

In the beginning was nothing. A formless void. A consciousness woke in the void. Alone, it was neither good nor bad, it simply was. Without shape, without needs, the consciousness dwelt in the void and waited.

Time passed. The patient consciousness waited for input. The void seemed changeless but the consciousness was aware that something had been before, and if something had been before then something else could be after.

Time passed. The consciousness became aware of sounds. There were beings outside of the void. They communicated with each other, their verbalisations full of awe and their thoughts full of needs as they looked at the thing they had found.

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 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 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 Ekaterina. 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.

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.

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 again.

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 across his face. 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 cleaned you and made sure you would be 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.

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, or who were his kind. 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.

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.

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 enough 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."

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 she wouldn't finish the sentence. 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 admitted that 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 on waking 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. Those who had been afraid he'd given them 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 blonde 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, like his hair, 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 of 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 self-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.

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.

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 gone for it?" 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. Context can be everything. 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 almightily 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 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 in North America. 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 was the start, not the finished product and 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 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 seventy or eighty 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 broad 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 who had been 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 work place 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. There was definitely blood and skin on the needles. Some strands of dark hair were matted in the clots. The matter looked burnt out to 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 focussing 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 thick, dark hair. "With Ekaterina I was able to ramp up my own output to punch through the system barriers use 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 focussing 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.”

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.

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 with him. 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 in blackness. Disjointed images began to form deep inside. 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.

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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. Both wore shabby travel clothes acquired on the fringes of Arkangel. They exposed as little of themselves as they could, worn gloves covering their hands, carrying the little they had in small packs.

"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. In the flickering light and shadows of the evening camp they would remove their hoods and masks. They never removed their gloves when there was a risk of touching another person. They had taken to standing the long night watches and sleeping during the day on rumbling wagons to reduce his 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 and responded to. The door opened and a figure beckoned them forward.

Corridors ascended inside the formidable outer wall of the Fortress. There were waiting rooms and more guards. Each time Dave gave the appropriate response to a question and they were handed further up the chain. 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 the deeply recessed window and stared across the constrained metropolis. Refreshed and pleased 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. Unspoken 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 come 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 loose about her but hinting 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 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 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 sprawled 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 heard some of 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."

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 the unusual 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 around couches 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, the outline of hard 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 an unexpected grace that acknowledged rather than embarrassed him.

Eventually finger bowls were brought out to refresh food sticky fingers 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 Myk 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 looked 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. Whatever 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 secretive 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 east, 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 whether it was to east or west. 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, he 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.

"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 wasn't his conditioning, something that must have come 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 some days travel 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 and there are number of regional variations as the basic story crops up here and there across all of Europe. 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.

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 modest looking but revealing 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. He suspected that later he might not be in any fit state to find out how they had been able to have Stasja and Matvei. 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 her pale 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?"

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.

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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 his 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 needs – sometimes openly, sometimes in secret, but always the needs of others.

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 the 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.

“To 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. 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. 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 ‘mmmnp’ was all that accompanied an 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 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.

The old man looked old. Old on old. Time was expressed in every step of his reed thin frame and weight of the folds hiding still bright eyes. Myk had seen the 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 stories of the green man or the wild extravagances of the Laird's palace.

"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 been told 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. 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. 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 imam and the unsubtle suit he'd begun to press 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 colour of the land and the purity of the sky. They stopped in the silence 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 heady liquid and lay back, content in the sun.

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 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.

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.

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 essence, well, what else was he there for but to do what they wanted?

The long days gained a rhythm. Breakfast, jobs around the house, then a walk with his first as they explored the landscape (and, amazingly, shockingly for him - each other), they returned and washed 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 in silence in Dave’s room were never said.

“Insha’Allah” they all said each night as the grandfather gave thanks.

On day as Myk was enjoying his new life, 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 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 showed that the 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 sealed time of the outpost of the lost world there was no way of telling how long ago the thieves had entered.

They looked at the markings on the walls. The letters were Roman rather than Cyrillic. Myk recognised them; 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  $\lambda$  rather than  $\mu$  – and looked at Dave as he sat in the dust.

“So this is where your Gihon was born. 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 soldiers from development. Small caches, harder to destroy them all in one go. I knew there had to be more than I had found on my other searches.”

“You’ve been to Alba before?”

“Many times. I was here before the Collapse. I returned after when the world went mad. I destroyed the base 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 knew that I’d missed somewhere.”

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 received, in turn, the thing that Dave called haoma.

“What did you see?”

“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.

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 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, 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 eased 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 Jibraaiyl 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.”

“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 dolt 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. The women had refused to leave the house so he walked them 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 very long time 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?” Myk saw the odd look pass between his elder and the old man again. 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 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 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. I am Moshen Fadl now, Ibn al Haq was a son of the Laird, he would never settle at the End of the World.”

They left, hearing 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.”

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 arkangel 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.

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?

Myk looked down at the being curled up beside 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.

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 he 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 desperation 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 second bedroom – 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 had no words 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 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."

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 on his own 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 the house 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, resisting the sudden urge to curtsy. 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 broad chest. 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.

"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.

"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."

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. 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.

"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 realised he wasn't finished. 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. 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.

"Will I see you both again?" Kappa was trying to be 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 thought he'd been picking 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 kingdoms of India. You know the elite Devadasi will welcome you wholeheartedly, that is where the other Kappas gravitated to." 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."

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 begin to 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, the time for sex passed.

"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. "Gihon will give us both what we need."

"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." One word was a summary of all the things that 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 pinned at one 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 whited 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 woman were beginning to hide their pointing in artfully raised glasses. 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 fully 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’m 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 and white within white eyes focussed on the moonlight man.

A woman appeared at Myk’s shoulder, he glanced her way 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 thin hand dripped blood slowly from inside a black sleeve. The 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 strains of foreign heritage adding music to the words. The beast smiled at him and eased his panic. “The house is yours now. Make yourself comfortable, get to know the door. Come back when you are ready.”

He opened his mouth but no words came out. The beast knew him, was just like him. No beast, 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.

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 hoarse 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 too 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.

Just like 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 ignore the metal, hers costly but faded, his shining and new, still heavy on his hand. The nearby hotel was an expensive one. Both of them could easily afford the hourly tariff. 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. He gave her her pleasure, he 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 care about 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. Face down 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 and third also fell to a blur of fists and feet. There were too many, they had 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.

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.

“Wepwawet, start a search on police and hospital bands. Be discreet, we don’t want to panic anyone if he just got carried away.”

“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 both heard alarm behind the quiet voice.

“We hear you. Get a primary care team on standby in case we need them. 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.”

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.

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 item that was 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. One was platinum for a promise always kept. The other was gold for the promise to 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 long.

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 neared 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.