

Holding Warehouse – Shabti Site 1 – North America

Unresponsive bodies fill the beds in the discard warehouse. Numbers increase, numbers decrease. Some even breathe unaided but they have never been alive. The warehouse has been the destination of all of the test subjects so far. Rows of hospital gurneys with monitors and life support equipment, trees of intravenous bags feeding a body on each one. Though there are variations in their size and condition most of the bodies look to have come from a common source. Some are missing limbs, many are missing organs. These bodies are things, they have never been people. Keen to maintain the image of being a benefit to society the director has decided to use the rejected products as warm organ donors. Dead ends as far as the primary military aim was concerned, these failed ‘answerers’ are at least able to assist with one set of needs. Scientists and technicians work through this bank of rejects, in theory testing and identifying potential candidates for further experimentation, more commonly just harvesting everything useful until the donor body is no longer worth maintaining and it is sent to the incinerator.

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

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

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

Progress Bar – Shabti Site 1 – North America

The message from the technician asking McDonald to meet off the record has him intrigued. Something has happened and he needs to hear it at first hand. Meeting in one of the quieter bars on the town sized site the doctor realises that maybe he should not have been surprised to discover that signature ‘H Boothe’ belonged to one of the few female nurses employed by the labs. He’d seen her around but had assumed that the elegant looking coloured woman had been a senior member of administrative staff as the standard lab coat gave everyone a uniform appearance. Initial pleasantries over, he is intrigued to hear what she has to tell him, there has been nothing to cause concern in her notes.

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

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

“Move him?” This is unexpected, he knows this might just be clutching at false hope but finds his mouth running ahead of him. “Do you see him changing too? I’ve thought that he looks to be putting some

weight on recently but haven't wanted to say in case it was just wishful thinking. If we need to I'm sure we can get him moved, but why? What's happened?" She won't look him in the face. "Why so uncomfortable?"

Comprehension dawns as she tells him what has happened - and not just the one time. In case it was a random event she had tried and had been able to reproduce the same physical reaction. Though the news is couched in detached medical terms he recognises the potential for embarrassment and misunderstanding.

Like other seniors in the programme Struan has heard the rumours, the scuttlebutt filtering through from other sites. He'd always assumed that such things didn't really go on or, if they did, they were just aberrations that were statistically bound to occur. The thought of similar things happening at his site, perhaps even to his Delta, makes the old man uncomfortable in ways he doesn't want to consider. Thankful for the circumspection demonstrated by the nurse Struan says he will pay another visit to their subject before making his decision.

His experiment seems to have moved into a different, and completely unexpected, stage of development.

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Later that evening, after ensuring there are no other experiments or visits scheduled, the gruff man gathers his thoughts. The gentle cadences of a Gregorian chant issue from the mp3 docking station and soften the sepulchral quiet of the warehouse. During his first visits the sound of worship had seemed appropriate to him to ease this purgatory of flesh and he had continued the practice, building an unexpectedly wide library in the process. This had become his favourite part of the day. Now he is tense, uncertain what success or failure would mean, wondering even more if he would recognise the difference between the two states.

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

"What would you like me to say?" The words are calm and clearly enunciated but said in a low voice as if the owner is not certain what sound would be produced. Struan stares down into dark eyes. It is the first time he has seen them open voluntarily and he finds the effect of them unsettling in the shadows and half light. The voice continues on - every word a breakthrough, every intonation a shock. "You know, you've never really asked me a direct question Dr McDonald. How can I be your answerer when your questions have all been rhetorical?"

"But you sound like me? Why do you sound like me?" He is aware of his grip being returned by the long bony fingers for the first time but can't look away from the direct gaze. Why was his own accent being thrown back at him, was this some kind of mocking?

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

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

"I need to get you out of here, get you somewhere more private. This isn't what I expected for our first conversation. Frankly the fact that you seem to be so aware has me dumbfounded. I wasn't expecting more than a blink or a twitch ... nothing like you are. Do ... do you mind if I call someone?" Feeling out of his depth the doctor fumbles for his phone and dials the number saved earlier in the day. No introduction, the person at the other end clearly recognises where the call is coming from. "I need your help back here,

get to me as soon as you can. Yes, it's him." Struan finally gets to show his discovery what a smile looks like, "Trust me. You have to see him before anyone else, oh, and see if you can bring something to dress him in, we're moving him tonight."

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

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

"Yes."

"OK, if I'm a man then am I correct in assuming you are also a man ...?"

"Yes."

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

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

"There have been other hands, but not recently - they were not always gentle so I was glad when you sent them away. Many of the hands have had metal rings on them so that does not tell me much about the sexes but I think it might tell me about your age. Again your left hand, you wear one ring, it is thin, almost worn away but there is no gap between it and your finger. Those other hands, the casual hands, often wore big rings with squared edges like they were new or fashions have changed over time. She also wears just one ring. It's on her left hand, the same finger as you ... so perhaps a similar age or experience. Married then? Maybe, but I think not to each other as your clothes are laundered differently. She has had experience looking after helpless things like me. She is very gentle when she washes me. She touches me and I think the feeling is nice. The last few times she touched me and it was different ..."

The eyes open again; an 'O' of surprise replacing the dreamy smile. "Is that not meant to happen? Have I caused offence?" Truly amazing, his conversation had changed from awareness to guilt in a matter of minutes. Even Struan, with a strict Catholic upbringing in tatters behind him, has to concede that that is an impressive feat.

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

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

– or maybe just to correct a receding hair line. She knows it will only be a matter of time before the shadow visible below the scalp grows through to a rich chestnut brown to match the eyes.

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

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

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

“No need to disturb him yet. I want some time to be sure what we have to show him, didn’t want to drag him back from his precious golfing weekend. If it’s just you and me for now this doesn’t need to happen officially until next week. Now he is awake, I don’t want to leave him here with people he doesn’t know. Don’t want to risk strangers seeing him. I was hoping you would be able to help get him to my place ...?” and, she realises as he says it, with anything else that would follow.

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

McDonald House – Shabti Site 1 – North America

Alyssa had not been back to the house for some time. If she was being honest she probably wouldn’t have accepted her father’s invitation had she not been so intrigued by this breakthrough that had set the other sites participating in the Shabti program abuzz with amazement. Her father had the only conscious Delta. And he was not just a conscious Delta; he was the first conscious Shabti - period. Officially on leave, she hoped to return to Site Three with insights gained from firsthand experience of the subject. There had to be something different about him, something beyond the blood and tissue samples distributed between the other sites. She had come to try and meet the Delta, to look for an essential ‘Daveness’ that could be identified and refined in the next iterations of the programme.

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

At least everywhere was clean and tidy. Maybe he had finally accepted the need for a cleaner to stay on top of things. Going back through the house she notices more changes. Subtle ones. No, not just a cleaner. A woman? Her father with a woman? No, couldn’t be, at least she couldn’t imagine anyone else

coming back here. Still, something was not quite right. Someone was studying - all kinds of things, the piles of books in the family room were not restricted to medical research. And where had all the documentaries come from? She was not so surprised at the content, looking through the boxes they were almost all fine and worthy subjects, but history had never been his thing and since when had her father made time to watch everything ever made by David Attenborough? And astrophysics? There was something very odd going on with the eclectic mix of viewing. A woman with older children? He was often absent minded but that would be too much to forget to mention. She hadn't bothered to check the other upstairs rooms.

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

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

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

The woman lies as he leaves her, head back, eyes closed, legs apart and knees bent as if unwilling to give up the feeling of him there, waiting for his return. Alyssa waits. The pale man does not return; the woman looks to be dozing. Eventually Alyssa walks towards the rug, shoes crunching the small shale of the beach to indicate her presence as she nears the exposed woman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, that was the wonder of the age.” Alyssa tries to sound nonchalant as she shakes the same hand, but she is surprised to see all the pieces fall into place. Obvious really. Knowing how recently he had become active she realises the childish handwriting on the note was just that –nearly two metres tall and impossibly real ‘D’ was all of six months old. “Does my father know what you are doing with him?”

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

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

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

“Honestly – what are you getting out of this?”

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

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

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

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

“I won’t pretend there isn’t ... I told you, I am still his nurse. I take his bloods, I dress his wounds and help him get over whatever has been done to him in the name of science. He knows he is a freak and it gets him down. I see him sad and lonely when he can’t make the effort to hide it any more. I’m still not sure what it is he gets from me, but why should I deny him any happiness I can give?”

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

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

“Can I ask - what’s with the specimen box?” All she wants to ask is how this woman looks the way she does, this must be why her father asked her to come over, part of what he couldn’t say over the phone. Maybe this was the source of some of the other rumours she’d heard.

“That’s part of the quid pro quo around here. We provide samples of him in return for the appearance of a free life at the house, time for him to try to learn about the world. Officially, they say they are worried that he might become fertile so they have to keep checking. Off the record, I’m sure there’s some very unprofessional sniggering and testing of rejuvenation products going on somewhere.” A chuckle and a small conspiratorial smile, “still, they don’t have to have everything. We give them enough so they don’t think to ask for any more.” A pause as she looks around the apparently idyllic beach. “He’s right, you know, it is nice just lying here in the sun. If you don’t have anywhere else to be just now, why don’t you relax a while? I promise you are very safe here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh.”

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

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

Helena recognises the surrender in the tone and explains the unusual nature of her charge’s journey from helplessness, even through the early stages that Struan had problems with, “you should have

seen his face, complete horror and he goes running off to hide and wouldn't come back until we were housebroken. Poor Dave. Good thing that was only a day or so."

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

Lakeside – Shabti site 1 – North America

"Hello. I'm guessing you must be Alyssa. I'm Dave." Oh, so that is the accent, yes, quite out of place in America. In some happy hypnagogic place, warm and cosy, Alyssa smiles to herself, it's a nice voice.

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

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

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

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

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

Alyssa had decided years before to never, ever, be dependent on a man for anything and to certainly never play those slobbering, sucking, violent games of penetration and ejaculation. Uncle Richard had been a help, always a comfort. He'd been the one she'd turned to when she didn't know how to cope

with the stress of boys and expectations of the normal. He'd suggested a different path and she had never regretted her rejection of the cisgender male.

So Alyssa watches the thin man in the long skirt climb the path up to her old house. She hopes the intervening years and experience, and this new creature's apparently submissive nature, will make the pretence easier to maintain.

This Dave is not at all what she had expected to find.

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

A week of strange days later and McDonald's Suburban rolls up the long gravel drive to Richard Lytton's house. Cover stories have been practiced and information swapped. Struan has successfully avoided too much information but he is aware that nothing has happened between the two younger members of the party. The director had grudgingly allowed the trip as a controlled experiment and all procedures had been stopped to allow them time to prepare. Strangely, this in itself had been informative, and everyone was fascinated by the speed with which his skin had lost any sign of needle and blade. Dave had also demonstrated a remarkable alacrity in learning how to cope with alcohol, the one poison that he had not been previously exposed to. His adaptive physiology quickly seemed to make 'drunk' a choice rather than the inevitable effect much to the impressed disbelief of the pair of hard drinking McDonalds.

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

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

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

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

"Who, what?"

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

"Nan, don't worry. These are the noughties, of course he knows. It was an old girlfriend of mine who introduced us. Actually ... actually ... don't tell but ..." This approach was guaranteed to make sure everyone would know in the next half hour, "she thought she'd try and make me jealous by making out with him as a way of getting me interested again. Bold as brass the minx even suggested a three way. So I kissed her. And then I kissed him." Nan was looking a little breathless; this was the most excitement she'd had in a long time, she loved what the young people got up to. "And then I left with him." Nodding to the pale blue saucer big eyes Alyssa gives a wink and circulates her way away from the old dear and towards her god-father who is busy trying to find out where Struan has been hiding Helena.

Helping herself to the drink in her god-father's hand Alyssa suddenly realises she might enjoy playing the game for a couple of days and shushes his enquiry. "Now then Uncle Dickie, you know we work in secrets. We could tell you everything – but we'd only have to kill you afterwards and that would just put a real downer on the weekend."

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

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

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

"Did we get away with it?"

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

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

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

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

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

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

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

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

Alyssa wakes to find she is in an unexpected embrace. It does not seem as traumatic as she thought it might be. Already awake, he notes the change in her breathing and murmurs a good morning as he snuggles her closer to him. This is too close. She pulls away from his hold as she feels the pressure of him against the back of her shorts. No, never with a man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

In the afternoon Alyssa sits on the beach, her back to the house and the sounds of more guests arriving. Lytton comes out to join her, the excited tones of old friends greeting each other reassure him that his staff can look after the latest arrivals; he is more interested in getting to the bottom of his god-daughter’s surprising relationship. He had listened to their story and decided that it was little more than smoke and mirrors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

With Struan busy catching up with old friends and Alyssa in gales of half-shocked laughter with her uncle on the beach, Helena and Dave take a walk in the grounds of the sprawling estate. Alone and

unobserved in an overgrown summer house their voices are low and there is an edge to their conversation. Though it is one they have had before, this time the hypothetical tone is missing. While Helena is experienced enough to view changes with a certain detachment, she sees the difficulty he has trying to reconcile new desires with untrained emotions.

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

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

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

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

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

Lytton Estate – The Hamptons – North America

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

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

Seeing a pretty young thing in the coffee shop queue had taken decades off Richard Lytton and put him in mind of days long gone when he used the same place to pick up students. The attraction to the slim figure had been instant. He had left his friends and gone over to chat before even realised how much long it had been since he’d been so blatant in public. Stirring his latte and making small talk Lytton was

struck by the accent that went with serious face and quiet voice, an accent that took him back to the days before he'd inherited the family estate. And then there was Struan, older, greyer and heavier and this young man was looking up at him as if he was his only friend in the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her drink is empty. Absently she tugs at his arm, he is her date after all, and he should be looking after her. He does not go to the bar but takes her over to one of the tall windows running down the outside wall of the room. In a reversal of the morning he stands behind her and hugs her close, bending to whisper

against her ear, "Please keep smiling. I'm going to ask you something and there are people watching. Will that be ok?" Bowing lower, he nibbles at her neck, placing quick, tender kisses along the clean line of her wide jaw. He runs his hands down her arms, holds her hands tightly as his mouth returns to the same ear. "I would really like to be with you as a man tonight, to feel you, to be inside you." He seems so very gentle with her but she realises he has asked her in public, and also arranged the pose, to control her reaction should it be negative. His knuckles lock with tension over her fingers.

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

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

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

Lytton finds his old friend on the patio. Struan and his lady appear to be taking in the fresh night air, enjoying a break from the noise of the party. "That's the kids gone to bed." Lytton suddenly feels his age as he takes a seat with them, he doesn't notice the way Helena's hand tightens on Struan's. "I asked Sweet Pea to be gentle with him but I think I might have had that the wrong way around. That boy of hers kisses like something that should be banned."

Lytton Estate - The Hamptons - North America

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you think they heard us downstairs?" His voice from the bathroom is quiet but clear over the sound of running water.

"I think they might have heard us in the next county. Shit. I wasn't expecting it to be so ... intense."

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

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

Morning and Alyssa wakes up happy and relaxed. Her muscles ache and her body protests, but only slightly, after the unaccustomed exertions of the previous night. She leaves him in the bed and withdraws to the bathroom. Discovering that her period is early she shrugs; though she had enjoyed the experience any replay of the previous night would just have to wait. The blood was one reminder of femininity that she never liked anyone seeing but she had always balked at the idea of risking the other effects of depo provera just to be rid of one annoyance. There was no reason that things should be any different with this man.

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

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

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

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

"You mean we did ... you did that ...?"

"What's wrong? I thought you enjoyed what we did."

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

"The blood is natural, it is life. What's wrong with that?" And he is next to her and his arms are around her, comfort and restraint in one move. "I think you have forgotten what it was like to be natural, to just be and be happy with what you are." She tries to pull away, who is this creature to talk about being

natural? He holds her close, closer still, and looks into eyes unwilling to return his gaze. This then, is a part of his strength, the partner to the easy feeling he creates around him. "What happened to you? Who hurt you to make you dislike your body so much that you've done all that to yourself? I can't say it is ugly but you seem uncomfortable with what you have done ... it doesn't sit easily with you. If anything is wrong it is that, not the pleasure that two people can have."

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

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

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

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

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

"You know she doesn't like men." The words are a flat statement.

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

"So why is she with you?"

"I'm not men." And now he smiles and to Lytton the room seems just a few degrees brighter than before. Not men, of course, that makes sense.

McDonald House – Shabti Site 1 – North America

The drive home is a subdued one, Dave comfortable with driving the long drive back to the base and the lake house, his little haven of peace. They had said their farewells amid promises to stay in touch and demands for the youngsters to visit again the next time they were in the States. Fatigue and the thousand yard stare of the interstate withers the sparse conversation and each gradually withdraws into their own musings.

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

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

same mistake. She knows that particular act is something he seems to take great delight in. It is also something she cannot even consider performing.

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

Scrubbed and clean, free of her metal, she stands in the den nervous like the night at Uncle Richard's house. In the middle of the day she has no alcohol to blame for any foolishness. Sober, she is acutely aware of the conflict between promises made by her adolescent self and the urges of that part of her so long neglected and searching for expression. Taking a deep breath she steps close and closes the book that has his attention. She has been wondering what to say to him, in the end the simplest thing is the best. She removes the 'phones and takes his hand. "Come to bed with me."

"I wish there was a way I could kiss you and make you feel better about yourself, but I don't think I can do anything for old wrongs in your head." Though there was no night to hide behind he had been gentle and considerate, accepting her initial ambivalence and hiding the sight of his arousal from her. She had barely touched him, had tried not to look at him. Again she had begged him to be inside her, not allowing him to withdraw until she had felt him soften after his quiet passion had peaked and subsided. That he might have wanted to continue hadn't occurred to her. Now, he lay behind her in the bed she had never shared before.

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

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

"Helena didn't look like that before she had you did she?"

"Inside she did, and that is where it matters. I thought she was a fine looking woman when I first saw her but you are right, not quite the same as she does now. All that has happened is that she has become more of herself." His fingers trail light patterns across the bare skin of her hip. "And what about you? What are you inside? I wish I could help you but I don't think I can make the changes that Harrison was hoping for." He bends to kiss the tension that flares in her shoulders. "Oh, don't worry; it was bound to happen. I'm glad he asked you, even more pleased that you have been willing. I don't know what he was expecting, maybe sex will only be a pleasure I think, somehow I don't think we are compatible for anything else."

"We could keep trying, you know, for science." Once beyond the mental hurdle of his masculinity riding him had released something deep and wild within her. It scared her. Easier to think of it as a sacrifice, another thing done for the programme to excuse the stirrings of attraction and desire that battled with the core of her.

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

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

Secure Medical Detention Unit – Shabti Site 1 – North America

Dave has got used to the dark again. He doesn't mind it so much. Even the quiet is not as bad as he had first feared. The worst is the lack of contact. He misses people; he misses certain people very acutely even though he cannot tell how long it has been since they put him in the dark. Where were Helena and his father? For surely Jens had been the father of his mind, he was the man who made him. And Helena he loved more than anything. He even misses the others he'd had when everything was fun. Some who'd been sent to him, some he'd found himself – Ginger from the Progress Bar, the cute little sniper he screwed in the hide by the lake, the secretary with the doe eyes who liked him to spank her, the anonymous ones – a variety of unknowing female flesh in the hidden search for 'compatible'.

The one person he doesn't miss is Alyssa. He knows exactly where she is, she is on the other side of the dark and she is the one keeping him there. She encouraged his experimentation with other women, saying nothing but seemingly mystified at his constant return to Helena's side. The blond woman had never

seemed to understand the difference between sex and the absolute submission of one to the other, the bond between him and the woman who cherished him.

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

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

In the dark they come and take from him. Skin and blood. Open him up, a slice of this, a piece of that, what happens if that is pushed just so? The pain is all he has for company. He is glad of the dark and the hood, no one sees the torment and the tears; the gag stops his screams. He was designed to recover, no one had designed him not to feel pain. When they don't need him they leave him to his thoughts and the confusion of memory. His care is minimal. Fluids and nutrients go in through the bruises at his elbows. If the balance is wrong he dehydrates or lies in his own waste until someone corrects the mistake. Some days pairs of technicians - always pairs never alone - come in and clean him. Their fingers are gloved, their clothes are heavy, one time a stray hand brushes across the facemask of an isolation suit before the straps go back on. They pay attention to what they are doing and never rush. In a detached way he realises that they handle him as they would an Ebola victim - or an unstable bomb.

In the dark his thoughts run the maze of recrimination and what might have been. Snatches of conversations come back to haunt him and always he yearns for Helena. What had happened? Was she safe ... or 'safe' like him? Had he seen the soldier make her kneel and put a gun to her head? He remembered screaming and fighting then something cold in his neck and then waking in a secure room. They were clearly putting drugs in with his fluids. It was so difficult to think clearly, so hard, so very hard ...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What you are doing is wrong." He couldn't bring himself to look at her. This was before the dark came. After it he thought he should have had one last look to fix in his mind what she had become.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A long way from his body he hears a new voice calling him back. He doesn’t want to come back. Reality hurts too much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An exposed Dave is left with his hands strapped together, the long cable secured to a loop in the wall behind his head. Alyssa knows he cannot get away; this is just to drive the point home. She dismisses the technicians with a curt "Out" and turns to the silent shape next to her. "Thanatos, oh Thanatos my lover, you know what you do with the weak ones, you know how you show them they are weak? I want you to do it to this one. I want you to show him you are my alpha and omega. I want you to show him what happens to weaklings who are not compatible." Her voice becomes a sultry promise. Dave remembers the same tone being used on Ginger. Given his situation he doubts there will be a repeat of that apparently blissful threesome. "You please me and you know what I will do to please you."

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

The physical torment stops abruptly as Thanatos withdraws and spills himself in hot gushes across the skinny rump of his victim. Heavy breathing in the room, the theta rolls off the bed, he sounds spent. The bitch sounds excited as she surveys the damage her pet has left. Without the massive hands crushing his hips into his attacker's groin Dave falls to the bed, bound wrists twisting awkwardly beneath him; he does not want to move but allows the bitch the satisfaction of seeing barely controlled sobs shake his stark ribs and bony shoulders. Footsteps, the door is held open. "Back in here, we have blood. Sort him out and strap him down again." The bitch's boots clatter down the corridor and in the emaciated man's head a child's voice weeps the giant's gratitude.

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

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He wakes to the darkness. Knowing that one pair of technicians is watching out for him he does not feel quite so lonely. He is still getting used to the feeling, it still surprises him. As he flexes against the restraints there is another subtle hint that he is feeling stronger. He guesses it is some days since the gift left by the giant and the start of his recovery. He is clear headed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It does not take long for the door to open. Just long enough, perhaps, for the techs to don the heavy suits. They may have clearance from the bitch but Dave knows they will have to maintain their pretence should anyone else come by. Sure enough, gloved hands disconnect the feeding lines, remove his sheets and the restraints. His hands are bound again but this time they seem to forget about shackling him to the wall. As they leave each of them contrives to give him a reassuring touch on the neck. The threat of discovery limits what they can do, whatever happens next is up to Alyssa’s pet. Unlike regular humans he is too precious for anything other than a mild scolding should he be caught acting against her wishes.

The air changes, subtle notes passing through the hood and directly into him. The scent is stronger this time, as if once experienced it would always be immediately recognisable. He braces himself for whatever might come.

Large hands run along his body, a light touch across protruding bones settling briefly on the unusual distension of his sternum. Warmth flushes through his chest and radiates out to neglected limbs. The leather binding his wrists together offers no resistance to the silent visitor. The hands carry on up to the hood, fingers feeling at the shape of his face below the thick cloth. Then the hood is gone, the lock holding the strap tight against his neck unaccountably undone. The same fingers deftly un-cinch the rubber gag and gently ease it from the open scream, massaging feeling back into rictus strained muscles before repeating the same with the blindfold and the layers of gauze pad beneath the band. Gradually Dave feels a lessening of the dark; his world becomes red as light filters through gummed-closed eyelids.

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

In Dave’s mind there is the sudden surprised laughter of a child. *Oh it is you! They said, but I wasn’t sure. I had to see you for myself. It’s you, it’s you. The light spills from your eyes. Adam Kadmon it’s you.* His internal voice is a peal of joy and the brooding aspect of his face is wiped away by a wide smile. This beast is only a youngster and the pleasure of discovery is written clearly across his features. *I would give you haoma again if you will take it. I didn’t want to hurt you before but it was the only way I could get to you. There is no need for hurt. All you have to do is accept that it is given with love. I can give you nothing that is not freely taken just as you cannot take anything that is not freely given.*

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

I would give you haoma. I want you to be well and strong again. The scrubs do not hide the obvious outline of what the theta intends. Dave tries not to look as Thanatos begins to stroke himself through the bright cotton. *Please accept what I give you in love and you will become well.*

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

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

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

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

"We are products of science not mysticism. I unite nothing, I give nothing, I just am. What they are telling you is to control you. There is surely nothing more powerful than one such as you. They just don't want you to realise that." They stare into each other for a long time before the theta leans over the thin man and kisses him as a lover. *Whatever you are I will see you well again.* Thanatos joins his progenitor, taking up the space on the bed, gently expressing adoration. They both ignore the sound of the door opening as Dave learns about his own kind from the view of the strongest of those to come after him.

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

Gloved hands cajole the theta back off the bed and hustle him to the door. "Go back to her. We'll tell her you hurt him again. She'll like that. She'll let you come back to him. And when you come back we will get him out." The man in the suit reaches up and pats a giant shoulder reassuringly, "Four days."

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

Briefly, before exhaustion takes him, he wonders if this is some elaborate plot by the bitch to break what is left of him. But Thanatos had shared some of his soul with the gift of his seed and his soul had been true. By whatever accident or chance the creature named death wants to save him.

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Day and night mean nothing when everything is black but each time he wakes he feels stronger. He still remembers the old conversations but now the memories are more coherent, no longer random snatches of words in the dark. If he can get away he knows where he will go. He remembers the who the outsider is; if he can get to see the man he is sure he will be able to gain his assistance. Sometimes he hears the muffled sound of the protective suits moving around his room but makes no effort to respond to them, they do not walk with the rhythm of his friends.

When the time comes there is no warning from his suited friends. The door opens. He hears Thanatos breathing heavily as he rushes in and drags away the hood, the blindfold and the gag. The theta cuts through the restraints holding thin limbs to the bed frame, tonight it will be over, there will be no second chance. Instead of the very obvious orange scrubs he is in dark fatigues. *Outside it is night-time. I have exhausted the bitch and left her asleep. His bulk blocks the light from blinking eyes. Are you hungry? Do you want me again?*

Not here. So close to being away Dave does not want to risk discovery, sure that failure would be the end of them all. *I do but not here.* The door opens again and the two nurses rush in – one tall with her black hair in a long pony tail, the other short with a crew-cut offsetting his soft features – they closely resemble the image that Thanatos has projected of them, he calls them Ishtar and Galahad but Dave knows that can't be their real names. These two also wear dark colours and carry the same for the thin man. Thanatos takes him from the bed as easily as lifting a child and Ishtar helps him dress while the others disappear – sounds of a fight coming from the room next door, things being smashed, a chair thrown, a loud yelp as something hard connected with Galahad's face, a thud of a body falling against furniture.

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

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

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

"Lori." She runs into his open arms, nearly bowling him into the dark figure behind him with the force of her rush.

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

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

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

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

"I'm better than I was, and much better for being able to see you again." Sex in the dark, in the daytime. He remembers the feeling of her skin against his. He still doesn't know how long it has been but he feels the familiar response start again. He sets the cup aside and reaches for her. It doesn't matter that

three pairs of eyes watch them kiss and undress each other. No one says anything as she lays him down and lowers herself onto him. She is careful not to hurt him. For the brief time it takes nothing else matters and he soon shares his new strength inside her, a soft moan accompanying the release. The sound seems to be a signal of some kind, Dave is aware of everyone else relaxing, a collective exhalation matching his own.

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

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

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

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

I will watch over us all tonight. Sleep safely and gather your strength. In the morning there will be time for you to make love to her again, to give your child a better chance. If you need more than food I would be honoured if you would consider accepting my gift again.

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

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

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

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

It is later, he hears voices, a murmur of tenderness between a man and wife, and he remembers that his reality is now different to what it had been. Ishtar and Galahad are outside, from the rhythm of their sounds he can guess what they are doing. From the other echoes in his mind he knows that Thanatos is with them. The theta is as gentle with them as he had been in the night when Dave had asked if receiving always had to hurt. He had finally received all that Thanatos had wanted to give him, mouth to mouth, looking into each other eyes as the giant held him in his lap and came inside him. Dizzy with the

rush within he'd finally lain back in the undergrowth, more than happy to let the silent one use his mouth to draw the same gift, in moans and snorts, from Dave's hardened flesh.

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

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

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

Lori is a good actress, good enough to cling to her real man and sob out the story of returning to their love nest to tidy up and of being surprised by the silent one and his terrified thralls. Dave plays his part. There can be no hint of connection between them. Alyssa may have known about the others but Lori had always been his secret. Restrained by others, he breathes them in - weaker Thetas, probably ones who didn't believe he was Adam Kadmon - then turns to this real man, he has his part to say even though it offends his feelings.

"It's been a long time since I had a woman. She has a nice mouth, I was about to see if her cunt was as welcoming. But I see you know that she does. Don't worry sweet girl, I'm sure you'll make do with this one after they kill me, shame you won't know what I could have done with you."

No resistance as the captain doubles him up with a rifle butt in the guts. They all think he is still weak. Nothing but a grunt as the same weapon is driven into his face, and again, blood spraying across the onlookers. Some are human. Most are Shabtis. Her eyes fixed on the beaten Delta the bitch doesn't notice the way some of the Thetas wipe at the blood spatter and lick their fingers.

"Let the humans go. They are no part of this. Collateral damage. They didn't know what Thanatos would do."

"You expect me to believe you?" A booted heel makes the thin figure cry out in pain. A gloved hand lifts his face to look into eyes gone mad. "You freak, you fucking freak, you should never have drawn breath." Whatever else the Thetas believe they have been told who Thanatos, their strongest, thinks this creature could be. Alyssa is unaware of shifts in posture, alterations in allegiance as she spits into the drawn face. She can never be more than human; the half world of the Thetas - of the Shabtis - is unknown to her. Dave is now aware of it. He understands that to get away he needs these uncertain and unknown beings. Thanatos is the only one he can count on but he is restrained by a knot of his own kind. Force has to give way to force for the first to stand a chance of escape.

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

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

Stand with us, stand with Adam Kadmon against what she wants us to be. Our gift is to protect not to destroy humans. Attack us and be the abomination that she has created.

The weakest of us is stronger than any of them. Why should we serve them?

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

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

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

He is our first, our strongest. Some Theta's believe, the scorn of silent laughter from the others sends a chill across the clearing. More human's become aware of the currents running at a different level of consciousness. New lines are drawn, before and against, a small knot of Theta's protecting Ishtar and Galahad, Lori and her captain and the potential children.

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

No, we stand apart.

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

He is the atom of Eden. Echoes of the phrase spill from lips across the clearing, one then another. The Thetas make their decisions as the bitch stands before the figure hunched over himself in the dirt and lifts his chin with her toe.

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

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

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

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