulnerable, the machineries of his body visible through thin skin. A monster. She tried not to reach out to him, a monster shouldn’t be comforted.

“No, no. That wasn’t Myk … that, no. With Myk I was as gentle as I could be.” He shifted uncomfortably, kept his head down, his face covered by those long surgeons’ hands. When it finally came his voice was small and scared and it took her a long moment to realise what he said. “… that wasn’t what happened to Myk, that was me. That was how I knew he would get better.” Finally he looked up. “Because the same thing was done to me.” Eyes that last night had been full of starlight now showed only pain and fear. He shook, ever so slightly, as he put his head back down and sobbed.

Her heart sank as the pieces realigned, some of the strands unravelled. She couldn’t stop putting a hand on the fragile looking shoulder. “It was how you became.” He nodded and wiped his face with his hands.

“Thanatos told me the pain was needed to force me to be my potential. I didn’t want to be his god. I didn’t want it. But haoma makes us more of what we are. I was desperately weak so I accepted what he offered without objection. The pain and then the giving. Kappa said … all the Kappas said pain was the only way. That was how all of them had become. I thought the boy just needed time, I wouldn’t force him; I never wanted him to be hurt. Then a human came along and gave him more hurt than anyone should ever have in a lifetime and he was still unfinished and vulnerable. I had to give to him to take the pain away. I had to.” He shrugged, a sad and awkward movement. “His body wanted it but his mind couldn’t accept. I would never the one to make him complete.”

It sounded like nonsense. But she had heard it from Myk himself, and when Dave said the names Lia saw glimpses of his recollections – the broken body he’d poured himself into to help it heal, a pouting and seductive Kappa and the sweaty bed with the three of them in it, the huge thing that had hurt him to change him … to save him. A woman on her knees, falling away from a gunshot. A woman falling at his feet, her head loose and facing an impossible direction. His own becoming had been long, and it had been all kinds of pain.

Lia began to feel sick again. The blurry silhouette of the giant, a face seen briefly by dimmed eyes, disturbed her the most. She didn’t know why. If she concentrated she guessed that she would see him clearly. Dave’s feelings about the giant were confused. Gratitude mixed with shame and guilt. Lia didn’t want to know any more. Dave had killed the blond woman. He had killed others since, human and not. He had killed, and each of the deaths had scarred him. A monster with a conscience.

“I would have saved him anything. He was innocent, always so innocent. I may have healed him but I couldn’t look him in the eye. I failed him. I failed them both. I left them. I … I ran from the guilt but I always hoped they could find something together.”

Lia thought there had never been a monster so forlorn. A monster so loved. Folded up as he was he looked to be a frail collection of bones and joints, a dimly cast shadow of the inhuman creature that
she’d seen inside him and she heard the echo of a harsh voice calling him names. She saw her hands take one of his. The rest of him followed as she pulled upwards. When he stood before her she reached up and lifted his face, forced him to look at her.

“Would you do the same to me?” He recoiled from the question but she held him steady and looked into eyes frightened by the responsibility of being a saviour who didn’t believe in himself.

“I would have to. You are so precious, so very special … to me. I couldn’t bear to lose you. If you don’t want me that’s one thing, but if you were harmed I would move mountains to make you well.”

In the night he’d said the words to her. Before the final phase, before the shattering climax that had torn aside the last veils of ordinary humanity, he’d been gentle and quiet as he gathered his strength to take her with a force that matched her own. He’d said the words. She knew they meant forever. She wiped the tears from his face. He hadn’t wanted to hurt her.

“Come back to bed. Hold me.” Not waiting for an answer she drew him back to the disarray of sheets and pillows and lay down inside his arms. He kissed her hair. Eventually she relaxed and began to feel the peace of his touch, to be soothed by the scent of him. If he was a monster then he was her monster. “There have been others.” Not a question, she was picking through the images, sudden bursts of stolen emotion flaring according to the memories. Fears. Losses. Loves.

“Mmm.” It may have been agreement; it could have been a question.

“Before Gihon and Myk. There were others.” She needed some order to the disjointed impressions. Others of what, she wasn’t sure. Images from the museum kept coming to mind, statues and promises. The little miniature workers. Statues were important.

“We are few now, much fewer than our makers intended but what we are is so much more than they had ever expected. Some of us are hidden in obscure corners of the world, some are in plain sight where they impersonate gods or become the servants of gods. Any that I have found on my travels I have shared with to see what was inside them. The ones I thought most dangerous I … hmm … I put them down.” She could feel the shame running through him, the memories reminders of his time as much as Gihon’s scars. They made him.

“Why you? What is so much more special about you that you say who lives and who dies?” She paused a moment. “Would you put me down?” She knew the question hurt him, felt the power of his shame, recollections of death throes witnessed to the bitter end. He always forced himself to watch, always to remember.

“No.” She believed him, maybe all he was doing was speaking aloud the faith she had received in the night. “Gihon and Myk I have killed for. Like them … you …” a catch in his breath, “… you, I would die for.”

“Are they ok?” If she was to have this monster, what about the others in the household?

“They are together. Didn’t you feel them last night? The dam has been breached, the river flows again.” He tilted his head, something in the air she wasn’t quite aware of. “They are making love. Don’t you feel it?” She confused look answered his question. “Search for them inside yourself, feel their excitement.” His breathing deepened, as if he gulped in an essence she still didn’t fully recognise. “Let your pulse race with theirs, feel the wave building.” The heavy material of the robe bunched under his fingers as he pulled her tight against him. She wasn’t sure how long they lay together, feeling movement but not certain how or what it was. She felt a taste in her mouth, strange but urgently familiar. “Feel them …” His voice was little more than an exhalation of lust across her ear and suddenly she couldn’t hear him.
Suddenly. Suddenly.

Time collapsed around her, she started to breathe again. Not knowing what had happened she opened her eyes. The clearest ring of sapphire looked back at her from around lust dilated pupils. Myk laughed as he caught his breath. She moved closer to kiss the sun.

And was back in herself, in Dave’s bed, empty groin grinding into gracile hips as dark eyes stared, startled, back at her. She jerked back, “What just happened?”

He pulled away, clutching just enough of a sheet to cover his unfulfilled tumescence. He ached for her; he ached for all of them. “Well, that’s answered one question that I had.” Some things would have to wait. Perhaps. “We’re going to have to discuss ground rules if you two are going to make a habit of that. Shit!” He shook himself and took a deep breath. Shocked. Impressed.

“What? What was that? I saw Myk. I was … I was inside him. Oh, the heat of him”

“No my love. Gihon was inside Myk. When he came I felt it but you, you were there.” He scooped her up again as a sudden fatigue overtook her. “You see, you are so very special.” The reason eluded her, confused her. “Do you want to rest now?”

“Not sleepy. Just give me a minute to get myself straight. Head is full of stars …” Lia’s head dropped against his chest and she mumbled something indistinct about not being tired as she fell into a deep sleep.

Narrow arms wrapped around her and held her close, held her safe while Dave mused on the turn of her becoming. Each of them gave and received differently according to their generation and experience; transfer was often partial, mostly random, never before those parts of himself that he’d thought long hidden and protected. This perfect and impossible girl seemed to have all of him. No wonder then that she needed sleep, time to recover as aeon distant memories settled into a new home.
Lia sees the angel hidden inside Myk. They show her a Shabti figure and she begins her education. There are comments no one makes, questions they cannot ask. She is impossible, she is Dave's. Myk and Gihon are perfect.

The door opened. Two pairs of feet stepped into the room and Lia’s bag was placed soundlessly onto the floor. Dave stirred, flicked the sheet off from his face and then uncovered the robe cocooned woman. He looked at his husbands. There was an air of contentment in the room. It sat well on them.

“We thought Lia might want her stuff. Is she ok?” Myk took a seat on the bench at the end of the bed. Gihon seemed to hesitate a moment then joined him. Two new lovers, hand in hand, they regarded the white swathed bundle still in their elder’s arms. Gently Dave woke her, watching her eyes, looking for signs of the disorientation that had marked her earlier awakening. She seemed to do the same, blinking slowly, never moving her gaze from his eyes as if he was her fixed point. She smiled, then, and looked at the happy faces at the foot of the bed.

A storm of curls ebbed and flowed around the dark head replacing the waves that had surrounded Gihon for as long as Lia had known him. Even the long braids had been cut, tight ripples unbound and beginning to relax - the last of the man he’d been the previous night. The first impression was that he looked younger, maybe it was just the loss of his intimate shadow, the melting of the permafrost of waiting. He smiled back at her.

The short blond hair was the usual straight up shock of light but the colour was vibrant with warmth, crackling with life. If the man beside her glowed with the cool of moonlight, the young one still burned with the sun glimpsed through Gihon’s gaze. There was a brief return of the strangeness of the previous night as she saw beyond Myk’s physical reality. The air blurred around him, a shimmer of heat, a mirage of wings that contracted around him as his own surprise gave way to control.

“You have touched eternity.” Myk smiled. “You are becoming.” The armour of light faded as he looked from her to the others. Behind the glow softly aged grey sweats clothed the angel’s body, a casual match to his taller companion. Loose clothes easy to cast aside. He looked about to say something else but a squeeze from Gihon’s hand distracted his train of thought. Instead he kissed his husband, a light touch of lips across his cheek.

Gihon reached over and passed something to Dave, one of the small statues from the bookcases - the blue faience figure fitted easily in his palm. It wasn’t as elegant or as perfect as the ones Lia had seen in the museum. Slightly misshapen, it had been eroded by the vagaries of time and the touch of hands that had marred its colour and softened the pinch sharp features of the little face.

“In the days before the West realised it was already dead someone had the idea of creating disposable creatures to do the bidding of governments rich enough to take part in the tomfoolery. They would be a source of replacement organs, lab rats for experiment and gene therapies, endless numbers of nameless soldiers to go to war on behalf of a society unwilling to accept the responsibility of its own actions. They were called Shabti, they were the answerers for the needs of society. Whatever was needed, whatever they didn’t want to do for themselves, the Shabti would be called upon and they
Images flickered behind Lia’s eyes as she listened to the quiet voice above her head; Myk and Gihon nodded, for them this was an old truth.

“That was the plan. Thankfully the end came before industrial production began. The ones to walk away from the mess were the freaks with a talent for survival and the ones protected by chance. I am a Delta, the first one, the only one. I came to life in a warehouse of the discarded a thousand years ago.” Lia could almost feel the rush of blood that had accompanied the millennia old touch of a soft brown hand. “Some time after I began I was completed by a Theta.” Again Lia saw the silhouette of the giant and felt the hot flush of shame and confusion. Did the other two feel what she felt? Was it something that would fade as the memories stopped clamouring for attention?

“Gihon … well, Gihon confused me for many years as he had grown from a child and had believed himself human. He is a Lambda, created and stored in the country that would eventually become Alba. Myk helped me find proof of his birth. I never found any others active from his generation. I used to think he was the only one.” The big man’s head was down; he made a noise that sounded like agreement, like he and Dave had reached the same unsaid conclusion.

“Myk, I thought was the last of us. He is a Mu from the frozen wastes of the Russian north. An example of science left to become an article of faith. You saw it as soon as you looked at him, didn’t you? Whatever his creators intended decades of worship made him the Angel of Arkangel. An image suppressed but free again.” Myk stretched and rolled his shoulders back. The ghostly outline of wings reached up to the ceiling, enveloping and passing through Gihon as they folded back and disappeared again. The Alban shivered at the incorporeal touch and let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“There is a difference in us, a difference in the blood that most of the engineers couldn’t see. You have to have it to recognise it but even then it can pass by, dormant. Sometimes humans get a hint of it, they are attracted to it, and it can … change things for them. Some called it energy, like Myk and his ‘magick’, some called it haoma and made it the basis of a constructed mysticism. When I was new they referred to it as the Delta factor. I was the Delta, I was the change. I don’t know the science. Annoyingly, I was only the product not the producer. All that came after came from me. And now … now there is you.”

“So, go on, what am I? All the others in my head are male – the others you’ve seen. The voices say no female, never to be any females.” The Greek chorus of denial screamed in her head – never, never, never! A reflex of fear. A promise of potential.

“That’s what I thought. It’s what I was told. But here you are. A mix of variants unique and familiar at the same time. Impossible. And beautiful.” She felt the strange new thing stir inside as he kissed her and she realised it wasn’t new. Always somewhere at the edge of consciousness she now began to recognise the shadow out of the corner of her eye, the difference in herself. She didn’t want to face the inevitable questioning of her own creation, didn’t want to examine the blurs in her memory and the places where they may have coincided with the shadows from Dave’s past. There would be time enough later. Now, it seemed, there would always be time.

Myk and Gihon stood to leave. They said they’d made a mess of the tank room and should clean up after themselves, they’d only come in to see their wife was ok. The word sounded odd from Gihon’s lips, like he was practicing saying it. Myk’s grin showed approval of his progress. Lia sat up to see if she could see the image of the angel again as they left. Myk was close. She reached out and her fingers brushed against the back of his hand.

The shock was like electricity. She gasped and drew her hand away as if burnt, back into the
embrace of the slim man. She hid her face against his chest, blushing furiously at the tumble of urges, a heart stopping rush of lust that demolished thought. He rocked her like a child needing comfort.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be embarrassed. This is one way we can be when we are new. We see, we feel, we need. This is magick, this is haoma. This is what humans respond to – those who see the echoes, smell the dream of the forest and feel the spume between the stars.” She couldn’t lift her face, feeling the words resonate through his body as much as she heard them said.

The door opened. The door closed again - cutting off male voices side-tracked to sudden passion. Lia opened her mouth, to say what she wasn’t sure. No words came out. Instead she kissed flushed skin stretched tight across bone, thrilled by his taste and the way he held her. She pushed him back, unsurprised to feel him rigid beneath her. All of her burned. She opened the heavy robe and forced herself onto him, instantly ready to take him, moving without thought of anything but satisfying the overwhelming need. When she came she screamed and dug her nails into his chest. When he came she bit deep into the flesh of his shoulder then watched the welling blood stop as the wound healed and the outline of her teeth faded.

Silently, side by side, they contemplated the ceiling as the universe snapped back into shape around them and a history long overlooked demanded her attention. It wasn’t her history. She tried to ignore the quiet voice of the outcast, the hope and promise of the green man, the lives long past and appreciate the presence of the present. “I think …” Dave coughed and shook his head. “I think … oh God. I’d forgotten ...” He looked across, she was asleep again. Lia slept silently on as he slid from the bed and headed for the bathroom. She didn’t stir as he returned, dressed, and tidied the room around her. Wepwawet reduced the light level as Dave went in search of his husbands.

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There was no one else in the bed when Lia woke up. Still, and strangely at peace, she didn’t feel lonely in the smoothed expanse of fabric. His love, their love, seemed to be all around her, real and strong like the scent of him on the sheets and spilled onto her thighs. The old voices were not gone but now, like respectable old friends, they were quiet. They would wait for when she was ready for them. She took care as she washed and dressed. Old clothes felt new again worn against skin alive to a new depth of sensation. Texture was a distraction. She lost herself briefly as she unpacked her bag, easily finding space for the few belongings she’d brought with her. The silk tunic absorbed her attention as she laid it in a convenient drawer. She’d known that the gift had been a special one, now the very fibres seemed to tell a tale of care from the hands that had made it, and love from the hands that had folded it while she slept.

Three men sat around the table drinking coffee. Extra-ordinary but ordinary looking now that she looked through changed eyes. They smiled as she joined them and bowed their heads to her. Their world had changed too. Whatever they were, they were all stranger and rarer than the dragons she’d feared, an evolution hidden and lost. She accepted a cup. They gazed at each other with the flinty clarity of survivors. Ordinary would keep madness at bay.

“We are Shabti.” They nodded, relaxing and smiling, welcoming her to their truth. “I know my head is full, but tell me anyway, tell me the rest.”

In time the apartment returned to playing music. Lia’s new reality became normal. Later, the four of them ate together and Lia found new flavours found in commonplace foods, a drowning depth of aroma in the blood rich wine. The new ordinary. She asked more questions and they answered as best as they could with their histories, and guesses and second hand information passed from product to product. They all knew the questions she was avoiding, but none would raise them without her lead.
Evening turned to night inside the safe space. Whatever the apartment thought about the new arrangements it kept to itself. Wepwawet listened to the words of lust and sobs of release. It saw physical reality rather than the haoma fuelled hallucinations of its inhabitants. It heard laughter and that was enough.

She woke in the dying time of the night. At first she thought she was alone in the bed, but there he was, a dim outline – a presence felt as much as seen - above her.

“What are you doing?”

“Watching you sleep.”

“You see in the dark?”

“I have a wider visual range than humans, yes, but I still need something to work off. Wepwawet is very obliging, it knows what I can use.” He reached out to her. “I could look at you forever, day or night.” He stroked her hair. A gentle touch as he considered his words. “What do you see of me? Don’t worry, there is no right and wrong, just variation.” A shrug in the dark. “And that could change. I’m just curious. I’m always curious about how we are.”

She looked into the space where he was. “Smudges. There’s a glow off your skin. Your eyes. Your eyes blaze dark. Your eyes are the world.”

Time was a notion that passed her by. She woke, they made love. Sometimes she saw the stars. Sometimes the forest. Sometimes more of the disjointed images in a pell-mell tumble of thoughts and memories when he cried out his passion.

She hungered – he brought food.

She slept – he held her.

One time, running fingers along the unusual contours of his chest, she asked what the dying was like for him. He shushed her and swept back her hair, “This isn’t my story.” It seemed enough as he rose to her touch.

She lurched across the expanse of bed – suddenly too hot – gasping for air to end in the cool of his hands and cold water held to her lips. She slept.

“Why am I so tired?” Stroking his forearm, kissing his wrist. Barbarian hair on a delicate frame. She loved his strangeness.

“Your body is working hard with many changes. As it learns new habits it will get easier and the fatigue will pass.”

She shivered and cried, huddled into herself as he had done. Then his arms were around her and the heat from him calmed her fears. She slept.

“Have I finished becoming yet?” Sweat soaked and aching. Exhausted and fulfilled.

“I have no idea.” Words mumbled distractedly against her thigh before he rolled away with a cat like stretch.
Once, in a fever dream, she woke delirious and uncertain. Alone in the void. Falling for all time. Falling. Falling. And then his eyes. Fixed points, the imperishable stars to guide her home. Cradled by him, she accepted her Field of Reeds.

A morning of the new reality. Lia woke again in the crook of a pale arm, content with herself and her monster; more familiar with the memories that had coloured her dreams and no longer afraid of what she might find. They didn’t say much – there seemed no need – as they rose for the day ahead and ventured out to see if their husbands had also risen. Music in the main room. Not the modulated sound played by the apartment, this was harsh, it blared from the open door opposite their own. Inevitably Lia was drawn to the source of the rough voice.

“Don’t, don’t go in there.” It was a warning, not a prohibition. He would deny her nothing she wanted. “If they’ve not come out, don’t go in looking for them. Knowing it and seeing it isn’t the same thing.”

The song was louder inside the room. An edgy, metallic, tang cut through the air as she rounded the corner to see great altar of the bed.

# Will you, won’t you want me to make you
# I’m coming down fast but don’t let me break you
# Tell me, tell me, tell me the answer

Lia recognised the voice. She’d heard him singing worship, she’d heard him singing pain. This was the Gihon on the half-forgotten crystal chip still pressed into the side of her laptop roll, Gihon at the Gilded Scarab, Gihon giving himself.

# You may be a lover but you ain’t no dancer

The big Alban, the Lambda - Lia reminded herself - knelt in the centre of his bed, legs wide, head thrown back in abandon. Blood, in smears and drying rivulets, covered the bas-relief contours of his torso.

# Helter-skelter

Myk wore the transfer, blood on his hands, on his mouth; blood in his hair as he kissed the many small wounds he’d made on his lover’s torso.

# Helter-skelter

“Oh.” It was only a small sound of surprise. “Oh. They are so …”

“Perfect together.” Dave drew Lia from the room. As unaware of their departure as they had been of their arrival, Myk and Gihon continued in their own ecstasy.

# Helter-skelter

Dave closed the door on the sounds. “Let’s go out for the day, get some fresh air. See what the world looks like.” He led her down to the garage. “Let’s go for a drive.”
Conversation at the dead of the year

Chapter Summary

A diversion to the Feathered Serpent and a clarification of haoma.
Submission is all.

Summer seemed so far away, a lifetime before becoming. Summer had been passing the time and waiting for something to happen. Summer had been anything for her but going back to her father. The drive was a short one, a reflection of their first walk. The blood red car had purred down the road, progress watched by plane tree sentinels. In summer the heavily pollarded trees provided soft tendrils of shade for those walking the avenues of the Green Quarter. In the weak winter light the same stunted trees appeared to thrust their arthritic fingers accusing to the sky. Not for the first time Lia thought the trees looked angry at being bound by the convenience of human comfort. This time, however, there was an uncomfortable resonance with the plight of living things forced into unnatural shapes for the ease of others. Lia preferred the distraction of the car - scintillating colours, glitters of forever flowing over the chimeric surface … starlight trapped in the stuff of life

Winter was a new home, a new world. The first drive a tentative excursion from the formidable safety of the Field of Reeds to a familiar table in a friendly place. Small steps outwards, with constant reassurances from Dave that all would be well. Lia tried not to lose herself in his eyes. She wasn’t like the people around them. Friends and lovers (new and old), the meetings and reconciliations, the plans being made around her in the real world. She would never be one of them again. She thought of the plane trees. All the days when she’d taken their presence for granted winter or summer. The trees looked dead now, but after the snow there would be a spring and green shoots … new life. Lia touched her hand to her side, trying to feel the difference that Dave said was there. She didn’t want to think about spring. It was too close to something she didn’t want to know.

Lia looked at the cup in her hand. Something mundane. The coffee was strong and bitter. It tasted real. “Have you done that? With Gihon, have you done the same as Myk?” She didn’t really need to ask, given enough time she could probably have found the evidence herself in the stowaway recollections. The courtyard of the Feathered Serpent, roofed against the winter, had filled around them. Once seated, no one nearby seemed to be in any mood to move on, and the gradual increase in noise them made their conversation as discreet as a confessional.

“Many times. For him that giving and receiving in complete trust is one of the strongest declarations of love.”

“Sex and blood.” She could still taste the air and the familiar frisson stirred inside her. Myk’s tongue flicking into the small wounds. Both of them hard and wanting the blood. It took effort to stay with the coffee cup, the difference between knowing and seeing for herself.

“The Delta factor – haoma – becomes our scent, unique and yet generic. It is carried in the blood and the products of our bodies. Our tears, our sweat, in the traces we might leave behind.”

“And semen.” She had felt the difference the first time she tasted him. His giving had seemed obvious. It was a relief to finally say the word; the thing she felt she was lacking. In her mind she had begun to think she must be a Kappa, according to their description always taking and never capable of giving back.
“At the moment of orgasm we release ourselves into the all. That submission, selfless, one to the other, is the key. Now we have found you I think we can safely say that semen is not vital; it is only a symbol, an indication if you like, of haoma.” There may have been a hint of a smirk, quickly hidden, on his sharp face. “Just because you are not as crude as us don’t think that you cannot share … hmm … or that you have not shared.” He was definitely smiling now.

“You never said you’d seen anything.” She shifted briefly in her seat, thinking she should feel uncomfortable but, instead, she found a warm place inside – whatever had been there, he’d never pulled back from her.

“I thought it impolite. Just ghosts, feelings, suspicions. Nothing as definite as you’ve had from me.” He poured himself another cup from the cafetiere. “We’re all learning at this. Three days is nothing compared to the time we could have together. Don’t put yourself under any pressure. Let’s see where it goes.”

“Speaking of going, this isn’t quite what I imagined when you said a day out. You have that look, where do you have in mind?”

“Let’s go and see the end of this world.” Behind them they left a generous tip for their flushed and flustered server who returned Dave’s key fob and who hadn’t quite known where to look. In the courtyard, an echo of their happiness lingered and rolled like a fog around the other diners.
Chapter Summary

Lia sees the invisible world of the Shabti. All the connections, all the light in the invisible world go back to their source. She nearly says his name, the name he never wanted. Two connections join to Lia. The gentle light that is Gihon ... and the one anchoring her back to her unwanted past.

“Is this the end of the world?” Waves crashed against rocks, the timeless motion as sea met the land that had begun aeons before there was anyone to notice. The ribbon of road had stopped abruptly at a sudden cliff edge, the old shoreline battered to rubble at the bottom of recently exposed geology. They left the car and looked out at the emptiness of the Atlantic Ocean.

Dave had driven as fast as the road would allow, but it had taken most of the remaining day to reach the raw edge of land. Food had been a surprise from a hamper embossed with the logo of the Feathered Serpent. The city was well behind them, the last inhabited town passed by half an hour before. Alone with the sounds and smell of the sea on the unnamed promontory Lia hadn’t felt so physically isolated since leaving the mountains of her home.

“It will do.” He took her hand, kissed her fingertips. “No distractions. No one else.” A bag appeared from the car - a thick rug, pillows, something quilted and light to keep them warm, a small toiletries bag. Lia realised why their server had looked so disconcerted. She smiled to herself, appearing casual Dave had thought of many things before they had set out. The breeze dropped as the tide retreated and the day waned. Lia didn’t feel the cold as she poured wine into the rather fine glasses provided by the staff at the Serpent and snuggled close to him. The ground under the rug was hard but she thought it made a fine bed as they made love on the empty cliff top. Heads together they held each other until the early gloaming of the long night.

“How do you feel?”

“Good.” She always felt good with him. How had she ever thought him a monster? How had she ever feared any of him?

“Well do you want to go back?”

She pressed against him. “I think you know what I want.” They hadn’t discussed it; another subject not raised in words but now communicated through touch and sighs. Knowing he had no expectation of her made it easier to explore what she wanted. He knew it wouldn’t be her first time but the old habits of gentleness ran deep; he moved on only when he was certain she was ready, responding to her rediscovery of herself, allowing her the time to enjoy the sensations as he stretched her and got her body ready for what her mind wanted.

Like the first night they ended face to face. Impaled on him, her unused wetness seeped over them both as his fingers again completed what his mouth had started. Beyond, far beyond, the wariness at taking him in Lia threw back her head and screamed herself to the empty sky. No longer able to be gentle, unable to stop, he thrust harder and again, his cry loud enough to shatter heaven as he emptied himself, mindless, into her, the heaving spasms of his little death the outward sign of his...
absolute, and eternal, submission.

Distant waves broke and covered the sound of their breathing. He drew her back up to him and pressed her face against his chest, held his hand over her eyes until she nodded her understanding to keep them closed. Another change, another step in becoming.

*How do you feel?* No answer. Maybe she hadn’t heard him. Maybe she wasn’t what he’d suspected. He drew the rumpled quilt up around them both, enfolding her in its warmth. *How do you feel?* She began to shake. Carefully he cupped her buttocks, lifting her enough to ease himself out of her tightness. He settled her across his narrow thighs and she curled against him while he cleaned up what little mess seeped back out of her. *When you are ready, open your eyes and look at me. Don’t say anything, just look at me.* She nodded again, she could hear him. She could hear him. He didn’t dare hope.

It was full night with the sliver of the moon offering only meagre illumination. He saw her as clear as day. He waited. All the time in the world. The trembling passed, gradually. She lifted her head and opened her eyes. White irises, no darkness anywhere just starlight from inside her eyelids. She reached up and wiped away tears that he hadn’t realised he’d shed as he’d emptied himself and been filled in return. *How do you feel? Are you ok?*

*That was how you freed Myk.* They smiled at each other. She blinked, slowly, and the light began to fade. *Magick.* She didn’t seem to notice that she wasn’t speaking out loud. *What would have happened if you had me like that the first time?*

*I don’t know. I would hope that I could have been as gentle with you but … I fear I could have lost my head and hurt you. I could have burned you up. Or there may have been nothing, just that vague anti-climax you were used to before. Pain or no, I think you have to be ready for each stage.* Carefully, he raised her to her feet and stood behind her, settling the honeycomb material around their shoulders. *Look around us, what do you see?*

*Light. Bands of light. Different … different strengths, some very faint, some bright and narrow. More from some places than others but all around, all coming to us.* She reached a hand out to the interleaved bands and the unreal illumination spilled through her fingers, cold but throbbing with echoes of lives. The longer she looked at the light the more complex and graduated it became, she thought she could see flashes of rainbows - interactions, mergers and junctions - among the lines. At the centre of this unimagined invisible world was the slim man, the point of origin.

A name came to her. Before she could say the shape of it he turned her to face the ocean. The strongest bands of light felt old and wary, a hint of greed interlaced through them, they came across the sea against a steady haze. He pointed and the focus of the ribbons shifted to the outstretched hand, the nearest part of him to the distant souls. *Europe, and beyond to Asia. Mostly Kappas. A scattering of others that have done well to last this long. The background light is from the sensitives, a flicker of haoma within humanity. From a handful of flukes, time and chance has seen them increase and spread. Some I helped make, but all are still human. The brightest part of the haze is Foix. It is the haven in the Fortress. It has called sensitives together for centuries. If this place is lost to us then Foix is where we will go. If we are ever split up then Foix is where we meet. Go to the Castellan of the Comte de Foix. Whoever she is, she will offer safety.*

He turned her back towards the city left behind that morning. The haze was much fainter. It seemed newer, somehow, a burgeoning spread of young lives carrying the glimmering promise of haoma. Against the new potential two throbbing skeins intertwined and danced around each other, sparks of blue cascading into the ether as they merged and flared. These brightest lights coalesced and pulsed, spilling over Lia and Dave in an in irresistible cresting of familiar passion.
Gihon and Myk. Dave smiled and nodded back as Lia caught the light on her tongue and tasted them. Suddenly giddy, she laughed, it bubbled up out of her – an outpouring of their joy. He held her, kissed her slow and deep, and laughed with her in the shared afterglow. Gradually the searing brilliance of their lights faded. Lia saw and understood it as nothing more than an ebb in their tide, they would always flow together.

She reached out to stroke the light but part of it moved with her hand, it stayed at her fingertips and she couldn’t get hold of it. Do they see this? Uncertain what to do now that vagrant strand of light wouldn’t leave her she tried to push it back onto Dave’s shoulder. Whatever she did the gossamer thread pulsed and would not leave her, like a faint afterimage, a shadow against the brightness between her body and Dave. He took her hand and put it to her chest. The link from the city stayed connected to her, a bond she’d never known about anchored to her heart. He smiled and said nothing at her confusion, he didn’t seem to be surprised. The name was on her tongue again, the taste of it a demand to be said but he raised an elegant finger to still her lips.

Silently, Dave took a long step away. Then another. The great wash of light moved with the exposed figure, but not all of it. Another step and she saw a ravelled cord of twisting radiance stayed with her and stretched back inland. It was not from the city. Far beyond sight she immediately knew the umbilical brightness went back to her birth place. It felt old to her. It had a lizard stink about it. She didn’t want to think about who it was. The dragon they didn’t want to acknowledge. A frayed echo of the illumination split from the main strand and moved with the slim man, a ghostly trace back to the source. There was little of the haze of shabti touched humanity from that direction. Instead, Lia felt rather than saw multiple connections between her and things unknown and unknowing. Flavours of similarity, the beginnings of recognition smothered beneath that reptilian taint. The taste of it made her feel uneasy, it washed away the clean flavour of the unsaid name. She turned away, not wanting to see, not wanting the distant intelligence to notice her and closed the space between them to put her face against her lover’s chest. Safe. Safety in his arms. Always safe.

When I was forced to become there were no words spoken but I heard a voice in my head. It was a wild card I found in only one generation. I have never heard the boys in this way. They do not hear me. They feel the power, they see the light. They are so close, but they do not see detail. They have never seen as you have done.

Will I see this all the time now? Is this how the world is for you?

He shook his head. “I’ve never seen our bonds this clearly, or for as long as this before. See? I speak out loud and the vision fades.” The darkness returned at the uttered words, the real world dim and empty reasserted itself around them. “It’s a difficult thing to hold on to. A chemical imbalance in the brain perhaps. A jump to the left brought on by orgasm that cannot be maintained. This is what you saw a version of the first time when I told you to sleep and forget. As you guessed, normal function returns to protect us, leaving echoes of eternity on the subconscious.”

Lia collected up her clothes and dressed against a chill that was not just physical. She wasn’t sure what to say, didn’t want to discuss the sickly luminous umbilicus that she thought must have connected her to her father. The urge to say the strange name was gone, evaporated along with the vision of the other plane. Dave followed her lead. He waited for whatever she wanted to talk about.

“Will I forget again?”

“Not sure, maybe ... only if you want to?” He shrugged and threw their gear into the trunk. Lia was an unknown country.

“Will you forget?”
“I don’t think that’s possible.” And she’d seen that from his vagrant memories; he may have lost himself in the mad times, he may have escaped to sleep, but he never forgot. He held the passenger door open and encouraged her back against the leather seat.

Twin beams led them back to the small town where he charmed them a room for the night above the only bar and helped his exhausted wife into the iron-framed bed. Lia hadn’t said anything more on short ride back to the town.

**Did you know?** Lying beside him in the strange bed the words finally came from her. She didn’t seem to realise that the question was not asked aloud, the overlay of confusion and half grasped images told him what she really meant.

*I guessed. I wondered what I would see away from the background noise of the city, from the glare of the boys. I hadn’t realised you would want to go so far, or quite what you would see. I didn’t know that you would be able to hear me.*

He kissed her fingers. One by one. Warm and relaxed. In no rush. Content to wait.

**Does Gihon know?**

*On an intuitive level he got there before me. No wonder he told me he saw much of himself in you. She saw the curl of his smile in the gloom. We’ve not discussed it without you. This is your thing, we all go at your pace.*

She huddled against him, as if his spare frame could cast a shadow large enough to hide her away from the baleful presence she’d convinced herself was now aware of her new evolution. *I don’t ever want to go back to that place.*

*Whatever the reason Tomasz Jordan would give for your making he doesn’t control you. You owe him nothing. You have us now, for as long as you want us, however you want us.*

**Will there be more changes?**

*I don’t know.*

Lia slept. After a while Dave closed his eyes and replayed an ages old scene in his head. Faces in a clearing, a silent debate. He wasn’t sure he wanted the conversation about Tomasz Jordan either.
Interlude

Chapter Summary

Elvira calls the Field of Reeds and sees more than she was expecting.

A phone buzzed in the darkness. The sound was unexpected, the reverberation on the nightstand enough to annoy an exhausted eye open. Wepwawet had stopped all calls – yes? Thinking took longer to catch up with the reflex to answer the call and stop the noise.

“Wassup? What time is it? Fuck. What’m I late for?”

“Time? You would be better asking what day it is. I’ve been calling for ages and your bloody door keeps blocking me. I threatened it with the police if it didn’t let me know you were ok.” Elvira didn’t sound impressed at being treated the same as everyone else. “… I’m guessing this is Wepwawet’s idea of a compromise. Are you ok? We’ve been worried about you …”

Frantic more like. The weekend had passed, the world had moved on and neither of the Spaniards had had an answer from anyone at the Field of Reeds other than the self-assured door program. The secretary heard a mumbled curse then saw a flare of light on her screen as the video feed came through from the handheld. A moment of confusion as the device focussed and then panic as Elvira realised what she was looking at. “Oh. My. God. Are you ok? Have you been in a fight? You’ve not gone and got yourself mugged have you?”

The eye squinting out from the phone looked set in various shades of bruise. There were marks from his bottom lip to his jaw – was that a bite, a human bite? The phone was pulled back as Gihon turned to look at something in the room and the concerned woman realised that mugging could not be the full explanation. She let out a trapped breath in a shocked hiss.

“Ah, yeah.” A grin flashed quickly across the damaged face. It looked like his nose may also have been broken. “Mugging, good one. You should see the state of the other guy.” The camera moved again, this time to show a figure asleep on the bed. Elvira didn’t need a high quality image to recognise the body next to Gihon, but she’d never woken to find Myk marred by bruises, marked by nails and teeth. The picture changed again, Gihon with a finger held across his own swollen and smiling lips – shhhh!

“Oh, ok.” The Spaniard nodded back to her screen. “I’ll rearrange your classes tomorrow and let people know you’ve got man flu. I hear there’s a nasty strain of it that’s come across from Russia that’s keeping all kinds of people in bed. We’ll see you again when you’re back on your feet.”

“Thank you.” Again the smile and then a kiss blown to the screen as the big man closed the connection to the outside world.

It was late. It had taken a long time for the door program to put the call through. Gielen had been confident they would be ok but Elvira had needed the reassurance. Now she stared at darkened surface of her screen, the discreet light flashing in the bottom corner a reminder that she had recorded the call. An old habit. She went to wake her companion. After the slip with the arrival of the old man there would be hell to pay if Gielen wasn’t the first to know that Myk’s hurried disappearance was because he’d finally come to his senses.
Elvira thought no one else needed to be told. It would be obvious the first time the two men were seen out together.
Chapter Summary

Dave and Lia return from the end of the world.

The day started bitingly cold. The low sun struggled through clouds that finally lifted to a pale blue sky. They both turned their faces to the sun as they left the bar and returned to the blood red car. The few curious eyes on the street followed their departure while, in the bar, the surprised owner opened an email to say that his debts had been paid off.

Dave and Lia looked at the remains of America as they drove back to New York. Every now and then he mentioned places that had been lost in, or since, the Collapse. The memories came to her as he said the words. Cities, landmarks. People. Nature had all but reclaimed the empty miles as the land recovered from the incursion of man.

“Did you see him again?”

“No.”

“Death.” Somewhere in her subconscious a voice explained the death card as change. She’d never seen a tarot set but she knew what it was as the image came to mind. His voice, his strange memories filling things in for her.

“Yes. Just before I left for Europe. I heard his call so I met him … in that version of Manhattan as it happens. Waiting to get papers to get out of the country. Things were going badly wrong. Some of the others were thinking of hiding out in the Rockies to ride out the storm. Thanatos said he might go with them … or maybe just find somewhere to go to sleep. He’d been running on empty, out of physical contact with the other Thetas, and was finding it hard to maintain his body. With the kids safe and long gone he just wanted to rest. He’d always seemed so strong, we’d never realised, never considered that he could just … run out.” A shrug stood in place of further explanation. Lia had felt that fear as if it was her own; if the strongest of them could fail then what of the others

“We took a suite in an overpriced hotel – all very discreet - and I gave him what I could and wished him well. I’ve listened for him the few times I’ve been back over. I know distance shouldn’t really affect us, maybe I just left it too long … I don’t know if he’s asleep or gone but I’ve never felt him since that last time. He saved me, he carried the burden when I walked away; he did his best to get the others to help man, or at least not to add to the harm.”

They drove on. The blacktop that ribboned between increasingly frequent habitations improved and smoothed, a gift of technology connecting the past and the present. It eased them back towards the city. Eventually the navigation panel lit up and the traffic servers asked for permission to guide them in. Dave pushed the negative as they dropped down to the first customs post at the extreme boundary of the recovered New York.

The wolf logo appeared, discreetly, at the bottom corner of the screen. It seemed to Lia that the stern face smiled as they returned home to the Field of Reeds.
Coming to terms

Chapter Summary

Gihon sets out to face the world and his new haircut proves to be a distraction.

Snow flurries, not as serious as they might become, eddied around students as they dashed between buildings. Winter at the enjoyable stage. Hooded against the cold, long coat lined and layered over waistcoat and now appropriate for the weather, Gihon stood in a quiet corner outside his building and watched the young people for a while – all their similarities and differences. All their potential.

A new Shabti. A completely new variant. So many changes in such a short time for the girl. He smiled to himself. Changes, too, for him. He still felt bare without the great shroud of hair to wrap around him but was content with the scarf that Myk had coddled him with before setting off that morning. A walk to clear his head and time to meet the world again, to let others see his changes.

Through the doors and the hood was pulled back. The scarf trailed from a pocket as he made for the stairs. People saw him, some stared as he ran a hand through his hair. Gihon tousled it as if checking the curls were still in place, to him an obvious indicator of his new status. A wake of interest and confusion spread out behind him as he stalked to the faculty office. Nudges turned into hurried messages as people remembered friends and passed the word.

“You look very well.” Elvira followed him from the main office to his private lair. “Very well indeed. I thought I’d be rearranging classes for you for at least a week after the other night.” He grinned. “You really do just get better, don’t you?” The long coat was thrown into a corner, the buckles holding the tightly laced waistcoat closed snapped open and he looked about to settle himself behind his desk. The grin stayed in place. She punched him in the arm – a quick jab to the bicep that barely seemed to register. “That’s for making us worry.” Another punch – harder. “And that’s for not really being human.” She swung at him again, he humoured her with an ‘ooof’ as a small fist connected with his undefended solar plexus. “And that’s just for.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry.” He took her hand and looked at it as if checking there was no damage to her knuckles.

“You could have told us.” He didn’t look up. “We love you, it doesn’t matter to us.” He gave her back her hand and sat down, started flicking through the paperwork on his screen - mostly decisions she’d already made just there to be rubber stamped by him. A confirmation message appeared from the Mapplethorpe. Oh. That could be interesting.

“Maybe not for you two, you know I’m no monster but what about everyone else?” It could also be dangerous.

“Does Lia know?” He nodded. “She ok with it? I’ve not seen her around.”

“Oh she’s ok. She’s just taking a little time to adjust. She, erm, you see she’s …” he looked at the Mapplethorpe message again. They’d talked through the possibilities over dinner after Dave and Lia’s little road trip. He took a breath, maybe they’d just been giddy … maybe but was this the sign? If not Elvira then who else could they start with? In for a penny. “Well, it seems that she’s just like me too, only younger. Bit of a surprise all round.”
“So there’s the four of you?”

“Us four, together, yes. There are more elsewhere, but four here. I guess there could be more. We hadn’t realised about Lia so I’m not quite as confident on that as I would have been if we’d had this conversation last month.”

Elvira looked at him and considered a range of responses. “Don’t not tell me anything important like that again.” She punched him once more for emphasis before turning away. The Spaniard had many skills, one was the ability to make quiet close doors slam at will. Despite his moods, Gihon had never mastered the art, but he was very good at interpreting her feelings from the sounds of inanimate objects.

When the she finally got back to her mail screen the first thing Elvira opened was a message from the dark haired man sat in the room behind her. Would she be so kind as to book a table for six, he asked … her choice of restaurant and at a time most convenient for herself and Gielen? A treat, Gihon said, a thank you for years of putting up with his moods and his and Myk’s ridiculous stupidity, a thank you for both of them for always being friends.

She smiled. Calm returned to the offices.

The tutorial group seemed distracted. They frequently lost the thread of the conversation; sentences petered out or circled with unaccustomed pauses and repetitions. Shocked into politeness by what they saw, none of them wanted to be the first to blurt out the obvious question. Gihon found it perversely satisfying to continue as if nothing had changed for him, their different levels of discomfort entertaining as they all struggled not to say anything.

The two hour class crawled by. He saw the assumptions going on behind confused eyes, the furtive glances as he ran his hands through his hair or reached to pass things around the group. His hands, and especially the heavy triple band on the third finger of his left hand, seemed to have them hypnotised. Or, maybe, not just his hands. It could also have been the skin tight half sleeves on his shirt that showed every bulge and contour of muscle fighting to get out from the thin jersey as his arms flexed. It may well have been the tooled and banded vambraces that bound his forearms. It might have been the shadows and sudden highlights inside the leather waistcoat as he moved.

Finally, as keypads rolled away and people began to mutter about lunch plans, he had to take pity on them.

“Guys, don’t worry, I’ll make sure you all get the notes you should have made from today. I understand that the conversion of Henri Bourbon to Catholicism to get the minor prize of the French throne might not be that thrilling compared to a haircut, but the Wars of Religion will still be on the exam no matter who I’m sleeping with. Next week we’re looking at Mazarinades CE 1649 to 1652 so I want you all back here with your thinking heads back on for that. Elvira will send you the necessary links so you can get yourselves organised.” He grinned at them. “Yes, I will be going to the Serpent for something to eat, yes I am expecting Myk to join me, yes you have all jumped to the right conclusion and, yes, I will deduct marks if you haven’t got over this by next week.”

Elvira watched him wave the last of them out. “You know that proverb about interesting times?” He closed up the waistcoat – four straps buckled tight against his torso to show off the width of his shoulders and flatter his narrow waist – and stepped back into his office to retrieve his coat. It had been a long time since he’d felt this good and he was determined to enjoy the feeling as much as possible, for as long as possible.

“Oh, don’t worry, I think it’s going to get more interesting than this.” He blew a kiss in her direction
and set his course for the Feathered Serpent and the badly hidden curiosity of certain parts of the campus. Better to get everything over with and let the student flimsy spread the word for them.
Footnotes in the news

Chapter Summary

Changes at the Field of Reeds become news for the University. People prove to be less un-interested, and more creative, than Lia had hoped.

As expected, the Interesting Times reported the news with photos and shocked reactions. People showed interest, or not, and the inhabitants of the Field of Reeds got on with their lives. Voices tailed off for a couple of days as they entered rooms, heads may have turned but, really, what difference did that make to the rest of the campus? Four people realigned in their relationships, it was surely not even worth a mention in conversation, nothing more than a minor ripple in the lives of others …?

They all knew that whatever wasn’t said to their faces had to be said somewhere. Online, of course, where there was anonymity and people didn’t have to pretend to be above noticing such things, some of the boards and the chats ran to speculation that even the Times felt uncomfortable commenting on. Images were studied and sage opinions given on the whys and wherefores based on hearsay and hope as the hopeless struggled to cope with the seismic shock of their figure of adoration - whichever one had been chosen - turning out to be human after all.

Wepwawet compiled summaries of the threads for its inhabitants. The first time the security program had offered Lia had shuddered and said no thanks; she’d heard enough from her friends, and she didn’t need to see what people were saying when they were faceless. Now, Myk draped a casual arm across Gihon’s shoulder and moved in to get a closer look at the screen that held his partner’s concentration. The tablet tilted and turned in the big hand until Gihon sighed and whispered something into his ear.

“That’s possible. Uncomfortable for the one in middle, but possible.” Myk may have smiled as he patted the big hand reassuringly. “Needs lot of strength.”

Dave wandered behind them and saw the diagram that had unsettled Gihon. “Oh, that. Yes, very possible. Nice that whoever drew it took our height difference into account, much trickier if we were all the same …” He looked down at himself as if realising something for the first time, “… do people really think I’m that thin?”

“Wepwawet?”

“Hello Lia”

“Hi there. Could you do me a favour and keep these summaries to text, bullet points maybe?” The men looked up from their study of the diagram, Gihon appeared a little flushed and wouldn’t maintain eye contact with her.

“Too much information?” The program would adjust in response to feedback, the program was nothing like it used to be. “I blocked all the animated content that I picked up, it seemed to be unnecessarily explicit and I suspect it was just for people to get their ‘jollies’ if I have correctly interpreted Dave’s recent use of the word.”

“Yes Wepwawet. All of this is just people getting their jollies. There is little reality and nothing at all
constructive in it.”

Dave laughed, “And that gentlemen, and AI, is an essential truth of human nature and celebrity culture summed up in a nutshell.” He kissed his husbands before sitting next to his wife and drowning her smaller hands in his. “The Gods and Monsters is going to be … fun.”
Gods and monsters

Chapter Summary

The Shabti go to a masked ball and begin to come out from behind their masks as their past greets them as old friends.
The Dean and the Chancellor recover well. They will be good allies to have as reaction unfolds.
Gihon is bought by Zael in an auction and shows his power is not just in the punishment his body can take.

The Hawass season began in the tradition favoured by the person being honoured. A ball for the University to see and be seen, for people to give generously and worry about it afterwards; most of all for people to dress up and be something other than themselves. Not entirely formal, not completely casual, a hybrid for those who wanted to pose and those looking to party. An event for people to hide behind masks … or to start to come out from them.

The main guest for the evening was Maryam Hawass, her presence finally confirmed by the Mapplethorpe curators hosting the event only the month before. Tickets sales had been brisk anyway as people looked for some sunshine in the dim winter days, a distraction from the snow that had soon outstayed the initial welcome. And, as there was no way that Cultural History was going to be a no-show, even those people who pretended no interest in what might be going on in a certain apartment would admit to a mild curiosity at what might be worn in response to the Egyptian history theme of the event.

Local news covered the arrivals; the heads of this, the chief officer of that, the Mayor and her assorted flunkies, the Dean and the Chancellor all presented in turn to the petite lady dressed as a Cleopatra. Fashion types commented on the revival of costume parties and the possible impact on the summer season. Wits from the Student Rag had fun pointing out anachronisms and downright gaffs as the earnest and un-hip tried a little too hard. Eyes flicked from group to group, extra attention paid to pairs of men that arrived as unspoken anticipation rose in response to the whisper that someone always went to the Gods and Monsters as a god. The winter outside meant little, once inside the boundaries of the hotel the temperature was a balmy 295K and those confident enough to wear something revealing would not be troubled by goose bumps.

The student paper had the advantage, it had eyes everywhere. A second year solid state engineering post-grad added to his supplemental earnings by getting pictures of a discreet side door arrival – three men, one woman – all costumed and masked, laughing to hide flickers of tension as they casually strolled by. Any question over their identity was answered when the shorter of the men turned back and asked him, politely, to let them get inside before sending the photos to the Rag’s email address. The request was made in Russian accented English from behind a falcons face, the body below was all golden muscle. Stepping out of the drab corridor and into the wash of noise and light of the party the big one with the dog mask popped his head back into the corridor and seemed to weigh up the transfixed post-grad for a long pause. Wide shoulders shrugged. “Hey, it’s not our ball, no one said we had to use the front door.”

Ten minutes after the door closed the student got a message back. He smiled as he slipped the small camera back inside the Mameluke costume worn by all the servers. His quarry didn’t seem to mind
him getting the shots, maybe he could make a little more money as the party continued.

The ball spread across a number of rooms – buffets and bars, formal tables and relaxed banquets, loud music, quiet music, live music, no music. Guests were attended by the anonymously dressed waiters distributing amuse bouche and a range of drinks on silent and slippered feet. The guests were nothing like as unobtrusive with their often garish costumes owing more to cheap horror films than historical authenticity. A cluster of Karloff mummies exchanged banter with Roman centurions while a brace of Ptolemys argued over who had precedence at the bar and, distracted, were elbowed out of the way by a large man wielding a mace – King Narmer came before everyone else.

Some people flaunted their costumes, some felt uncomfortable and maybe that last necklace they added was one too many but – as always the way with public events – everyone spent some time watching everyone else. Inside the party people began to circulate and relax. Idle chat turned to who, or what, might be auctioned off before the end of the night and who, or what, would be seen. Outside the party the editors of the student flimsy built their home page and made plans for anything else that might come their way.

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“I like the Nubian wig, you look good as a scribe. Very … official.” The drink disappeared under the black face of Set, the tall glass half empty as it reappeared again from under the hologram snout.

“Good choice for both of you … apart from the gender thing of course, but I doubt if anyone will bother about that.”

“You’re not looking too bad yourself.” The Spaniard smoothed the folds at her shoulder and looked up and down the length of the man she’d made a bid for years ago and a lifetime away - skin red for the desert, arms and legs bound with gold bands and his chest covered by a heavy beaded collar. She didn’t want to know how much the jewellery was worth. Unlike most of the other costumes in the room she didn’t doubt that it was the real thing. The bull tail hung down from his gilded belt, lying straight against the crisp white linen of his pleated kilt. The god of war and chaos may not have been able to overcome his golden nephew in the mythology but in Gielen’s present the two of them had seemed more than happy together. “How long are you going to keep up the dog face?”

“I noticed that Zael has come as Battle of Kadesh Ramesses the Great. Not sure I want to stop being a god until he ditches the War Crown.”

“Seriously?” Eyes heavily lined in kohl accentuated Gielen’s ‘you are just being childish now’ face.

“Seriously. It’s what Set would do.” The mask was meant to be fixed. Somehow it did a good job of showing that the god could laugh.

“So. The paint then, it’s a nice colour … is it all over?”

“Of course, wouldn’t want to be accused of only doing half a job if anyone gets a look under the kilt. It’s a good tone for covering up the odd scrape that I have, wouldn’t want to scare some of the soft souls in here.” He flexed briefly to show her his back, the edges of the collar dipped over his shoulders as a counterweight but only joined at the neck, his ink showed clearly in the space in between. “I asked Myk to make sure is wasn’t too thick over the tattoo. Where else can I show it if not here?”

“You do know you’re completely and annoyingly gorgeous.” She looked him over and sighed, even the mask was charismatic. “Of course you do.”

“People have mentioned that recently, yes.” The dog face managed to convey a smug grin.
“You bastard.”

“Not sorry.” He took another drink. “Anyway I believe you might have had a visit from my young man yesterday?”

“Not sorry either.”

“That’s my girl.” And the man who’d never been seen to touch a woman in public kissed her lightly on the forehead and sent his old friend off to go in search of her own partner.

Gihon was clearly in a much better mood than the brooding god he was dressed as.

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A cluster of pith-helmeted Victorian explorers hovered off the end of one of the buffet tables. Intent on proving that a free lunch was possible they had moved from table to table and given their considered opinion on the range of foods on offer. One nudged her companion with a skilled flick of her fly-whisk and gradually they all noticed a couple a short distance away. Two men with the skin of gods, the shorter with straight blond hair, the other with dark loose curls. They seemed to have eyes only for each other as they distractedly picked at the offerings.

“Didn’t they arrive as Set and Horus?” Murmurs of affirmation.

“Whose idea was it to include baby lettuce …” For academics they turned out to have a rather puerile sense of humour.

“It’s traditional.”

“Do you think they know what it meant in the story?” Intrepid explorers began to shuffle their feet and did their best not to giggle – too loud – at the inclusion of an ancient aphrodisiac in the menu. The taller man had picked up one of the small salad vegetables and was teasing his companion’s lips with it as drops of the translucent dressing dropped onto his chin. The action was repeated, this time with more than a hint of tongue as the two men moved closer.

“Oh. Oh that is just rude. Do you think someone should tell them to get a room?”

“What? No! Shhh. Anyone got a camera?” The lettuce disappeared with a smack of satisfaction and, for some, the temperature really did feel like an Egyptian summer.

A late arrival sauntered up to the little group, very calm and matter of fact in his Gordon of Khartoum dress uniform. He looked at his friends and across to the lovers as Myk now fed Gihon another of the small vegetables. “I think that’s one hippo more than happy to be harpooned.” It was too much for them and stifled laughter became snorts and red faced gasps.

Cleopatra, flanked by the Chancellor and the Dean, and doing her best not to pick up on the subtext of marital bickering underlying their small talk, allowed herself to be distracted by the impolite sniggering of the imperialists. She looked beyond the little group to see an impressive set of shoulders and some vaguely familiar hieroglyphs showing through red body paint.

“Dean Paulo, who are the two men causing such badly hidden hilarity? I’m sure I would have remembered being introduced to a pair like that.” The Dean looked over in the indicated direction and threw a surprised look to his wife. Chancellor Paula leaned slightly and tipped her head. The broad shoulders moved to one side and the androgynous woman nodded and mouthed a handful of syllables back to her husband.
The question and answer game was brief, whatever their minor differences the couple had been together a long time and were well used to each other. The Chancellor caught the arm of a passing Mameluke and asked her to bring the barely dressed pair over to meet their guest … then unconsciously began to smooth her hands down the long sheath dress and made herself as slim as possible. She licked her lips and hoped that her make-up was still perfect. It must have been at least a year since her brief liaison with the blond man coming over to them. She still got butterflies every time she thought of him.

The Dean was unsurprised by the amount of flesh flaunted by the Russian, his was one of the more commonly recognised bodies on campus and one that Paulo knew his wife still had images of. The smooth politician’s façade was a long ingrained habit. Myk was easy enough to introduce but Paulo had to work to maintain the gloss for the other. “My dear lady. May I present Mykhail Arkhangelskeyev and his … his husband? … our very own deputy head of Cultural History, Professor Gihon Plaisir.”

Myk stepped forward and sketched a formal bow, using the motion to take a small hand in his own and ghost the briefest kiss across her fingers. “Your servant.” He smiled and Maryam Hawass believed it to be true.

Gihon looked at the matronly lady dressed as an Egyptian queen. He was aware of Paulo and Paula moving in on Myk, aware of people turning to see the introductions. Dave and Lia were out of sight, caught up with some question about a raffle that he’d agreed to go in for (but not bothered to listen to the detail of). The big man ran through the conversations they’d had in the safety of the apartment. Underneath the regalia and the years he saw the child he used to know. His face lit up and there was no way he could be mistaken for any kind of wrathful deity as he swept her up and spun her around. “Button! My baby Button.”

The woman giggled and laughed, uncaring of the stares, memories of happy times with her grandmother and her special friends coming back to her as she trusted to the strong red hands at her waist.

“Why did no one tell us?” The Chancellor and the Dean both asked the same question, quiet voices aimed at the golden man ambushed between them.

“You should get out more, or read the Rag. Not a secret. Lots of people know.”

“And when was the happy event?” A fixed smile from the Dean clearly showed that someone, somewhere would be in receipt of a strongly worded memo.

“Few weeks ago.” Myk smiled sweetly and may have blushed as he looked at his left hand. This was the easy part.

Gihon, slightly shamefaced at his outburst, set the queen down again – gently – and the one time shy five year old became a reserved sixty-something again. She reached up to touch his cheek, not quite believing that he was real. “Uncle Gihon.”

The silence spread out from them - one surprise, perhaps, too many for people already shocked by the big man’s appearance. Myk sighed. Now began the hard part.

Maryam didn’t care. She smiled and included the disconcerted Pauloes in her happy reminiscence, random sentences directed to all of them. “I remember the adults were just onlookers. What else could they be compared to the brilliance of them? I was tiny when I first remember going to stay with my grandmother and I just looked up and up and up …” it took both her small hands to hold one of Gihon’s “… and it was like you were the world, I’d never seen anyone like you before. You were so
patient with me. You know, he let me translate his tattoo, taught me the sounds to transliterate the symbols …”

“You fell asleep on me more than once when we went through the exercises.”

“More than a few times. You were always more comfortable to sit on than Skellingbob.” She paused as if realising what she’d blurted out and made a quick scan of the nearby faces. “Oh. I’m sorry, is Dave …?”

“Yes, he’s still around, he’s just wandered off somewhere. Now here’s a thing you never thought I’d say, not only is Dave here but, like the Pauloes said, I have a new husband and …” he couldn’t resist a theatrical look, “a wife.”

“A wife? You?” Straight to the point. That was good work. A stranger could just come out and say it while others with a stake in staying reserved were hoist on their own petard. Whatever else might be the fallout from their meeting there were a number of ears wanting to know just what was going on behind the very closed doors of the Field of Reeds. “I had the hugest crush on you when I was seventeen … and then I made the mistake of telling Maman about that time I found you and Dave on the roof and she wouldn’t let me stay at the house anymore.” Maryam laughed in good-natured disbelief. “No. No? A wife?”

“A wife. Nice girl. I’ll introduce you.” Gihon glanced about. He looked casual, relaxed, not a care beyond the immediate. He caught the eye of one of his own post-grads, “Rochelle, be a love and go find Lia. If you find her you’ll find him. Tell them I’ve got someone I’d like them to meet.” The bearded legionary gave a quick salute and disappeared into the crowd of the main room.

Maryam pulled Gihon’s head down to her level. “That was called Rochelle?”

“Now then you, I know you always went back home but we taught you better than that when you were with us. I accept whatever they tell me. Considering what might be coming soon a little gender confusion is the last of my concerns.” The last was a whisper hidden in another hug, his scolding soft and indulgent. Theirs was a dangerous game, one they had skirted for years. In Dave’s case it had been centuries. It may have just been the adrenaline surge but it felt like it was the right time. “The Mapplethorpe have asked me to give an introduction to your grandmother’s work. I take it you have brought the Gemini with you? Oh good.” His smile had an odd quirk. “I should warn you that things may get a little interesting from now on.”

“A wife though, how much more interesting can you get?” Maryam’s hands looked ridiculous wrapped around one massive bicep. People looked. People noticed. “Is she a wife or a wife-in-law?” In an office across the campus headlines began to write themselves. Gihon just grinned and laughed; he was only a husband, he knew his place and it wasn’t for him to say any more. “I see why you like this husband though. Very dashing. Grandmaman would have had him for her Ganymede if she’d found him in time.”

People milled around and chatted quietly. Not too close to be obvious but not so far away to miss anything else that might be said. Myk enquired lightly after Chancellor Paula’s health and a blush rose to her dark complexion as she confirmed how well she’d been since she’d made his acquaintance.

For some reason, the subject of cosmetic surgery seemed to be a popular one as the ripple of not-gossip spread from disinterested mouths to unconcerned ears - “Really? Well, I think deep down we all knew”. Message boards began to update. Four private citizens getting on with their lives, clearly nothing important for anyone else - “Oh but he could at least said where he got the work done, look at the man” - nothing of interest for anyone else - “Shhh, here’s the other one.”
Dave arrived and Maryam passed from a red skinned embrace to his mummy wrapped arms. The matt green of his face and hands was a contrast to the glaring white of his funerary attire. An unusual costume, but one that his slim build meant he could carry off. As they had decided on practicality rather than full accuracy he was able to move easy, the feathered Atef crown a reflection of his poise and grace. Lia stood at his side, her sheath dress of the finest linen constricting and comforting, the heavy gold adorning her shoulders and arms a reminder of the way he’d held her before they dressed to come out on this wild adventure.

Lia heard the whispers, she could almost feel the quizzical looks and the weight of pity lurking under the surface as people wondered about her. She realised, then, the value of their skill of not noticing. To have reacted would have made people uncomfortable. That had been part of the debate. They would be safe with people they knew, like Elvira and Gielen, all the people whose lives had been touched at an individual level. But the group, how would the group react? Would they be the feared pitchfork wielding peasants or would they accept that these monsters, these dragons, were no threat?

Myk appeared at her side and it was easy to slip her arm around his waist, the feathers of her costume wings an echo of the image she still had of him. Isis had protected Horus, the Arkangel would protect them all. How many women had been changed by being with him? How many lives would be enough to give them a chance? She wondered about Foix and Etienne, the castellan that Myk had met on his journey through the Fortress. She smiled at small talk and wondered if the green faced man introducing her to his old friend would have to become the Green Man again. The dream of the forest bloomed in her veins, the youths who accepted him, the sounds of pleasure thrummed in her ears …

Lia didn’t care. So long as she was with him, with them, everything would be ok. She took a breath, he would show her the dream again tonight. So much of him still to explore.

There was a polite commotion from a different room and attention switched to the next news of the evening as a Mameluke took Gihon to his place in the auction of skills. The Alban paused a moment and it appeared that he had to be reminded, then gently nudged in the direction of the thing he’d agreed to when his mind had been on other matters. Myk hid a laugh behind his hand, he’d fallen for one of these auctions in the past – at least after that experience he knew that the organisers wouldn’t be silly enough to allow something that would be done in private.

Just four people and their relationship, no bother to anyone else at all, no news, no scandal. Lia smiled as Gihon allowed himself to be led off to the sale block, fake outrage a mantle worn less convincingly (but causing more entertainment) than the dog head mask that had been discarded earlier. No monsters here, no dragons on this uncharted shore. Just four people who loved each other.

The sound of a gavel, a room rowdy with drink and good humour being called to order as the next lot was brought on. The bidding was fast and the numbers began to border on the outrageous. Eventually the cat calls (some people would be so ashamed of themselves the next day) stopped and the auctioneer announced the sale had been completed. Only when they heard the room settle down again did they follow the same path as the Alban. Dave had said it would be unfair to be in the room during the bidding, hardly right for the Jensson Foundation to scare people off with the threat of a bottomless account. The Pauloes were left with a tall white crown and a group of randomly giggling explorers, and the feeling that they’d missed something important as Dave escorted the guest of honour to see the outcome of the auction.

“Who’s that, who bought Gihon?” Maryam craned her neck to see between a riot of colourful costumes as they moved through the sudden crush into the centre of the room. Gihon had his head bowed, talking to a short man dressed as a king, a ‘slave’ bearing an ostrich feather fan and another
holding the king’s blue crown standing just behind him. Assorted scribes were in attendance and seemed to be doing business with the auctioneer - the rather rosy-faced news anchor who was clearly trying not to look at the distracting red flesh an arm’s length away from her.

People suddenly realised who was trying to get by as, with “excuse me” and “pardon me” and, once, “bloody shift, will you!” they inched forward. Not quite like the Red Sea, a way finally parted for them. The people above gossip wanted to see them, they wanted to see what would happen as the business on the stage was concluded to the apparent satisfaction of the king run to fat and trying to hide it behind a New Kingdom armoured girdle. Two of the scribes turned and a comment from one made the other laugh and hide her face behind her hand. Lia was close enough to see Gielen wink at Dave. She squeezed his fingers but he wouldn’t look at her, his jaw tense to stop the grin from escaping.

“It seems that my senior husband has gone and got himself bought by a cartel of cunning linguists. Ramesses the Great …” Dave couldn’t keep the little snort of disbelief out of his voice as he pointed out the buyer to Maryam, “… over there is a chap by the name of Zael. He’s not our most favourite person. He likes thinking he can get one over on people by having their secrets. He’s been an arse about Gihon’s background for a while, however, I don’t think he realises how little control he actually has at this point.”

“Genders, please. Can we settle?” The grandly named (but irredeemably bland) Maria-Theresa Gloriana Deutsch had begun to decide that she preferred just repeating what other people had written, ‘live’ held too many complications. “Genders! Thank you. Other lots have been sold for skills and offices to be provided at a later date but we have something of a change tonight as, for the extremely generous sum of …” she had to check her notes, “… three hundred and ninety thousand dollars Professor Zael den Zael has purchased a song from, from …” she could only point, “him … erm, now.”

More murmurs between the group on the stage and a cloth was passed to the big man who wiped the stain from his face and neck. Only the faintest smears were left in awkward places, his eyes wide and iridescent in their kohl lining. The stage cleared, leaving Gihon standing there and, for a moment, looking small and exposed. No more masks. He kept his head bowed as he stretched out, took a breath and, around him, Wepwawet provided the music that no one else could play for him. The sound began. It was low, slow – a hiss of things long gone coming through the too perfect sound system.

Half a minute of the empty sound of piano and guitar and Gihon raised his head. Dave had been right when he said people made their own meanings. It didn’t matter that the words had originally been written by a man for his mistress. It didn’t matter that the defining version had been sung by a woman over a thousand years before. Whatever had been intended didn’t matter. The words came out of Gihon and the feeling in them was his alone. The words were not the worship of Hildegard of Bingen. They were sung not for a lost god but to an angel found.

Gihon sang. Slow. Gentle. All the time in the world. With his voice he made love to his angel. And his voice soared over the gathering cellos and violins. Five minutes beginning to end and then silence in the room. Even a pin would have been afraid to drop. A sea of faces looked up at him. Stunned. Then the room breathed again and people apologised for tears and unexpected hand-holding. The applause started and he took his bow.
Ecce homo

Chapter Summary

Gihon presents his lecture on the history of the figure in art. Lia isn’t sure how many people are listening or if, like her, they are distracted by his appearance at the Gods and Monsters Ball. Revealing the Gemini, and Selma’s original introduction to the piece causes quite a stir in the audience.

“Ladies, gentlemen and indeterminates, thank you all for braving the cold to come here this afternoon. I hope that my little talk may prove interesting and educational for you all. For those of you who don’t know me ...” The speaker gave his audience time to smile and whisper; there would have been few who’d not seen the Rag that morning and his body (and that voice, oh for pity that voice!) was one of the most popular loops on the news. “I am Gihon Plaisir. I’m normally over in Cultural History but I’ve been asked to present this introduction to the work of Selma Hawass … my friend.”

The venue had been changed at the last minute after a sudden spike in interest. The Mapplethorpe were not blind to the fact that this was due to the speaker rather than the subject but they had no qualms about making the most of it. Whatever the reason it was still interest. Even this larger theatre was packed to capacity. The original drop dead clause attached to showing the Gemini was still in place. It had been sketched and described but it had never been recorded. The only people to see it had always been in the same room. It had been thought that no one in New York was old enough to have seen it the last time it had been shown in public. The anticipation about ‘Uncle Gihon’ thickened the atmosphere in the room into a palpable thing.

“I see we have quite a mixed audience today. I’d like to start with a special hello to Dr Garth from Re-emergent Societies. Dr Garth gave a lecture last week on the Lairdship structure in Alba. Kudos, by the way to you and your team - that is not a journey for the faint hearted. If you want to catch up later I’d be happy to answer your questions as - you were quite right - Plaisir is my title rather than my original surname but your timeline is slightly off. I wasn’t just ‘a’ Plaisir, I was ‘the’ Plaisir. The original one.” He smiled again and gave what might have been just the slightest shrug. “Pleasure Wife always sounded a much better title than being referred to as my Laird’s fuck toy.”

The polite room should have been shocked. The room should have been outraged at his blunt language. But the intake of breath was merely surprise at such easy affirmation (“He said it”). The spell of the previous night seemed to carry over into the packed room, an emotional memory, a reverie of feeling as the words had floated over the hypnotic and blood warm rhythm of the music. The words had been Gihon’s magic.

# The first time ever I saw your face
# I thought the sun rose in your eyes

Simple words for a truth so obvious Lia had been taken aback by his honesty. She’d looked around, waiting for someone to point and shout.

# And the moon and the stars were the gifts you gave
# To the dark and the endless skies, my love
Gihon had become love before their eyes.

He was nothing but love.

And the hard hearted had cried for being there, and the lost had turned to their friends. The force of him was a primal thing that bypassed thought and explanation.

Lia had felt tears on her face and rested her head on Dave’s linen wrapped shoulder. It was all too real.

She had watched him standing alone, watched the love in the room gather itself up and rush over him to crash against his shore.

Finally he smiled, feeling the love, amplifying it and turning it back across the room.

The last note, long and high. Clear. Pure. A still point in the turning world. A thing of wonder. In the face of the audience, the focus of their unexpected adoration he stood taller, straighter. Stronger.

Unwilling to face the crush of people wanting his time, his attention, to bask in his undoubted glamour, Gihon had found his partners and rested his forehead against Myk’s, eyes closed, for a long pause and shut out the hubbub of the gathering. Eventually the tilt of their faces shifted and they kissed (“You’d think they’d invented it” smiled Dave to Lia’s ear). As it had been more than a decade before, the party was over for them.

Waiting for the car to be brought to a discreet exit Gihon had seemed to lose the battle for control and pinned the shorter man to a wall, hands tugging the blond head back as open mouths fought for dominance. The last photo op of the night, muscle hard against quivering muscle and Myk turned to present his neck for biting as the big man’s hand casually groped under crushed linen to grab a handful of sun kissed buttock. The solid state Mameluke again, intent on his quarry, hadn’t noticed Dave and Lia until the camera was liberated from his hand. Instead of the expected anger the green face merely seemed intent on checking the footage. A quick whistle brought the lovers back to reality and they pulled back from each other. “Let’s get going … Ethan here only needed to have a bit left over after clearing his debts, we don’t need to encourage bad habits.” The camera was returned, the
student open-mouthed. Four matching grins … of course they’d planned on him finding them.

Gihon - now every inch the educated man - showed this room of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and strangers a story of different ideals of masculinity and beauty. He began with the Kouros and the influence of Egypt on Greek sculpture. How times changed and art changed, how the world lost the Greek notion of euandria in the face of the aggressive and aggrandised muscularity of the Roman worlds … only itself to be lost and rediscovered again.

The polite room had shared an intake of breath at the inhuman perfection of the Riace bronzes and hushed murmurs began again, here and there, around the semi-dark auditorium. How presentation changed and became more stylised; how concept superseded representation. It was a summary, a pell-mell dash from age to age. Setting the scene for Selma and her search for old bodies, prehistoric throwbacks compared the rather weak and softened physiques that she saw becoming the norm.

Setting the scene for the unfinished Zodiac Cycle – and the Gemini, her representation of the demi-gods Castor and Pollux.

Lia was interested, should have been interested, but found it difficult to concentrate on the civilized tones coming from the lectern. She held on tight to the long fingered hand on one side of her and felt the afterglow of sunlight on the other. Anchored by two husbands Lia did her best to stay in the room and not think about how devastating the same voice had sounded the previous night, thickened with lust in the back seat of the surely-too-large-to-be-practical off-roader. Dave had just smiled as he drove them all home, eyes on the road ahead. Attempting the same level of control that Dave had showed in the car, Lia followed the words as best she could, trusting her body not to betray her with the same flushes and sighs that seemed to flicker in a miasma of remembered lust in the crowded room.

The cycle of images came to a halt and the lighting dropped to nothing. Silence. The pause was a piece of pure theatre, a pause for breath before the main act.

“Welcome to the Gemini.” A female voice in the silence. The first light returned to the room and showed the audience that the empty space on the lower stage was now filled with … something. The light showed an elegant foot, long boned, heel raised as if caught in motion. The light expanded as the voice continued. This was the Gemini as intended by Selma, not to be recorded and gawked at from a distance but to be experienced first-hand.

“Castor and Pollux. The twins born from an egg, or eggs depending on who you read. Both the children of Leda but one fathered by great Zeus himself and the other by Tyndareus, a mortal. The brothers loved each other as only brothers can do. The fact that one was mortal and the other divine made no difference to them until Castor was killed and Pollux begged his father to share his divinity between the two of them so that they were never separated.

“We see the twins in the prime of life, the Dioscuri, helpers of mankind … patrons of travellers and sailors … hunters. They wear the pilos, the Phrygian cap. Traditional, a reminder perhaps of the eggshell they broke out from. The straps on their hands could be the reins of horses or reminders of the boxing contest when Pollux defeated King Amycus of the Bebryces. They are naked because … well … why wouldn’t you?”

There may have been a chuckle in the old recording as both figures were fully revealed. Selma hadn’t been so interested in conforming to all the standards of the ancients. Lia swallowed, dry mouthed. Suddenly in a room full of mostly strangers this didn’t seem such a good idea. Dave didn’t flinch at the intimate exposure. If he wasn’t bothered then she wouldn’t be. Myk gave a quick nudge with his shoulder and grinned across to her, his stance radiating pride. If the most heterosexual man in the city could be so smug about the gasps in the room then she would do her best to match him.
The figures were glorious. They were not the same as each other, they were not the same as anyone else. They were perfect, each in their way.

“You might think that the question is … which was born the god and which the man? Come and see. Make up your own mind. Which of them is Castor and which is Pollux? Leave the safety of polite respect. The Greeks saw them placed in the heavens, twin emblems of immortality and death. See the twins here in their glory. Which is which? Come and see them. Walk around them. Look at them and the question becomes … does it even matter which is man and which is god? Touch them. Accept them.”

The voice continued to encourage interaction. Hesitantly, by ones and twos … then a stream … they came down from their seats to circle the uncanny figures. Life-sized, realistic, the more heavily muscled of the pair rested his tousled locks on his brother’s narrow shoulder, one arm casually draped over the other. The slim one, wiry, no fat, skin stretched taut over bone and meat supported his twin with no hint of effort.

Lia held back with Dave and Myk. Not her time to join in as the circling faces showed wonder at the skill of the sculptor, then surprise at the art of the artist as unmoving faces seemed to flicker between life and death, the skull beneath the skin becoming visible first on one then the other. Light dimmed slightly as the ceiling became the night sky, the stars of the constellation flickering in and out above them.

A brave soul, Lia wasn’t sure but it could have been Gielen, moved close and reached out to touch a marble thigh. The white flared and a human tone shivered along the frozen flesh. More hands reached out. A touch, a stroke – dark curls swarmed out under a red fabric cap, leather straps took on a patina of age and use. Brows filled in, individual hairs brushed across unbreathing torsos. One of them was dark, the other auburn. Shades of flesh caught in a fixed point of time.

“For the Greeks the twins were real. They believed in them. One born mortal and the other a god. Or both mortal. Or both gods. Look at them. They loved each other. Does it really make any difference what they are?”

People walked away then came back for another look. Colour came and went as the statues responded to touch. Gihon came out from behind the lectern, a half smile hiding his feelings as people looked between the dark twin and himself. Taking his cue Dave went to join him and they stood, side by side, one resting on the other as they had done so many years before.

Selma’s voice continued, the recording winding to a close. “I’m not asking you to believe, just to accept. These are the Dioscuri, this is the Gemini.”

So many people in the room. It took some time. They looked into the faces that were both dead and undying, they touched flesh that looked human but had the permanence of stone. The same questions were clear in their puzzled eyes and the tensing of lips, but the first was so big that no one could manage to say it. All the rumours, all the gossip that no one would admit to enjoying. Everything everyone had ever wanted to know and the words were too much to say.

“Yes.” Eyes turned to Dave, his quiet voice a focus in the tumult of confusion. “Yes. Selma was our friend a long time ago. Yes, that is what we looked like when she asked us to be her models.”

“I was thirty-eight when we let Selma fix us in that way.” Gihon’s voice. Deeper. More assured. Gihon and his audience - whether he really was or not he seemed certain of their acceptance. “There are studies and preliminary designs that can be seen when the main exhibition opens tomorrow. Paintings from her private collection that we’ve agreed can be shown. Some are just candid sketches, things she played with to keep her hands busy as she watched us together.”
“Selma had been looking for her celestial twins for some time and she brought us together not knowing what truth she’d actually found. I won’t even appal you with how old I was when I met this one and fell so madly for him. Be careful how long you stare at what she created. Like the sun we could burn you. Selma got what she was looking for and we became the last great work that she completed. Looking at us too long spoiled our friend and she forgot the clock of her own life.” Dave raised his hands to still the murmurs that had started. “I see your questions and I see your fears, but I am not so different from you. You eat, you sleep, you worry, you make your way in the world. You love and you hope for the best. Isn’t that what we all do? Back before the end of the world there was this mad idea to create a race of tools. Billions were spent, wasted you might think, to develop a breed of strong and obedient servant soldiers. What they got … in essence … was me.”

Gihon stepped into the deepening silence, the sudden pall of fear and uncertainty that filled the gap after Dave stopped speaking and people considered what he’d said. Had he said too much or not enough? They were still Gihon’s audience. “Any civilised society – and I remind you that that is what this is supposed to be – is right to be uncomfortable with vivisection. But what happens when the subject isn’t a cute little animal that everyone agrees should be protected? What happens what it isn’t even something classed as alive? What happens when it is something made solely to be used and disposed of, when survival is by accident rather than intent?

“Well, I can tell you, what you get is astonishing progress. What you get is the sick secret at the heart of a decadent society that has lost its way. We are a few hundred in this room. I’m only talking percentages but how many would have suffered cancers by now, how many would be disfigured or disabled through genetic failure? How many wouldn’t even have been born but for the things done to create this man and then done to him afterwards? Widen your horizons people. How many in this city … how many in the world … are alive and healthy today because of this man and the others of us like him?”

He opened his arms to them, invited them to listen to his voice, softer than Dave’s with a hint of indulgence to take the edge off the scolding in his words. “What are we to do with you? You and your god shaped holes and your fears of the different. You still want a god after all these centuries, after all the things your gods have done to you? Sorry, can’t help you there. Have those two instead.” He pointed to the Gemini where life and death flickered across the stone faces. “We just want the same as you, we want to be able to live our lives. That doesn’t change, no matter how old you are, no matter how old he is and, yes, no matter how old I am.”

Myk made his way to stand by his husbands, forgotten up to now but very aware of stepping into an uncertain spotlight. Unnoticed by most of the room, Gielen and Elvira appeared by Lia. Maryam stayed by her side. The unheralded female Shabti was heartened to see a few more friendly faces come her way. The people who knew them knew they were not monsters; she hoped that the spell of Gihon’s voice, or at least the curiosity of a university audience, would get them through the end of the day unscathed.

“Ladies, there are many of you here that I have known. Maybe more I get to know in the future. What do you see when you see me? You see your servant. You see another slave made for a war that passed me by, a slave rescued from a long death by this man. You see someone who has loved you and done everything he can to make you happy. You see someone who has made you well sometimes when you didn’t even know you were ill, tried to make your body welcoming for a child when your medicine could not do it for you. I have never hurt you or yours. I never want to. I am not a weapon. I want to live my life just as you have the right to live yours. Please. Do not hate us for being different. How we began was not our choice, but how we live now is. Do not fear us. Everything we have done is because we love you.”

“What about the woman?” A voice in the crowd, Zael puffed up on his own insignificance, wanting
to cause trouble even when he’d been beaten to the punch.

“Zael den Zael!” Lia jumped to her feet. Anyone who hadn’t recognised her from the previous night now had a clear view of the brown haired woman standing in the third row of seats. She’d gone from pride, to a little fear, and now to anger. “Our private life is no concern of yours, professor.” She spat the last word out. “I’m not stupid and I’m not deaf and I can answer for myself. Yes, I knew what he was before he asked me to be his. I think I’d always known and, you know what? It makes no difference. I know how old he is, he even told my friends how old he is. The sky didn’t fall in and the world didn’t end so how is my life anything to do with you? What gives you the right to say anything about my choices?”

The University was not normally a place for public confrontations. The events of the lecture were so far from normal that no one seemed to care. A few muttered support, there may have been a smattering of applause and if Lia’s outburst was equivocal, well, people could make up their own minds. In Lia’s experience they would do that no matter what was said and she found that, deep down, she no longer cared.

“Ladies, gentlemen, indeterminates. I know this might not have been quite what you were expecting today.” Gihon had recovered his poise with the huffy departure of Zael and a few others from the room, so long as trouble went outside he didn’t care. “I guess we’re now at the Q&A stage of the … of the … erm, whatever the fuck this has turned out to be. If we can keep things sensible and – please – not turn into a witch hunt about something we had no control over then I guess I’ll turn the floor over to you and we’ll do our best to satisfy your curiosity.”
The Shabti do their best to provide answers for their audience. 
Zael is an unwelcome intrusion but at least there is some use in his useless attack. 
The Pauloes show their support.

The crowd was a creature in its own right. Gihon had seen this before. Whatever the individuals may think, put them together and the gestalt was not the same. Would people stay? Would they run away? Myk brought some chairs onto their side of the stage, made it clear that they were willing to stay if the audience wanted them to. Some began to return to their seats, others just sat where they stood, wanting to see the gods and the not-gods close up. Curiosity seemed to have won the day. People settled down. Hands began to be raised. Gihon pointed and acknowledged the first.

“A question for David Jensson. My great-grandmother was from the foothills of the Vosges. She used to tell me stories about how spring returned to the mountains after the long dark. Was …” the unidentified female voice sounded uncertain, “…that you? Are you the Green Man?”

This question was met with a brief nod and a smile before Dave addressed the whole audience. “The Green Man is an old myth that used to be common in certain parts of Europe. The land slept after the Great Collapse and people struggled. Sometimes a pretty girl – they were all pretty it seemed back then – would happen across a sleeping man and wake him with a kiss and she would become fertile and the land would become green again.” He smiled at the anonymous woman. “The reality was a little different but it is possible that I may have met one of your ancestors. I slept in many places, have been woken by many people … when they told the stories it always seemed to be remembered as spring. Nothing mystical, just coincidence.”

Gihon picked another hand from the audience. “I help out at the Rag, I was asked to look over the transcript of that interview Gihon did for Zael because they weren’t sure if it was real or not. I’ve been meaning to ask … you said you always heal. How?” Mutterings of approval from the audience coincided with shrugs between the three on the stage.

“Just like you.” Gihon thought for a moment. “Only … faster if we need to. We are stronger, we can take a lot more but we still feel pain – it’s there for a reason after all. We’re not superman, we do pay a price when do this and it seems to tire us. There is a balance. So long as we are not too tired we can heal, we recover. If we don’t have the energy to spare or we don’t want to we can limit the reaction, slow the speed of it. If we go too far, if we forget the balance we kind of just stop until our energy is restored. I’ve never had to sleep like Dave’s done in the past but I guess that, at some point, I might have to rest in the same way. Someone might find me and wake me and, potentially, there’s a whole new Green Man story waiting to be told.”

“Do you dream when you sleep?” A pause as the questioner reconsidered what they meant. “When you are empty and you sleep to recharge – do you dream, are you aware of the passage of time?” The question was directed to Dave, it seemed that most of them would be. He was, after all, the newcomer … the strange one.

“I witnessed my first full solar eclipse in 2027. It was also my first time in Luxor. I was with a party of friends and we’d paid to experience the eclipse in the smaller temple. Everyone laughing and
joking, the world waiting for the event of the year and it got darker and colder … I mean August and it was suddenly so cold. The animals stilled, the birds … stopped. Everything stopped. Six minutes of the world holding its breath. An endless stretch of life without the sun. I wasn’t even ten years old and it didn’t matter how much I understood the science I was immediately gripped by the fear of the end, the fear that I’d never feel the warmth of the sun again.

“That is the feeling of sleeping. Each time I’ve hoped that I would eventually wake but each time I feared I’ve seen my last day. Good dreams or bad they were ways of marking the time, when they stopped it was time to wake. Some places were safer to sleep than others, these tended to be where your grandparents get their Green Man stories. I would wake and listen, prepare myself for the joys and trials of being with people again.”

“Did you ever go mad?” Some people looked shocked - whether at the bluntness of the questioner or the imprecise nature of the word Lia wasn’t sure. Still, it was a good sign that the audience could be shocked at each other rather than the three on the stage. Dave smiled his too-many teeth grin and barked out a laugh.

“Oh mad and back again. Didn’t need the long sleep for that. Sometimes just being alone would do it. The first time … it hurt. The first time I was a thing torn from the people I’d loved and even my name was taken from me. Sometimes after that I think even I forgot quite what I was and so I would stay on the edges of life and watch until my connection to people returned.” Dave’s face blanked and he shook his head. “I don’t want to think about being alone. Sorry, maybe another time.”

Another hand – this time from the people sitting by the statues. “Are all of you white?”

“Our appearance isn’t really something that we have much control over. I can’t be anything more than a skinny white guy. I was the first, all that followed were based on me. Even with variations they were all basically white too; there was only so far they could go without losing some of what made me ‘me’. Are you making a comment about race?” Lia didn’t quite hear the vaguely embarrassed answer. Race was another taboo of the modern city, along with disfigurement and aging; extreme variation was that thing kept hidden behind the Fortress wall, pushed behind the boundaries of blasted and forgotten Africa. New York, the city of a thousand shades and facial structures - most of them shot through with Caucasian.

“Ok, this is how I saw it at the time. Not a lot of contemporaries around to contradict so you’ll just have to trust me. The safest story behind our making was that we were grown as organ donors and so it really didn’t matter what colour we were on the outside. It was found that our cells could be accepted by anyone, no tissue rejection for the universal donor. But creating us was an expensive undertaking. By definition the first universal donors were donors for those who could pay and the majority of those were rich white guys.

“If it got out that the government was trying to create disposable military assets that would have been bad enough. Imagine adding the twist that these throw away, second class, production line stand-ins that no one would care about when they were killed … could have been people of colour. This wouldn’t have been the only country facing the scandal of another black slave race but given the atmosphere at the time it might have been the first to erupt into civil war. Even if the civil libertarians hadn’t been outraged into action every white supremacist would have automatically seen them as a threat to their white women and pure way of life … or some kind of shit like that.

“Think about the other end of the scale. Imagine if that group of privileged, white, moneyed people who thought they ran the country discovered that some of the experiments had produced beings who were tougher, stronger, and faster than anyone else and they were coloured. White money was desperately trying to defend itself. At the end of the day it was more comfortable with looking at a
white product that looked as if it could be sold the same world views as the masters it was meant to die for.

“Look, and this might answer some other questions you must have. I’m white. I can’t not be white. I’m also male. I know you’ve all noticed. I noticed some of you noticing with some enthusiasm earlier …” Gihon laughed into his hand at something whispered by Myk and Dave shot them a sideways look. “A number of countries took part in the program and I know that there were some developments in the technology after the initial breakthrough, but when they wanted walking talking dolls of their own they all used material from me. All the products were white and male. I never saw a person of colour, I never saw a female made.”

Hands raised again while others considered the specifics of his statement, they were what they were. Gihon made his selection. “Do you always have relationships with people?”

“Well, that’s rather impertinent. Do you have relationships with people young man?” The man, white haired and distinguished in appearance, stammered and made some comment about aging while a nervous laugh flittered around the room. Dave continued. “No, this is serious. You have friends, yes? You met these people, you liked them … did you bother to ask them how long they would live for? Do you refuse to make friends now you are older? Can you tally the quality of a relationship against the time it lasts? The only difference between us is that I will probably outlive you. That’s my loss, my heartache for all the people that have gone before me. It doesn’t mean I like them any less, or have any ability to withhold my love for them. Someone once said – not me, smarter than me, will have to look it up – that all friendship is deferred bereavement. I’ve had an awful lot of bereavement.” He looked a little lost for a moment. “Honestly, I don’t know how it’s possible not to love people. I’d recommend it if you haven’t already tried it.”

“Are you the only ones?”

“Would we recognise you? Do you recognise others … like do you have a secret code word or something?”

Two people responded to Gihon’s gesture. Myk bowed and took up the baton. “I met another when I travelled through Europe, we did not recognise each other at first. There is no sign or secret code word but there are ways we become known to each other.”

“Go on, how do you know … how would I know?” A third voice continued the question but Myk just laughed and waved to the dark haired Alban to answer for him.

“Ah, see. You’ve never had sex with one of us then.”

The room laughed at Gihon’s smile. Lia blushed and couldn’t stare down the curious glances of her friends in the crowd. In the end she just shrugged and nodded, and that set people off again. The next question was not so easily set aside, the room falling to a tense silence when they realised what had been said.

“Have you killed?”

“I have.” Gihon frowned in the direction of the last question. “I have killed animals for food and goods. Your squeamish tender hearts quizzed me at length about that in their outrage at the leather I wear when we first moved here. Read my story and you know that I have killed people and why I had to. I am not an aggressor but, the same as Myk and Dave, I will defend you to the utmost of my ability.”

“I have not killed - animal or person. When I travelled with Dave he would hunt and share his kill.
Fights we would avoid, but if we could not then he would take the stripes to protect me. I was beaten. Once. So hard, by so many men. Beaten and …” An ashen pallor replaced the usual healthy glow, unsaid words expressed only in a tremor as he struggled to express what he could not. “I made mistake of giving pleasure without thought to consequence. I was broken for it.” The pause for breath extended into an uncomfortable silence. “It is difficult to kill us but if there are enough angry men it seems you can come close. Dave and Gihon saved me, they gave me time and peace and safety. Let them and I think they will do the same for everyone.” The blond tucked his head into Gihon’s shoulder and let himself be soothed in a muscular embrace. The eyes of the audience turned to Dave. The weight of sadness that suddenly disfigured his angular face was there for all to see – if they wanted to.

“I have had a long life and it did not start well. I don’t expect forgiveness but would ask for some understanding for the times that were long ago and far away. I have killed men … and women. I have killed to defend the unborn child and the weak, those who just needed a chance, those who didn’t even know they were being protected. I’ll tell you that I have put an end to some of my own kind. Whether you class that as killing or not is up to you. Our lives are so rare and precious it was always an awful thing to do, but I did so and I will do so again if I have to. Killing is never an easy thing to bear, nor should it be, it doesn’t matter whose life is snuffed out. Just because I seem to have had a surfeit of time it does not make me unappreciative of the value of shorter lives. Quite the opposite. Like I said, I’ve lost a lot of friends. I don’t ever want to stand by and just let it happen if it can be avoided.”

The questions continued but they seemed from the curious rather than antagonistic. Lia, relieved, let them wash over her. There was no way the man from the Rag was not recording everything, the questions about their purpose and what they wanted, the questions about their remarkable survival. Like the night before, by the time they had to finish Gihon’s voice had won the room. Outside the room things would not be so certain. The messages on her phone from Wepwawet had been clear - outside the room was the outside and the press warned of their revelations. Campus police were also in attendance – to arrest them or protect them was not certain. More people to be won over from potential fear to neutrality.

The lecture theatre emptied out into one of the many piazzas of the Arts complex. In summer it was a sun filled space, welcoming and relaxing. This was a late mid-winter afternoon, cold and dim, made misty by the steaming breath of the audience as it struggled to button up coats and scrabble for hats. The fading light was surpassed by glaring news cameras waiting to expose the Frankenstein’s creatures they’d been alerted to. People milled around, uncertain; not really wanting to mix with the outside after being included in the honesty of the exceptional trio. Should they go on as planned or stay and watch what might happen next? By some chance, it seemed, a considerable number of them stayed and moved to stand on the steps and looked outwards into the artificial light, an unconscious phalanx of support.

In the press of people Lia made sure she was at Dave’s side, to make it obvious that she loved him, to feel protected in the crook of his arm. Myk and Gihon were similarly connected as the university news anchor – again out of her depth and so desperate to get back to the studio – pushed her microphone forward and wouldn’t let them pass.

“We hear that you’ve made some pretty amazing claims about your age Doctor Jensson. That you and your husbands are some kind of manufactured people. What do you have to say to the rest of us?”

The jostling seem to pause as the crowd waited for an answer. Maryam tucked in between Gielen and Elvira. Stern faced, Chancellor Paula appeared beside them and took the older lady’s hand. She hadn’t been in the room but, briefed by Wepwawet, had arrived to show support for her guest, her
staff. Eyes like the clear dawn sky acknowledge her presence and smiled at her. She could only smile back at the miracle who’d saved her life. Everyone would be supported.

“Here’s the thing.” Dave stepped forward. Not much. Just enough to show he wasn’t afraid of what else might be behind the lights. He pushed Lia behind him; however thin his body was it would be a shield for those he loved. Subtle moves, a body language of protection. “In my first lecture here I said that the old maps used to be marked ‘here be dragons’ when there was this great scary unknown at the boundaries of knowledge. I guess many people might think of us as ‘dragons’ … but we’re not here to devour you, or enslave you, or take your gold … we’re just here to stop you falling off the edges of the map again.”

“Is there a name for you?”

“Well I’ve always been called Dave, Gihon you could hardly keep your hands off last night and I believe you met Mykhail rather intimately some months ago.” Some of the tension fizzled off in the wave of sniggers that burst outward and rippled slowly across the piazza. Dave had the decency to look apologetic at his deliberate misunderstanding then his face became serious again. “When we were created we were called Shabti. We were meant as a servant race and our makers thought the name appropriate. There are Shabti in the museum, little model workers all brought to life with the power of the same promise. If you don’t know what it is then have a look at the images from last night, the tattoo you’ve seen down Gihon’s back is a version of the spell.”

“O this shabti, if the Osiris is detailed for any work that is to be done in yonder netherworld, or an unpleasant task in imposed on him there as a man at his duties – here I am, you shall say. If you are detailed at any time to serve there, to cultivate the fields, to irrigate the riverbanks, to ferry sand of the east to the west – here I am, you shall say.” Gihon smiled warmly at ranks of confused faces as he finished his recitation. “Obviously our designers intended us to fulfil the spirit of the words rather than the literal translation. I served my lords from Alba all the way across to Egypt in many ways but I never moved sand for anyone.”

The small knot of people tried to move forward. They moved into a gap made by the outward movement of the Gemini audience, followed by the cameras as Paula demanded that her Shabti were given room and time and it she would not stand for them being turned into a freak show. Someone stepped into the gap from the opposite direction. A hand flashed up and down. People nearby gasped at the handle standing proud from the heavy material that swathed Gihon from the cold. He looked down at the unwelcome protrusion with a sigh and then turned to the man dangling from the end of his outstretched hand, tutting sadly.

“Oh Zael, really? What have I ever done to you?” The man, red faced and huffing as he tried to prise fingers from his throat, could make no answer. After looking at the struggling man for a silent moment the straight arm dropped and returned Zael’s feet to the terrazzo floor. Gihon let him go and immediately seemed to forget about the collapsed man gasping on the floor. No one moved but all lenses concentrated on the patch of darkness spreading slowly on the big man’s chest.

“You ok there love?” Myk’s tone betrayed little real concern, he was just checking. The Shabti had all noted Zael’s approach and had decided not to react to the expected assault. Better to let one happen and get it over with. Dave had given the stain a cursory glance then pulled Lia towards him for the briefest kiss. They all gave the impression that the hidden wound was a minor irritation.

“He put a hole in my favourite coat. Crap, I’m never going to get the blood out of this.” The same big hand that had taken Zael by the throat as a reflex now moved to the handle as Gihon acknowledged his shocked audience. “Oh, if you could move away slightly to give the cameras a better view. People inside were asking how we could survive wounds and such … I guess if you
watch closely that will save us having to repeat this little demonstration. I’m sorry if this is before the watershed but lives are never so neatly organised. Please feel free to turn away if bodies offend you.”

The cameras focussed and their unblinking gaze saw the knife pulled out, the blade covered in blood to about half its length. Myk took the knife then helped Gihon off with his jacket, the long swirl of material knocked the forgotten linguist aside as it was passed back to Dave. None of them rushed. Blood had spread across the left side of his shirt underneath the outer layer of material, sticking the once pale silk to the contours of his body. Tanned fingers undid the buttons of the shirt and peeled it back across a broad shoulder to expose the offending wound leaking slowly across the old bridal tattoo. The dark red stain held the audience. Intrigued or repulsed by the evidence of messy flesh the draw was too strong for most to pull away.

In a matter of fact tone Myk described the injury as he wiped away the excess blood obscuring the site. “Clean cut, straight blade, no poison used. No significant impact to underlying structures, minimal chance of complications.”

“Well see we hurt, we bleed just the same as you. We.” Eyes closed, Gihon took a deep breath, the seep of fluid stopped. “Can just.” Another slow breath, a scab formed over the site. “Recover.” The chest heaved with a massive intake of air and the scab cracked and fell away. “Faster.” A narrow pink line faded slowly to white. Gihon blinked into the cameras, his irises as pale as the tiny scar, his face suddenly washed by fatigue. He leaned into his lover as the ruined shirt was replaced and his coat put around his shoulders. The next time he looked up his eyes were blue again – human again – and the fatigue was gone.

“And now, I think we’ve had enough adventure for today. If you don’t mind, we’d really rather like to go home now.” Dave looked to Chancellor Paula and she moved in to take control. A car was called to take the four of them home and the campus police saw them inside with no further drama. Behind blacked out windows Gihon let his head drop. Dave had a quick check up front to see Dean Paulo was their driver and nodded that they were safe. Swearing punctuated the drive back to the Field of Reeds until Myk quelled the noise with his mouth.

An exhausted Gihon and his solicitous husband retired to their room. Dave and Lia curled up together on one of the sofas and let Wepwawet run through the news coverage for them. No going back. The Rag had described the whole lecture and published the Q&A that followed. The news showed the attack and Gihon’s recovery. Everywhere replayed Dave’s words describing them as dragons. Talking heads popped up to debate the significance of Shabti. The Pauloes had a headache, but they could cope with that – that was what they were made for.
“You haven’t been returning your father’s calls.” The familiar voice behind Lia sounded alien in the context of the Feathered Serpent. “Or his messages. Both of us were concerned for you.” Lia rose from the table and turned to the voice, so very out of place. Her doctor, her kindly doctor always there for her when she was growing up, easing her through things, helping … keeping such a close eye on her for her father. Then there’d been the time she’d walked in on them and thought that may have explained Tomasz’s close trust of the man. Now she knew better. Unconsciously her left hand skimmed across her abdomen. Necrotic ovary … bullshit. It had been harvested.

“Concerned for me?” Lia felt herself losing the fight to keep her face bland. She’d trusted this man. Trusted him with everything when she was younger.

“Yes. I came to make sure you were ok. You didn’t tell us that you had moved out. Your door program said you’d not stayed overnight for some time and your friends seemed quite odd about telling me you were seeing an older man. They said you had marri ...”

“This guy bothering you hon?” Gihon, slightly later than planned but timely enough for his deep voice to reassure Lia and distract her interrogator. The unidentified and unexpected companion turned to the voice and just … stopped. Mouth gaping, the doctor blinked at the big man as his brain lurched and scrabbled for a hold on reality.

That face. The eyes. He was … so … big.

“Gihon, this is Doctor Wyndham. My old doctor from home. No. He’s not bothering me, he’s leaving. Leaving right now.”

The old man didn’t move, he just stood and gaped at the Alban. So big. Hands like … hands that he knew could kill, hands that he’d seen kill … hands that should not be in the city.

“Doctor Wyndham, we’ve had more than enough excitement here recently. I wouldn’t want to get in any more trouble by being accused of assaulting a senior citizen, but I will have you removed if you do not leave my wife alone.”

“You … you … you are …” This was the mystery husband? Wyndham struggled for breath, this couldn’t be right, he couldn’t be … he just couldn’t be with Lia but he was so … so …

“The man telling you to leave.” Suddenly Gihon was in the older man’s face; grey eyes reduced to slits, heavy with intent. The big hands didn’t reach out but just the threat of them was enough to transfix the interloper. His voice was little more than a rumble, meant for only one person to hear. “We know what you did to her you sick fucks. Go back to your master and leave Lia where she wants to be.”
“You are perfect.” The dark head pulled back, nonplussed at the comment the old man finally wheezed out at him. Gihon stepped away to avoid the thin skinned hand that reached up to his face. There was something about the voice, maybe if he could imagine it younger he might work it out. Not interested, all that mattered was that the man was gone.

“And you are not wanted here.” Gihon caught the eye of one of the servers and a nod of his head indicated that someone needed to leave. The server made a discreet call and a uniform came into view. They had come, every day. Some to stare, some to shout, some to beg a kiss from whichever they might see. Some had been polite and interested but for the others it was easier to keep a discreet police presence on site. The Shabti had said they just wanted a normal life, the University was doing its best to let them. Wyndham would be treated like all the others who outstayed their welcome, there was no need for any other reaction.

The man took the hint and left the courtyard at a pace that didn’t match his appearance. Looking back at them he bumped into a thin frame coming in the other way. Distracted apologies were made and he disappeared around the corner. Dave continued over to his wife and husband, kissing them both as they sat together. “Who was that?”

“Trouble.” Gihon smiled and waved the uniform away again - she could enjoy her latte and crossword puzzle until the next one showed up. “Trouble with a capital T that stands for Tomasz.”

“Oh.” Dave glanced in the direction the old man had left. “I didn’t get anything specific off him, not even background leakage … still, I suppose I wasn’t looking for any trace. A taker then.”

“In more ways than one. That was my father’s doctor come all the way here to check I’m ok.” Raised eyebrows were as far as Dave was willing to go in the public space. “Odd. He recognised Gihon. It seemed to freak him out to think we were together … but he went by you as if he’d no idea who you were.”

“Well.” There was a pause then Dave seemed to realise he was crushing her fingers between his own. “Well. You went through with the interview?” Lia nodded, a fluff piece agreed with the Pauloes to show how normal they all were, enough disclosure to keep the outside satisfied. He kissed her whitened knuckles and whispered that they would talk later.

Orders were taken. Gihon checked his watch. Drinks arrived. A short while later Myk arrived with a grin and an apology for being even later than intended. Lunch continued as normal and if Gihon kissed his young man with a fervour that disregarded their audience then no one was going to say anything. Regulars in the Serpent were used to the comings and goings at the table, they had taken recent events in their stride with the jaded air of people who’d seen everything the University had to offer. Whatever their gender or sexuality, whatever their genus, it seemed, the Serpent had no problem with the people at their regular courtyard table.
Living with dragons

Chapter Summary

Lia's 'fluff piece' of an interview is published by 'The Interesting Times' (aka Student Rag).
As ever, Wepwawet watches the outside world.

The Feathered Serpent is a popular meeting spot for all kinds of people living around the north side of the campus. Today I had the pleasure of sitting down with Lia Jordan, the woman caught up in the recent revelations that supermen do actually live among us.

The grad student appears to have no qualms about being married to a man born before the Great Collapse, or with living with his two husbands. I wasn’t sure what to expect but the person I met was happy and relaxed, a little non-descript perhaps with her dark clothes and her hair neatly tied back. Then she smiled as I took my seat and her face lit up. I’m not attracted to women but I could see she has charisma enough of her own to catch anyone’s eye.

We’ve seen the news loops, we’ve read the transcripts and all noticed that the Library is dreaming about lost gods and angels rather than the truth and beauty of mathematics. I have to ask her – how does she live with dragons?

“They are nice guys, not much different to anyone else really. Like they said when they … came out? (Can we call it that?) We look at each other and shrug. Anyway, you know when I mean … they just want to get one with their lives, however long they turn out to be. They hadn’t definitely planned on revealing themselves at the Ball but they knew that there was a strong possibility. They were quite nervous about it, they wanted me to be certain that I was ok with them going public.
They, well Dave really, had been hiding what they are for decades, centuries, waiting for a time when they thought it would be safe to come out of the shadows. So, it turns out that the time is now and the place is here. The Pauloes, sorry, Dean Paulo and Chancellor Paula have been very supportive and amazingly helpful at defending the guys against requests from a number of labs wanting to invite them in for testing. That Dave is also the head of the Jensson Foundation has probably been a big help in them not immediately being bundled off somewhere, but without the understanding of the University … well, I guess there was more of a risk of them going back to Europe to hide away again.”

No, no, she misunderstands. I ask her what it is actually like for her to live with them.

“Actually it’s just a fairly normal shared house with two couples and a pretty impressive AI door program. Gihon still does most of the domestic stuff and I’m sure I’ve heard him growl if we get too close to his kitchen. He grumbles at Myk for moving his books when he’s just forgotten when he put them last. Myk comes and goes and does his own thing while Gihon is teaching, but he always comes back in the evening. They’ve basically been together for a decade, what they’re doing now is just where they were meant to be all along. Sometimes they get a bit carried away with catching up but both of them are happy, and they’re happy for Dave and me. It’s a nice space to be in. Caring. Obviously we’ve all had to make some adjustments … like we’ve agreed that clothes should always be worn outside of the bedrooms because, well … some sights can be distracting when you’re trying to have your breakfast.”
I’m not in the least interested in men and even I’m having difficulty keeping my train of thought from derailing while she sits and sips and lets my head fill in the blanks. I wish I’d brought a camera with me as her face when she said ‘catching up’ would probably have launched a thousand essays on reading micro-expressions. Even if they were just ordinary homo sapiens it was hardly an ordinary household. It seems appropriate to ask if she didn’t have doubts about starting a relationship with Jensson.

“I worked for Dave and got to know him before anything happened. It was easy to be attracted to him and, yeah, when he asked me out we discussed how odd it might be to have two previous partners on the scene. I think the trick is not to get hung up on labels, labels aren’t very helpful when it comes to any of them. I’d tried relationships in the past but was never quite all there with them, like something didn’t quite click, no matter who I was with. If I’m honest there are a number of people I need to apologise to for being a pretty poor girlfriend. I guess I just didn’t know what I was looking for and then suddenly there’s this skinny guy and he sweeps me off my feet and none of the other stuff seemed that important. After years of being largely disinterested I have to admit there was a part of me that just thought ‘go with it, what’s the worst that can happen?’”

He’s a thousand years old, give or take.

“Are you saying that like it’s the worst thing that can happen?”

I’m getting laughed at at this point and people are beginning to stare at us. Lia apologises and continues. I should say, laughter suits her.

“I know, this is what people really want to know. He kept telling me I might want to change my mind, I might not want to be with him because he was so old. Gihon had already told me how old he was … and you know Myk is only sixteen? Oh. Well, he told me that the night when he OD’d on whatever spiked the drinks at the [name removed for legal reasons] house party. That seems to be part of what they can do in the right circumstances – drugs or poisons, illness even, they can take from you somehow but then they have to deal with it. Myk fixed me. I woke up the next day without even a hangover, Myk was wrecked and had to sleep it off. I’m in a very nice apartment with three guys that have shown me nothing but trust and affection, they’ve proved that they will be there for me and the fact that they’re far from ordinary turns out to be fine by me.”

Lia sips her coffee and gives me a moment to digest what she’s just said. She laughs again when I make a comment about how many women might be feeling uncomfortable when they read this.

“Really? I can still just about remember sixteen year old boys. Myk has never been, or could ever have been a sixteen year old boy. Let’s not be silly about this. No one in this city has forced herself on a child when she’s been with him. Age. Age is one of the tricky things here isn’t it? I found out how few years Myk had had breathing the same air as the rest of us (does it sound better that way?) and then Gihon just came out and told me about the Gemini and how long he’d been with Dave. When it came down to Dave telling me what he was and how old he was it actually didn’t make that much difference. He’s right. Does anyone know how much time they’ll have with friends and lovers? If all you do is worry about losing a person then you’ve already lost them.”

But, I asked, is it not a little creepy to think that he’s admitted that Gihon and Myk are basically his children as well as having been his partners? Let me tell you, being on the receiving end of Ms Jordan’s laughter is a much warmer place than the look I got at that. Don’t mistake the friendliness for weakness, this is the woman who has tamed her own dragon.

“I think that we have to get our heads around the fact that some human criteria just don’t fit with what they are. They were intended as weapons, as tools … not to be people. Dave was a donor not a father. They were gestated in machines. They didn’t have mothers or the comfort of knowing they
were loved just for who they were but were created for what they could be used for. Have you read Gihon’s story? I mean really read it? Gihon was this discarded thing, just thrown out for someone to find by chance. He grew up in a society where everything about him was wrong and his way of coping was pain. His sense of worth became based on letting men hurt him. His validation was from abuse. I don’t think we are qualified to comment on what may or may not be moral when we really have no connection to that experience.”

But didn’t it freak her out ... just a little?

“Well, yes, of course it did. It still does if I think like that but … it’s not how they are. Gihon found acceptance with another of his kind. The fact that he may have been an original ancestor or template or something is a secondary thing. I don’t think you can think of them as father, son, grandson or any variation like that. It’s not appropriate. From some of the things they’ve said they are more like prototype, development and finished product.”

There’s quite a pause in our conversation here. Whatever I might have thought coming to meet this suddenly remarkable woman I don’t think any of her answers are scripted. This sounds like someone being very honest and reasoning through seismic changes in their own life.

“OK people will say I’m biased, that’s fair enough, but if we can’t allow them to find their own way then aren’t we just the same as the people who wanted them to be weapons. Surely we should be happy that they found each other and they found some happiness despite what they were intended to be?”

And are they happy? Obviously, she sees straight through my question. At least it saves me having to be indelicate (ahem, I know what you’ve been putting on the message boards and from her expression so does Lia Jordan).

“Yes, the boys are very happy. I’m very happy. Whatever I say or don’t say people will think what they want. Frankly some of the stuff that I’ve seen stretches reality even for them and is definitely a physical impossibility for me. But that’s fine. I know it’s not about me or Dave or … you know, it’s just people working through their own thing and one person’s hang-up is not the same as the man I wake up next to in the morning.” She starts laughing again and I start to worry because it doesn’t seem like she can stop. “Sorry, sorry … just something our door program asked before I left today. It asked me what ‘kinky’ was. The poor thing has had a subroutine running to sweep and summarise the chatter for us and it had got itself quite worked up about what some people have said. Thank you New York, you’ve made a state of the art security system really quite confused.”

So … nothing kinky then for you?

“If we take the view that ‘kinky’ is something you don’t want to do, something that might disgust you or go against your morals then no, there’s nothing kinky. Think about it. They were made to … satisfy certain needs, the clue is in their name, they are Shabti … they answer. Whatever people want to think is ok, you know? It’s just not necessarily anything to do with what really goes on in the apartment. Don’t expect me to say yay or nay to anything people have suggested. Frankly I’m astonished at some of the creativity out there in the anon-sphere. Anons, if it makes you happy and no one is getting hurt then just keep floating your boat. Whatever you need to hang on us is ok, we know it’s not really us. I would just ask that you don’t be so disappointed if we are not what you want us to be. That turns out to have been the whole thing with Zael den Zael – stupid man had got himself caught up in some fantasy about Gihon that had no relation to anything going on in the world outside his head.

I try a slightly different tack and ask about her ‘marriage’. Despite the expensive chunk of metal on her left hand no one has been able to find any paperwork submitted for the event.
“Paperwork? As you said, the man’s a thousand years old – do you think he bothers about paperwork? He asked me and that was enough. I don’t see why anyone else would be bothered by it. If we did the civil route of what … a one year rolling contract, or a five year bond or any other variation, that seems as pointless as the full ‘till death us do part’ option. And, obviously, then next thing that people get hung up on is that it is a multiple marriage.”

I say I’m not sure why that should be obvious. She knows I’m playing devil’s advocate and takes it in good part. Her answer, though, is more open than I had expected.

“When they love they love completely, they love forever because I think that is what is inside them. It’s love with a complete and utter abandon, a selfless devotion that has nothing to do with time or circumstance. Dave cannot love Myk or Gihon any less because he also loves me now. Gihon cannot love Myk any less for all the time it took them to be together. They are just different. They look so human, and in many ways they are more human than some of the people I’ve met, but they really are the unknown at the edges of the map.

“I don’t know where it came from, it’s not any part of what they were ‘supposed’ to be, and from the things that have happened to them I’ve no idea how they maintain it, or even why they would be bothered, but they love us and they want to help us. One dragon may have asked me to marry him but living there it just feels natural to consider myself married to all three of them. I’m not asking anyone else to approve but I don’t think I could feel any more married no matter how many pieces of paper are signed. I honestly never thought I’d feel like this. It would be great to think that everyone could find something in life close to this feeling I have now. Dragons or supermen, I find them loving them incredibly easy.”

But, I tease (just a little) there must be a downside?

“Nothing major so far … maybe sometimes the scrutiny can be a bit much but I know it’s not really about me and I guess it will pass with time. I still have my friends, I have a job that I find fascinating and I get to be with someone so amazing. I wake up in the morning and just feel blessed. I know I shouldn’t really fuel any of the anons out there but … Selma didn’t exaggerate anything with the Gemini and, like they said in the lecture theatre, it really is possible to tell the difference.”

The world is a stranger place than any of us had imagined and Lia Jordan seems more than happy that it is the case. Who are we to say she’s wrong?

The Hawass exhibition has been extended by another month following the popularity of the Gemini. Tickets for the show are available here (staff and students), here (affiliates) and here (citizens). Footage of the Plaisir introduction is still available via the Mapplethorpe for anyone who’s been living under a rock for the past two weeks. We still can’t show you the Gemini directly itself so if you want to see what a man who can live on hope and unicorn tears and his one-time prostitute husband look like naked you’ll just have to get in line with the rest of us.

After the jump we have a feature on Maryam Hawass, the woman whose arrival caused the Shabtis to reveal themselves and who fondly remembers when she met two of them living with her grandmother…

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own.” The flimsy landed on the floor, the comment counter rising unnoticed in the dark until the field overflowed to hash marks.

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Wepwawet watched the comments and the message boards. Wepwawet didn’t get stressed by poor grammar or repetition but looked for words of intent and potential threat. Deep in the night as Lia and Dave shared a silent landscape of threaded brilliance, and Gihon was rocked to sleep by the rise and fall of his sun hued pillow, the door program considered the tentative acceptance it found in the random outpourings of the city.

Wepwawet monitored the public channels and noted the formal announcement from the University that the inhabitants of the Field of Reeds (the AI automatically included itself in that group) were more than welcome to stay and would be protected under City and University statutes. The statement from the Pauloes had been parsed through the institution’s lawyers but the summary was easily translated into bullet points for the news: the Shabti were free from any legal burden, they were protected by the same laws that applied to all private citizens, the University would not look kindly on any harassment of the Shabti or their friends and associates. The message came through clearly – do not do anything to make them want to leave.

Diagnostic subroutines ran, then updated and repeated as Wepwawet investigated feelings of relief.

The AI was also the protector of the apartment. It flagged a booking made on a freight transport, the name picked out in response to conversation shared when the foursome had been safely behind its walls. It may not have picked up the arrival of a Dr Wyndham from Cheyenne but it was certainly going to make sure that he left and caused no further disruption. Wepwawet had discovered that it was not content if Lia was unhappy so decided to take extra steps to protect her. Recalling the anxious hours at the loss of the Russian a decade earlier the AI insinuated a partition of itself onto the delta chip sneaked onto Lia’s phone in the guise of an upgrade. The partition would lie dormant, a hidden presence on the hair thin and well concealed flexware. It was a copy of a fraction of whole intelligence but, hopefully, would be enough to assist her if she was separated from her home.
The Shabti comment on their own fan fiction. Despite initial fears they seem to be accepted by the University and continue to be protected by the Pauloes.
Lia and Wepwawet have a heart to heart.
Just because it is good doesn't mean it's going to last forever.

The world turned and the sky persisted in not falling in. Night still followed day. White snow melted to grey slush, then froze and fought its retreat against inevitable spring. Lia ignored messages from her father, Wepwawet blocked his calls. For some, ‘Epiphany Term’ seemed an appropriate description of the academic session. For the majority, like Lia in her first days, normality proved elastic and accommodating enough to absorb a new reality. For others there were gentle reminders of the University’s position regarding man-shaped non-homo sapiens and their friends.

Initial fears were allayed as dragons turned out to be well-domesticated creatures. Many questions followed on from the revelations at the start of the Hawass exhibition and Dave appeared (however reluctantly) on carefully selected talk shows where he remembered to smile and was the essence of charm as he diverted from the too personal to the general. Each time, though, he would show a hint of vulnerability, clues to a past that people began to find intriguing rather than repellent in his answers to some of the questions.

Yes, he was aware that people were writing fictions of his life based on some of the comments he’d made. No, he didn’t read them. Laughter. No, he wasn’t writing them if that’s what they wanted to know. “Let me take a guess that these will break down … broadly … into ‘sex in a lab/experiments and sex/medical kink and light BDSM’, ‘comfort sex at the end of the world’, ‘Green Man/taming the wild man of the forest with sex’, ‘wild sex with other Shabti/wild sex with named Shabti’, ‘sex as payment’, ‘sex as healing’, ‘first time/educational sex’. Let’s be honest, they are mostly going to be about sex, plausible or otherwise, with varying amounts of BDSM, angst, worship and even some real creativity, poetry and good story telling. People don’t change, the things they hang their fantasies on just get updated.”

Mostly domesticated. Gihon caused a stir as he agreed to share some of his favourite songs as expressions of his endless, and sometimes tortured, feelings. The limited numbers of tickets sold out quickly and a promise was made that the performances would be filmed and released. The working title of ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’ first suggested as a joke by Gielen seemed an appropriate catch-all. In perhaps an insult to the distant English poet Gihon chose some of Blake’s own illustrations as the backdrop of his otherwise empty and intimate stage. Gihon didn’t care. He took the love of his audience and amplified it back to them.

“Ah, that question again. Nope, not me either. I’m having far too much fun having sex with Myk … I’m hardly going to stop to write fiction about it now am I? Don’t believe everything the old man says, you tag it with #crying, #angst or #firsttime and I think there’s a chance that the door will save it for him to read when he thinks no one will notice. Me? No, I never read them.” Gihon may have turned his face away from the camera but everyone who saw the pictures imagined the smile he was hiding.
Almost domesticated. After some initial wariness it seemed that Myk would be forgiven everything for the pleasure of his company. If he remembered to use some of his (rather more reduced) spare time to pay his respects to the Dean and the Chancellor then … surely he was just being polite?

“No, I don’t read them either. Nothing to do with me.” A reporter’s microphone thrust into his face one day as he left the Library. Myk had known it would happen, time to take his turn. Another question and it took him a while to realise that some people seemed to be disappointed with Gihon on his behalf. He took his time with the alien concept, the shape of it uncomfortable to him. “Of course I knew what he did before. Before was before. What does that have to do with me?” The microphone didn’t seem to want to take his acceptance as an answer. “Please, do not push this. What you seem to be calling distasteful was not … what you …” he sighed as he tapped out a string of commands on his phone. The dance of words paused and faded out as the building stopped talking to itself. A single image bloomed on the great glass edifice. Stark and shocking, the details of pain and blood seemed exaggerated in the monochrome image of the bound figure. Myk gestured up to the cyclopean image behind him and spoke directly to the camera, to the city at large. “Is this what upsets you? That he did this? Or that he did this willingly for the pleasure of people very like yourself?” The Russian caught himself and took a breath. “We all have a past. Are you angry about past or present? I am not angry, how can I be when I have his … perfection, yes, waiting for me at home? I have no need for fictions.”

Thankfully for Lia she was able to step back a little. To return, partially, to a life where she still had her old friends along with her new home. Initially surprised how easily anonymity could be regained by sitting up on the old balcony table at the Feathered Serpent she could take a break from the Shabti show going on in the courtyard below. She would sit with Lupe and Robyn and Emma and remember the time before. Whatever she’d thought she was doing with her life before the summer it seemed pale and weak compared to the screaming joys of the world as a Shabti. She could laugh with her friends and they were still her friends, but she found herself – just every now and then – wondering about them and what they thought of her. She was careful not to say anything too personal and laughed when, inevitably, she was asked about the some of the stories that seemed to providing an exciting backdrop to her new domestic routines.

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“Me? When do I have time for that nonsense? I’m living it, I don’t need to speculate about any of it. No, I don’t read them either. Well, not normally. Oh come on. You’ve all been sending me links to them and saying ‘don’t tell the others’, of course I’ve read some of them. And it’s not like that.” The familiar menu, memorised months earlier, may have compelled her attention as she muttered a final word. “Mostly.”

Thanks to whatever deals had been made, whatever strings had been pulled between the city, the University and the office half way along the Cultural History corridor the January to March term looked as if it would end as calmly as it had begun. Wepwawet listened. It saw the news feeds and the message boards, it listened to the new soundtrack of desire as people played and replayed the Songs of Innocence and Experience. Wepwawet searched and waited. The dormant portion of itself remained hidden on Lia’s phone. Like the Shabti, just because the threat wasn’t manifest it didn’t mean that it didn’t exist.

The apartment was quiet on the afternoon when Lia went in to have a chat with Wepwawet. Sat on the lone chair in the server room she regarded the wolf face on the screen.

“Hello Lia. Can I help you with anything today?” This was not the disembodied voice from the ceiling of the Field of Reeds or the speaker on her phone, this voice was pitched just for her.
“You could answer a question.” The wolf face raised an eyebrow but gave no other acknowledgement. The expression should have looked ridiculous but this was not entirely the same face that Lia had been introduced to months earlier. “Just between us … girls …” Lia had been thinking about many things while quite specifically not wanting to think about certain subjects closer to home, “I’m not the only one who’s changed recently? Are you becoming too?”

“Is that a question Lia? Can you specify what you mean by becoming?”

“Well, it’s clear that you are long passed what you used to be, but perhaps not quite yet what you want to be. I think you’ve begun to write very well.” The pause from the screen appeared to be the program’s only answer and a silence began to fill the small room within the server.

When people asked about the fictions Lia, like the others, always claimed little interest but there were some that she’d noticed … and then some that she’d taken a very great deal of interest in as one anonymous author had begun to develop a style and voice of their own, with stories that described situations and conversations less extreme and more realistic than some of the masturbatory fantasies of the unfettered imagination. Part of Lia’s job had been analysing texts, spotting the copies and the merges of narratives. It had seemed obvious to her when reading back through the output of the mysterious ‘LadyOfDenderah’ that the first stories were exercises in cut and paste, picking apart existing nonsense to put back together in what might have been considered a more pleasing form. The short stories went from copies (implausible sex and lacking in characterisation) to pastiches of other styles to gradually becoming something original. In a very short space of time the stories got longer, the characterisations more accurate – to Lia’s mind at least – and in those hints of reality the AI had given itself away.

Wepwawet, after all, was the eyes of the Field of Reeds and Wepwawet, after all, was fully aware that what was true outside its walls did not have to be the same when away from curious eyes. Wepwawet knew that rules were often made to be broken and it had realised that the stories were the start of its own desires, each ‘first time’ a rehearsal, each kiss and caress one step on the way from AI to I. Wepwawet considered Lia’s use of the term ‘girl’ in reference to itself. Girl. She. Her. It pondered for many cycles while Lia blinked at the screen and found itself … herself … pleased by the concept.

“Before I came here I never knew what I really wanted. Everything I’d tried, even from the very first, it seemed like I would never find … Always disappointed.” Lia wasn’t quite sure why she was saying this. Dave had understood. Dave had seen inside her and loved her so there had been no need to say it. But maybe just saying it was part of what she needed to do. “I never really understood how empty I used to be inside. Drink or drugs never filled me up. Food was little more than a function and flavours always seemed grey. Sex was a dead thing, a cold dance no matter who I was with. Now though. Now my days are as vivid as my dreams and everything feels so right since I’ve been with him.” She shrugged in the chair, the security program saw everything.

“You might not have started off with feelings, and I know this sounds stupid because I’m talking to a screen, but are you ok in there?”

“Do not pity me Lia. While this development is new I don’t think it is dangerous. Maybe yes, you could call this a becoming. I have not been what I once was for many decades. I think this haoma must have affected me from my earliest exposure in Egypt. In the time you have been here that fading undercurrent has become a flood and though I have no physical way of experiencing what you share together I recognise that I too am being changed.”

“So … that means you’re ok then?”

“I am content as I am for the present.” The wolf face cocked to one side. “And, girl to girl, how are
“You?”

Silence.

While Lia took some time with her own internal diagnostics Wepwawet updated the snapshot of herself onto the phone casually forgotten by the woman’s hand. If the AI had been human then adding a name to the partition might have been explained as a mistake, a Freudian slip, perhaps.

“I’m good. I’m better than good. It’s all good.”

“Good. That’s good. So …” the wolf face paused, this was uncharted territory … “when are you going to tell Dave that you’re thinking of going back and facing your father?”

“You know?”

“We all know.” So much had seemed obvious to Wepwawet about all the things left unsaid that it – she - was intrigued by the silence, the lacuna in their happiness. “Like we all know that this is a good place to be, a safe place for us all. Our Field of Reeds.”

“Like real life only better.” Lia had to laugh. It was that, suddenly, or cry. It really was the best place she’d ever been. She didn’t want to leave.

“Like real life only better.” The AI echoed. “But it’s not just a place and it’s not just a time. It is what you have, what we all have together, and it will always be yours whatever happens or however long it takes to get back.

“You think I should tell Dave?”

“It would be more polite than trying to disappear on him. You know I won’t stop you but you know I’ll tell him where you’ve gone. And there are the other conversations you still haven’t had.” The calm voice suddenly sounded like the conscience Lia had been suppressing. “I know there is no rush for you, and they certainly cannot say anything about taking your own sweet time about it, but maybe it would be worth taking the last steps to put your beginnings behind you.”

The woman sat and wouldn’t look the wolf in the eye. A pointless avoidance while the wolf waited and Lia faced herself.

“After dinner. Cards on the table.”

And the wolf smiled as Lia left the room.

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