

*“How do we start? I guess the beginning would be best. If I skip details or miss things you think are important then, tough, this is not a documentary. Same applies to things I dwell on too much. Anything you need explaining make a note, anthropology is not the subject here. It’s a longer story than you might have thought. Get it all, we can discuss it later.”*

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

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

The land was wild and it could be a harsh place in winter, but the beauty of the summers more than made up for the hard times. I still miss the land and the air of separateness about the place. Up above the tree line I remember the sky going on forever, lying on a bed of heather watching the stars come out. Magnificent isolation, there at the end of the world. That was what it was, World’s End, I mean. I’m from the last lands of the Western Isles, brought up with my back to Fortress Europe and facing the openness of the great ocean. The land provided everything we thought we needed, and it bred a hardiness into its people.

In a psychological return to the Middle Ages the feudal model had been the norm for centuries following the collapse of the decadent West. People knew their place and were told they felt comfortable in it. A contraction of the mindset peculiar to the Western Isles but most pronounced in the fundamentalist enclaves of Alba where the village elders enforced adherence to strict religious tenets that had grown, garbled and re-interpreted from half understood beliefs that survived the Great Fall.

As a child I was taught that our God given mission was to repopulate the land with the faithful, that everything beyond the horizon was weak and depraved. Only the foolish entered the ruins of the forbidden past. Such mad adventures were left to the overlord’s specialist troops.

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

Women were second class; they got their status from their husband and the number of children they produced for him. Children could be doted on and excused for many omissions as they represented the future of the village. Male children, especially, were given a certain scope for discreet experimentation on the basis that such a thing was only a phase and would pass if not taken too far and no one drew attention to it. Whatever female children felt was of no import to anyone, a condition they were raised to accept as normal, their value was only in the potential for the next generation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Had I been able to believe what I had be taught in the Kirk I might have been content to follow the Imam's wishes. A life of faith would have given me opportunities for learning, and would have reflected well on my family and let me avoid the increasing pressure for an acceptable sexual identity.

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

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

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

My older brothers had women and families of their own, they had moved out. As the eldest Pishon, and his wife and children, lived with us as they would inherit it as their home in time. There was only myself and Hannah to be married off and it seemed obvious that it would not be long before she decided which of her suitors to settle for – or biology made the choice for her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

You know where this is going.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All the time I thought I'd been keeping him safe by keeping him shut out, he'd known and he'd worried about me. His disappointment was not that I was something anathema but that I hadn't trusted him with my fears. He berated me for my foolishness and pride, why did I have to be so certain of my difference, so unwilling to even try the pleasures that would make me a man? He railed against the ridiculous strictures of our lives where honesty had to mean expulsion. And he shed tears at the thought of losing a son for the second time. Stupid the things we put off because of fear.



Maoilios, that surprising man, supported my wishes before the council even at the risk of losing face by telling the truth. I could not go before the elders of the local villages, I was not a man and a chattel had no voice. I heard the raised voices but not specific words as he argued that our area needed to find someone eligible and willing to send, surely they would be happier for a true volunteer to go rather than risking losing one of their few virgin daughters. Sameer seemed to be the main voice of dissent but was silenced by a contemptuous voice – the Imam? However it was expressed, it seemed that concern for their own daughters and fear of exposing the collective to shame if my ‘sin’ was discovered was enough to get my name submitted. I would be someone else’s problem after that.

I was to be sent to the Laird. I would have a few weeks to say my goodbyes before transport details would be confirmed. Given the nature of my leaving, there were not many goodbyes to make.

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

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

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

The afternoon with the Imam was something of an ordeal. All I got was a fire and brimstone lecture from him. While I owed my physical body to the Laird – as did everyone in his lands - I was an abomination and would damn both of our souls if I actually gave myself to him like Jonathan to David. I’d always thought that the old boy was a kindly man at heart. He must have known more about the secret lives of his flock than he ever said, but to be directly facing an uncomfortable reality upset him and he fell back to harshest aspects of his confused creed, the forgiving God was nowhere to be found that day. Listening to his well intentioned but closed reaction was good for me in one sense – I wasn’t going to fall for that God shit any more.

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

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

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

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

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

I didn't dare put my new found confidence to the test though. There was no way I was going to expose myself to whatever was outside our door.

So, as I was not leaving the house, the community doctor came to me. It seemed that my status needed to be certified before I could be collected. Another part of the barbaric mindset and, of course, completely ridiculous. Still, thanks to my unknown parentage and the fact that I was considered too old when Maoilios found me I really was unmodified. A minor thing you might think compared to what you've had done, but a foreskin had been just one of the things that had made me shy when I was growing up - now it was part of my final qualification.

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

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

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

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

I said goodbye to the little ones, thanked Pishon and his wife for their quiet kindness, and nodded to Mother who would always be angry with me. Little Hannah I embraced fiercely, holding her to me and kissing the top of her head as she sobbed into my shoulder. Father was the hardest to leave. The thought of never seeing him again turned me back to the frightened little boy he had discovered in the forest. Anyone could have found me there. Anyone - or no-one. Instead Maoilios

had given me a home and a name and had accepted me. I don't think there is any shame in admitting that I needed the impressive soldier's arm to guide me to the transport as my eyes swam with tears, Father's last words echoing in my head, "Whatever else you might be, whatever you might become, you will always be my son and I am thankful for the privilege of knowing you."

*"Are you ok? We don't have to do this all now. We can leave this and catch up again later in the week. You're in charge, no rush."*

*"Oh, don't worry I'm fine, fine. Old memories ... just surprised myself with them I guess. No one left to hurt with my ancient history. Where was I? Leaving home, another unknown future."*

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

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

He hadn't known.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though his phrasing was couched in general terms I got the impression that his knowledge was not just academic. What kind of place was the capital that someone could have such experience and still be an accepted member of the establishment? Someone with such enticing eyes, and a smile that seemed wasted with me as its only audience. I suppressed that train of thought even as I became aware of its birth. I was trying to get away from trouble not invite more of it.

The transport stopped for the night. Travel after sundown was avoided where possible. No way to recharge batteries dependent on solar panels if we got into trouble and too many hidden dangers on the rough roadways in the dark. I hid in the bedroom as Ibn al Haq, my new friend Moshen, left through the armoured door to see where his men had made camp. A sharp hint of pine in the cool air coming through the open door, a murmur of voices greeting the commander and then silence as Moshen locked the door behind him.

It seemed like a very long wait before the door opened again. To pass the time I checked the contents of my small bag – some changes of clothes, toiletries, oils for my skin and the all important shaving kit. The extra pair of vambraces was a surprise, a present from Maoilios I guessed. Much longer than my first pair of bracers they fit from wrist to elbow, the black leather was soft and I remember the lining was lambskin - he must have started making them as soon as my travel date had come through. I had put them on and was admiring the intricate tool work on them, not crying quietly into the leather, when Moshen returned. As I said, he'd been through this – or something like it - a number of times before me. After a long moment with my back to him he reached out to tousle my hair and pressed a handkerchief into my hand with no comment.

The men had set up a perimeter and were settling in for the night. There had been some grumbling about missing the comfort of the way-stations, nothing that had lasted longer than a look from their senior officer. Moshen would go back out after the men had eaten and make his call, after that he said he would sleep in the main room and leave me in peace in the bedroom. We ate again but neither of us had much of an appetite. Finding the gift had been a sharp reminder that I was further away from home than I had ever been, and my new friend had some worry on his mind.

Finally, as I cleaned up, he told me that he wanted to take photos of me in case he needed to send proof of his news to whoever he was calling. I think it was easier for me to strip than for him to broach the subject. Even so, I resisted the idea of removing the vambraces. Despite his assurances that the detail would not be important compared to the headline news I was concerned what this anonymous someone would think if they saw quite what I'd done to my wrists. We compromised on the smaller cuffs - they covered the worst damage, and wearing them had been enough when the doctor had visited after all.

Suddenly shy, and trying desperately not to imagine what he might be thinking of me, I couldn't look at the camera. Whatever the differences between an out of the way village and the corruption of the capital he must have grown up with the same stories as me. Man was made in God's image; to capture the naked human form was a sin, an insult to the perfection of God. Uncomfortable at asking me to stand so and so he got his evidence then gently covered my nakedness with his cloak, his eyes full of apology for what he had done. He urged me back into the bedroom where I curled up in the folds of the heavy cloth and he disappeared again into the night.

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It had been a long day. I must have been asleep soon after he left me. I certainly didn't hear him return. I woke in the strange bed the next morning but had no recollection of crawling under the sheets. The cloak was neatly folded on a side table. Moshen must have been listening for signs of life



before disturbing me. I was in the shower trying to clear the cobwebs away when he knocked on the door to tell me that breakfast was ready as soon as I was. So we had breakfast. But it was odd. He seemed to have lost some of his assurance from the previous day and wouldn't look me in the eye.

With a curt message relayed to his men Moshen told them to get underway. Once the drive motors had started up he relaxed a little, took off his fatigue jacket and turned towards me. There were bruises running up the side of his neck. Without a word he lifted his shirt and I saw fist sized blooms patterning his ribs, already a sickly blue on his caramel skin. I was concerned in case he had been in a fight with one of his men, did they know what cargo they were carrying?

No, it was worse than that – the fight had been with me. He'd come in to check on me, found me still curled up under his cloak and had tried to wake me enough to get me into the bed. I'd lashed out at him. Apparently my speed and strength had surprised him. It was over so quickly he couldn't even call it a fight, stranger than that he said it seemed to be a purely reflex reaction. I hadn't even opened my eyes as I'd hit him ... and then got into the bed anyway afterwards, still apparently asleep. We had one of those awkward silences. I mean really awkward. I was aghast at what I had done to my friend, he was more than a little embarrassed at being bested by ... well, by whatever I was.

Thankfully it didn't last. He was gracious in accepting the full apology I made on behalf of my unconscious self but I had clearly given him something to ponder.

The morning's conversation was on the politics of the court and had I considered the potential repercussions of the Laird taking a male bride? I must have been thinking along the same lines as Moshen and his mystery confidant. I didn't exist. A male bride? Who would believe such a thing? I'd already learned my lesson in reality. Even if the Laird did take an interest in me there would have to be an official bride, I would just be a shadow in the background. Even as the words were formed they gave me cause to look again at this smooth man with his shoulder length hair free from any wife braid. The thought must have shown on my face and I was gently, but very firmly, told that my thinking was mistaken. The soldier had no wife because he had no time for a wife; the whores in the palace serviced his needs while all his commitment was to the Laird.

The Laird, all life and health to him, was starting to feel his age Moshen said. The senior wives with older sons feared that he would dote on whatever new child came along in his twilight years and felt threatened by the prospect. (*Don't get carried away with the twilight years thing, I'm not into geriatrics, the man was in his forties when I met him and still a force to be reckoned with.*)

Anyway, we played with the notion for a while. The senior wives would not necessarily object to a union that couldn't threaten the status quo. Maybe some of the wives would be relieved that there was someone else to be the target of their master's unmentionable appetites. Moshen Ibn al Haq, dutiful subject of the Laird, had hopes that that was the case – at once confirming the rumours that my father had heard but had first disregarded. The secret call had encouraged his belief that the Laird would be interested in me. My unexpected strength had made him think that I might prove a suitably resilient recipient of the less acceptable desires expressed when the mood took the old man.

The time passed with our idle speculations. Nothing could be certain, however, until all the candidates were presented to Failbhe, the Lion of Alba, our Laird and liege lord. The only thing we could put money on at that point was the uproar that my presence would cause in the seraglio. We were determined to follow the Chamberlain's orders to the letter and would ask for no special treatment. I would be handed over to the Chamberlain and Eilionoir, the Laird's most senior wife, just like all the other candidates. I would be held together in seclusion with them until the time one of us was chosen and then ... and then Moshen assured me that he would make certain I was safe whatever happened.

Sunset. Even though we had made it to better roads as we neared the capital Moshen did not want to risk pushing on in the dark. We stopped for the night. His jacket buttoned up and his head down his men did not seem to notice any difference in him as he checked in with them and reassured them that they would be home to their wives and whores the next day. He'd quietly left his comm. link open one way so I could hear his progress around the transport.

He accepted an invitation to eat with the men so I looked after myself. I got treated to some of the wilder speculation from the soldiers wondering why he was spending so long with this pick up rather than riding with them. His answers about, oh, you know, having to keep an eye on those wild ones from World's End, seemed to satisfy their curiosity and prejudices without saying anything too specific about what he had been doing. Whatever else was said, it seemed to be obvious that the occupant of the vehicle was off limits. A short while after the meal was finished he excused himself

and left them to their suppositions. I heard him whisper that he was closing the link as he was going to make another call.

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In the bedroom I was awake and waiting for his return, planning no surprises for either of us this time. I might not have been, but it seemed that somebody else had got there before me. His face was tense as he sat by me on the bed. He'd been given orders and he didn't look happy about them. Did I trust him? Course I did, how could I not trust him? I wasn't certain that made things any easier for him and he gazed into space, appearing deep in some internal debate.

The jacket came off, then the shirt. He asked me to help him with his boots and socks – we ignored the reason why he might be having trouble reaching down. Fatigues and underwear followed. I looked up at him – all curved contours and smooth living softening an essentially hard body. Apart from his perfect brows and luxuriant tresses he was completely hairless. He said nothing but let me take a good look at him before he stepped through into the shower. I seemed to listen to the hissing water for a long time and then he called me to join him. Knowing how uncomfortable he'd been when he asked if he could photograph me I wondered who could have had the influence to command him to do this.

The shower had not been designed for two people, certainly not two as tall as us. There was no way to stand without touching that dark silky skin. Wordlessly he turned me away from him, held me close against his body and started washing me. Long gentle strokes of his hands, soothing, reassuring, taking his time with my arms, the front of my body, my thighs, then moving on to my balls and the inevitable erection before slipping a hand between us to caress my buttocks and explore that forbidden place. He might not have seemed happy with the idea of what he was doing, but, Jacob's blood, taking his time made it such exquisite torture. I told him to stop. Even as I wanted to grind myself into him I said he didn't have to do this, no need to do something he didn't want to. Orders were orders, it seemed. He was going to carry them out as best he could, no matter how much I protested. I was to arrive at Arthur's Seat a virgin still, he would make certain of that, but so much better educated than before the start of the journey.

I had to tear away from his intense, strange embrace. Not through any sense of virtue you understand but just because it didn't seem right for me to be enjoying it so much. The things he'd asked me about, he meant to do those? No way could I let that happen if he didn't ... if it wasn't something he wanted. It wasn't right. I turned back to demand he stop - and I looked at him. It was all I needed to do. Unlike the doctor he didn't go weak at the knees, he didn't go weak anywhere. Quite the opposite. The shower was off and he backed me out of the small room to land on the bed in a tangle of wet limbs and urgent passion almost before I realised what was happening.

*“Do you remember how much energy you had when you were young? How often you could come with a new lover when you were still Gilbert?”*

It was a night of wonders and discovery. To a body accustomed to studied neglect or painful sublimation his every touch excited responses that I barely recognised and had less chance of restraining. I trusted him utterly and did everything he directed me to without fear or shame, without conscious thought intervening in the purely physical. So many ways to give, and receive, pleasure. Dear God, the man was as good as his word. Frustrating though it was, it was also a night of extreme self-control as he wouldn't allow us to go beyond the final limit that had been set.

In one of our spent silences, with his head resting against my thigh, he admitted to his discomfort at seeing me the night before. How he'd stayed out in the dark after making his call but had been unable to relieve the torment as he discovered urges re-kindled that he'd thought long behind him. However much he'd denied the feeling in himself, he said he'd wanted to hold me as soon as he'd met me. His orders were not difficult because he didn't want to follow them ... but because he'd wanted to too much, and he feared where that might lead.

Eventually we rested. As we fell asleep I heard his sleepy, sated, voice say that if the Laird wouldn't have me then he would damn the shame and would ask for me for himself. He said he didn't know what he felt, he felt alive for the first time, he thought I was an addiction and asked if I was some kind of incubus. I laughed, how could I be an incubus? Incubi slept with women, I must have been a male succubus I said, because all I wanted was the touch of a man.

The morning, and a return to reality, came too soon for both of us. Cursing the alarm ringing at his wrist Moshen dragged his long body out of the bed and tottered into the en-suite. I remember stretching and feeling a delicious ache in my muscles for the first time. I was thinking of the taste of him in my mouth, knowing that I wanted more, when I heard him call out in surprise – he had something astonishing to show me. He looked well, positively glowed with health, too much perhaps compared to the previous day. There were no bruises left, no marks along his neck or down his flank. Even as I looked at him in the harsh light of the small room I thought I saw the last hint of a bite fade from his perfect thigh.

Amazed, we stared at each other. I had been to blame for the bruises and I happily recalled what had led up to the bite - but had I also been responsible for the healing of them? How? So much for us to think about. Not enough time to even begin.

He needed to be presentable and out with his men again before the last, and unfortunately shortest, part of our journey. I tried to talk to him as he showered and dressed. His words of regret at the brief time we had together seemed heartfelt. He wouldn't let me speak of a possible future where we were together, too much to hope for he said, too much to get through first. And then, in his parting kiss before reluctantly leaving me to my own ablutions, he apologised for the harm that might come to me in the name of another's pleasure. His smile was sad as he went to greet his men and shut the door on our brief night together.

It didn't take long to get to our destination. Cocooned from the world I had no idea of the progress we were making, no clue what he had told the Chamberlain to get the transport inside the Laird's private parking garage rather than fetching up in open view. The transport stopped. I remained seated and counted the passage of time, hiding as far back inside the hood of the dress cloak as I could.

Eventually the door opened and my friend introduced the Chamberlain. Thankfully no one else was with them. One at a time, maybe, and we might get away with it. Commanded to rise I did so. With all of me hidden in the cloak I waited until the little man's eyes travelled up to my full height before I pulled the hood back and bowed low in greeting.

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Uproar is a good word. Furore is another one. Now mix them with disbelief, shock and hissed whispers you might have an idea of wake left behind me as I was taken through the corridors of the palace all the way to the seraglio. In a side-room crowded with women and functionaries arguments took place in voices so low they were mostly carried out in facial tics and angry nods. Moshen held his ground; he had done his job, he had gone to World's End and returned with their virgin for the Laird. Whatever was said, however he did it, I was finally ushered into a dormitory set aside for the candidates and a wall of silence as thirteen young women stopped what they were doing to see the new arrival.

Thankfully, Moshen followed me in, carrying my bag and dropping it on one of the empty beds as if a male presence was an everyday occurrence. He introduced me to the group of dumbfounded girls and gave me a tour of the quarters that were to be ours until someone was chosen. I was thankful he'd already told me what to expect and I'd worked on memorising all the girls before we got there. To be honest, even with different hair colours and complexions they all kind of looked the same to me, stacks of ambition but not a lot of character to differentiate them at first meeting.

Moshen couldn't stay, he said, he had been given a last pick up to make. He was certain that I would be safe; my very uniqueness would protect me from the outrage of the court and there was also his mystery contact to consider. He had a parting gift for me - a tightly rolled package had been added to the sparse contents of my bag. It was something that Maoillos had passed to him as I had been saying my goodbyes. So much faith on the part of my father, he'd insisted it was for me to wear at my audience with the Laird. His voice soft, and careful to face away from any of the girls who might be watching us too carefully, Moshen admitted that he had opened the parcel and that, though he didn't know how my father had made his guess, he couldn't agree more on the effect it would have. Our public goodbyes were formal, the real parting had happened that morning.

The girls had arrived, one by one, over the last couple of months as news had gone out and arrangements made. They had been left to work out their own pecking order. Sophia had arrived first from one of the local estates. She acted like the alpha but, following Moshen's information, I caught the eye of the reserved strawberry blond standing behind her as I walked over to them and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. She saw the move and nodded back. Having made appropriate

deference I made my greeting to Sophia, promised I'd be no trouble for them and would keep to myself if it would make them all feel more comfortable.

There was little chance of keeping to myself. The girls, young women – whatever - had been secluded within the palace and declared themselves, as a group, bored with the unglamorous waiting game. Moshen had been the only man they had seen since arriving in the dormitory, his visits the highlight of their stay. Like spoiled children with a new toy I was unwrapped and inspected and played with until they realised I didn't seem to have working parts. Sophia led the exploration of this uncharted territory while the quieter ones held back and watched. Eventually she declared herself convinced that I really had no interest in women, she'd just wanted to make certain I was no wolf.

Amana, the strawberry blond stayed away from the fray and fumble of female hands. Smart girl came over to sit on my bed the next day and quietly complemented me on my self control. Not for my lack of hardness, which she thought was commendable, but for submitting to the ordeal in such a docile manner. She'd seen the outrage flare in my eyes and then be locked away again without even making fists of my hands. A new friend made. It was good to have someone sensible to pass the time with as we waited for the arrival of the final candidate.

The other girls didn't leave me entirely alone. Singly, or as pairs of friends, they would watch me exercise and shyly approach when they thought no one else would notice. Sometimes one would watch me shower. I made sure I spent a lot of time in the shower so any who wanted to could see me. Being polite young ladies it seemed that most of them had never seen a man naked. I didn't hide away, and I didn't make an issue of it. I would not belittle their bashfulness. They were apprehensive, they had questions – though none of them would admit this openly to the group, which seemed to behave as a completely different creature compared to its constituent individuals. I did my best to answer honestly, giving examples drawn from what I'd seen and what Hannah had shared with me. To the shock of the girls from the more restricted backgrounds I explained, as gently as I could, that, yes, it was possible for a man to take another man.

Amana didn't have questions for me. One of the older candidates (I think she was twenty?) she had seen men before, had seen what sex could look like and declared herself disinterested in the whole matter. Always staying one step back, she was the cool head in the dormitory and had done a good job of calming the nerves of the younger and more fearful girls. She hadn't gone with hopes of marrying the Laird but, like me, had been looking for a way from her previous life and hidebound father – a minor noble from the south of our country. I said she was a clever girl, we both knew what she was doing the evening she slipped up and was 'caught' trying to get me in a clinch in the steam room.

Sophia didn't have questions for me. Not that she had any more experience than the other girls, just that she wouldn't admit to ignorance or fears. Bravado or stupidity. I wasn't sure which at the time but it was easy to see that the aggressive, man-eating, swagger was as much of a pose as Amana's manufactured heterosexuality. Convinced I could be no kind of threat to the self-proclaimed prettiest girl in the room Sophia had blanked me out as an automatic also-ran. Fine by me, I don't think I could have got through that time if she'd decided to be my best friend.

Moshen's return was without fanfare, the timing unexpected. The main doors opened onto the room and there he was, this time accompanied by a fleshy brunette. We smiled across the room to each other but I didn't rush over to greet him. It wasn't that I didn't want to, I couldn't. I was lay back on my bed with Amana straddled across my hips, continuing with Hannah's massage regime. She said nothing but her eyes widened at the sudden pressure of my reaction to seeing him again. Coolly, we stayed as we were while I fought to get back to a presentable condition, excessively thankful that Amana was who she was. By the time introductions were over and the brunette had been shown around our quarters I was in control of myself and able to greet my friend without embarrassing either of us.

Nearing the endgame, there was little that could be said in public and our hello was mostly a goodbye with undertones conveyed in a handshake and the tilt of our heads. Amana stopped his retreat as he turned to leave, stretched up to whisper something and planted a long kiss on his surprised lips. Her rejoinder to the shocked onlookers as the door closed behind the flustered aide was that everyone had been thinking it; they might not see him again so why not try it just once? Briefly alone together later that evening she whispered that she had only done it to pass on the message she had felt beneath her.

All the candidates together, it was time to move on to the next stage. The girls fussed over their choice of attire. I finally unrolled the extra package that Moshen had left for me and puzzled over



a muddle of straps and ties until Amana took an interest and worked out how to wear what she called a skirt. I'd never seen anything like it; she said it had roots in ancient Roman armour. Wherever the design had come from it looked more like a strange belt than a skirt to me, but it did have the effect of drawing the eye of everyone in the room.

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Preparations over, one evening we were escorted from our quarters and taken to the audience chamber. The room was busy with the court, all the resident wives and many of the Laird's adult children among the buzzing throng. Voices hushed momentarily as we were settled in place. And then, suddenly, there he was – the Lion of Alba.

Failbhe was a strong man, his flowing grey mane home to many wife braids, all of them with child beads. Whatever the girls had thought at seeing me I could imagine that there was some frantic re-calculation going on when they realised the difference between a slim young buck and this thick-set middle aged man. Even though I was committed to giving myself to the man should I get the opportunity I still had a moment of doubt when I saw him nod a greeting up to the svelte Chamberlain's aide.

What to make of this man? Fourth son of the previous Laird he hadn't been expected to succeed his father. That he had survived his father while his older brothers hadn't had taught him a lesson about ensuring the survival of the line and the importance of maintaining power. The arrival of Eillionoir after passions waned for his first wife marked the change from wastrel to something altogether more focussed. Their union, however, produced only daughters and it had not been long before she encouraged him to start on his quest for other wives and heirs. Now she stood at his side, still tall and graceful, her long golden hair having turned white by degrees, she remained his most senior wife despite the passage of time and the vagaries of his affections.

We stood in two rows, all of us cloaked and hooded, all of us nervous to finally be in the presence of the man who would decide our futures. There was no way he hadn't noticed me, at least half a head taller than the women, but he made no outward comment and observed the form of the audience. In a voice made nervous from fear of what might come next the Chamberlain gave the order and fifteen identical robes fell to the floor. I'll confess, there was a part of me that enjoyed the intake of breath as the court finally saw fourteen young women wearing very little made up of silk and lace, and me in my cingulum skirt and long vambraces – all black leather and steel buckles, hints of forbidden flesh visible between the loose vertical straps making up the body of the skirt.

Strange that, how no one said anything. In the tense air I could almost feel the pressure of eyes flicking from Failbhe to me and back again. My own gaze I tried to keep fixed a short distance ahead of my bare feet. We had been instructed not to look at the Laird unless spoken to. Apart from the reflex glance as he was announced to the room, we were all either cowed or self-controlled enough to keep to our instructions. A laugh finally broke the tension – a deep, rumbling sound – and the room breathed again. The Lion of Alba apparently appreciated some humour in the gift of the virgin from World's End.

The frisson of fear and excitement focussed again in our little group as Failbhe inspected his prospective brides. He spoke to a few girls – low murmurs of conversation lost against the background chatter as the room relaxed – I was aware of his presence moving past me but he did not speak to me and I did not look up at him. Only after he had returned to his dais did I feel myself relax before another wave of apprehension hit, would Moshen be allowed to ask for me?

Maybe he was in a perverse mood to upset the court, to annoy his Chamberlain, or the wives who wanted to control him. Maybe he was just bored with the restrictions of everything that was expected of him. Whatever the reason, the next thing I heard was his clear command to take the boy. The Laird was in the mood for some sport he said, a wife could be picked later. For that night he would use the rare creature that had come from the wilds.

I was led from the room in silence, taken to a suite of rooms and guarded by two distinctly unimpressed brutes until a woman came to prepare me for the night ahead. Something in her eyes and the dark cast of her skin was familiar but I was too wrapped up in myself to continue with the thought. Her manner efficient, she repeated the instructions Moshen had first given me – what the Laird wanted the Laird would have, submit to him and I should make it through the night. After ordering the guards from the room her manner and tone softened. Gently she offered me something to make the night's experience easier. I had to refuse her suggestion. I'd gone into this willingly I

would see it through with a clear mind. She flashed a grim smile – I hoped it was of approval - and wished me luck, leaving me nervously pacing the room.

Time stretched. I began to think that maybe I had overestimated myself in rejecting the offer of narcotics.

Angry voices approached in the corridor, expressions of disapproval at Failbhe's choice of companion, the damage caused by doing such a thing in so public a manner. The voices boomed and were cut off abruptly as the door opened and was slammed in their faces. I knelt before my lord, waves of anger rolling off him, a tempest of violence pent up and needing an outlet. Braced for an attack I risked a look up into his glowering face.

For all the speculation and calculations up to that point there was no conscious decision as I gazed at him. Need came unbidden, as if hard-wired from my core. Submission to the stronger man was just the way I was. And the storm broke. And it was brutal. And yes, I enjoyed it.

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I awoke in the lambent dawn light, Failbhe asleep beside me. I had offered myself up to him without hesitation, a vessel for his pleasure. He had taken me without a word and I found a profound peace in the extremely physical nature of that pleasure. Okay, I was also sore as hell, but somewhere in all the separate aches was a feeling I thought I liked. I lay still and listened to his breathing while I wondered what he thought of the night. Was he pleased with me? Would he want me again or cast me aside?

Suddenly, grey-brown eyes were looking into mine, he was awake and alert in the same instance, rolling and pinning me to the bed with his heavy body. He didn't say anything but stared into me as if searching for answers to unfamiliar questions. Then he was gone, calling through the door for his medic to be brought, disappearing into the bathroom to reappear in a robe to meet them at the doorway. A hard glare kept me in the bed when I attempted to rise.

The same exotic looking woman I'd seen the night before came in response to the summons. I heard him ask her to stay with me, to make sure that I would be fit for his attentions later in the day. Though not entirely certain that I should, I took some consolation from the order. He hadn't finished with me.

Left alone together the woman gave her name as Deborah. She said it like some kind of reward for making it through to the morning. Her experienced hands attended to a number of minor hurts in silence, most of which I couldn't remember getting. An ice-pack was pressed against a cheek - a bruise ...or worse? My nose didn't feel the same, numb, but at least it was still straight. Other than feeling the aches I had no idea what state I was in. Worryingly, she checked me for concussion and that none of my teeth had been loosened. She gestured to me to roll over. Seeing the ragged bites across my shoulders elicited a hiss of censure but no comment as she made sure they were clean. The sharp exhalations continued while she salved the more intimate wounds and confirmed for herself that the bleeding had stopped.

Reassured that there would be no permanent damage Deborah dressed me in a soft, loose, robe. She insisted that I ate while servants replaced the bloodied sheets with fresh ones and nery maids cleaned sprays of scarlet from the wall. She, well, she had clearly tended to a number of the Laird's night-time adventures. I realised that her disapproval was not for me, or what I had done, but in the level of aggression evidenced on my body. In her concerned looks I suddenly realised who she reminded me of, someone who had warned me about the violence but never showed me any himself. I tried to ask her ... but my questions were shushed away as her glance flicked to the door and then back to me.

Time passed slowly, and quietly, as my minder would not be drawn into any conversation and appeared reluctant to look at me more than was necessary. I began to worry about my appearance. Would he want me again if I was so hard to look at? Had I forgotten something important from the previous night?

Later, as muscles started to stiffen, I said I needed a soak and Deborah helped me bathe. She checked my wounds again. This time she was clearly surprised at the speed with which the offenses of the previous night were healing. I'd had years of wounds, it hadn't occurred to me that there was anything unusual in what my body was doing. Not sure of my place I didn't ask her to explain. I didn't feel much like a person just then, more like some anonymous living doll. Maybe it would be different after the Laird acknowledged me. If he acknowledged me.

Drowsy and relaxed after the hot bath I must have dozed off on the bed before I'd even got dressed again. Warm breath in my face and heavy pressure on my chest, newly familiar eyes again inches from my own as I blinked in the sudden awakening. And then gone. For an instant I thought I was having some kind of flashback to the morning. No, there he was, formally dressed again, this time telling the medic to leave us but not to go too far away. I hadn't heard him come into the room. Had they be talking about me as I slept? Maybe so. Maybe she'd told him what she thought of his behaviour. It might take a brave woman to upbraid the Lion of Alba but, somehow, I got the feeling that she had done it before.

Whatever the reason, this time when he turned to me there was no anger in his features. He slowly approached the bed, returned to his position on top of me and gently started to kiss my face. As I opened my mouth to him my body flexed against his, an unconscious movement of yearning, skinny hips writhing up against him, my hardness rubbing up against a matching pressure. He shifted his weight to rest on one arm and looked down at me, questions appearing again somewhere behind his eyes.

I used the opportunity to drag at the buttons of his shirt, to run my hands down his chest and to follow them with my mouth. Kissing, and licking, and biting (ha! softly) I made my way down his wide and hirsute body, gradually reversing our position on the bed so that I ended on top of him. I tugged away his trousers to gorge myself on his thick manhood. I may have been new to the act but I was a quick study and Moshen had been an excellent teacher. Strong hands that had pressed against the back of head abruptly drew me back to eye level as I heard the change in his breathing.

It seemed I had taken him too close, too soon. With an easy movement he rolled me onto my back and knelt between my thighs, reaching out to take a bottle from the side-table. I lay back, simultaneously dreading and needing what I hoped would come next, relieved that this time would be easier as I watched him pour a glistening liquid onto one hand and then anoint himself with it. I spread my legs wider and tilted my hips up towards him as lubricated fingers found the place he wanted, unable to stop the deep groans of pleasure at his penetrating touch.

And the bastard stopped! He just stopped. We were both hard as you can be, I'm quivering with anticipation, desperate for him to do it and he just stopped. Then, *then*, he decides he'll speak to me and he asks me who he is. Trick questions I am not in the mood for at this point. I pant that he's my lord, my lord and master. He asks me who I want to be. I practically scream it at him; I'll be anything he wants me to be so long as he fucking sticks his fucking great cock in me.

Not the politest way of expressing myself. But it was honest, and he seemed to like it. Carried away on lust there was no discomfort as he did what I begged him to do. Starting slowly, he bent over me, teeth raking and biting any skin in range as his thrusting became more forceful. When he came it was an exhilarating thing to feel as I bucked hard against him, and felt my own climax as if triggered by his. Had I cried out the night before? Had he? This time we both did; raw exultations of animal gratification.

Still inside me, and undoubtedly aware of the fluid cooling between our bodies, he cradled my face in his hands and asked me again – who was he? I could only hope that my hoarse answer was the right one; he was Failbhe, my lord and master and, should he wish it, he always would be. In the long pause that followed I saw the tiredness in his eyes, deepening folds in thinning skin - the sure signs of uncompromising age starting to write themselves on his features.

He said nothing but pulled out from me with a sigh. Tender kisses again on my lips, then my neck and down, a gentle touch now where before he had hurt my flesh. The touch of warm breath made my nipples harden and the thing between us stir again. He carried on down, kiss after kiss, until his lips were poised above the sticky mess on my abdomen. Tentatively he tasted it. A cautious first sample of something he had given innumerable times but, according to Moshen, never received. The shamed and stammering apology died on my lips as he lapped at it, slowly at first but with an increasing greed. He wanted more. He demanded more. I was young. I was in a dangerous and exciting situation. And I was really, really turned on. Providing more was not difficult, especially when he dipped his head and took me into his mouth. There was no need for finesse.

When he had enough of me there was not a great deal of time before he had to leave for the promised next audience. But there was time enough. He asked me my name and smiled as he vaguely recollected the origin of it. He said he'd always thought of rivers as female, but maybe it was an appropriate name for me. I saw him refreshed and dressed again, and brushed through his lustrous hair while we discussed the best girl to pick for his bride. He needed to show the people a wedding day, he had promised them one. Of course he had the information given by his Chamberlain,

or, more accurately, from the Chamberlain's aide, but he asked me what my thoughts were after spending time with the other candidates.

There was only so long the supposedly freest man in the land could ignore the chirps from his messages and the increasingly strident knocks at his door so, eventually, he said he had to go. The medic was called for again. Immediately at the door Deborah looked past Failbhe, her face a polite mask until she saw I had suffered no further harm and then she gave us both a relieved smile. The smile was accompanied by a small intake of breath she saw the braid in my hair even as I reached up to undo it. The execution might have been basic and unadorned but the meaning was clear. Whoever was announced at the audience the Laird already had his bride, and it was one that could not exist.

Failbhe's parting command this time was a gentle one - to keep me company, to see that I had anything I needed, and a message of thanks to be conveyed to Deborah's son. My existence may have been a shock to the court, one that some people were coping with better than others. No surprise for the Laird though. He had been looking forward to my arrival, increasingly impatient at the delay imposed by protocol before he could compare the news and images from his soldier with my reality. I said nothing, but I was relieved to find that Failbhe, the old Wolf-Killer himself, had been the secret confidant, the one who could command his soldier in such an intimate manner.

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In the end it seemed an easy thing. I guess that was the difference between Failbhe's position and everyone else's. A bride was picked, a political match that served to strengthen the Laird's influence to the east of the capital. Sophia was thrilled to be the chosen one, so very, very thrilled that it didn't even occur to her to think that something might be unusual in her fiancé's lack of interest in an intimate meeting with her.

The other girls were distributed among the court and nobility according to the Lion's whim. The Chamberlain was surprised at his sudden acquisition of a new bride but could say nothing without risking offence. He was a man in comfortable old age with a wife he had not troubled for many years. He was also a man who was good at his job and who could recognise ability. It was only a matter of time before he realised the value of the very aware and very calculating strawberry blond whose name had been whispered into the Laird's ear.

I was not mentioned.

Though his behaviour was obvious to the inner court none would openly draw attention to the young man who seemed to have taken up residence in the Laird's rooms. I guess it was a case of least said is soonest mended and all that. No one wanted to make an issue of my presence so that forgetting about me would be easier after the embarrassing whim had passed. Some distracted themselves by commenting on a new spring in his step - surely in anticipation of his upcoming nuptials. Only a few, a very close few allowed themselves to see the other changes, the new brightness in his eyes, a tightening in his skin.

One day Deborah told me she had noticed the loss of the tremor that had started Failbhe's left hand the year before. As his personal doctor I knew she wanted to ask me what I'd done to her Laird to cause these changes. I also knew that - as his subject - she could not, would not, dared not ask the question. I pretended ignorance of the matter. As a mother I wasn't certain how she would react to finding out that a similar thing had happened to her son.

The build up was long and the ceremony lavish for the time. A great celebration and affirmation of the power of the Laird - as state events have always been. So much effort put into the display, the pomp was an ideal distraction from the truth. In the weeks immediately before the match Sophia's family strutted and preened their way around the palace, her father so impressed by the match that he gave no thought to the presence of the anonymous hooded figure who sometimes appeared by the Laird's side and was never mentioned by the court. They left shortly after the sham observance, happy and none the wiser.

*"As easy as that?"*

*"Ok, I'm glossing some. Things settled down after the initial shocks. There was no way I was going to be a full-time distraction. Failbhe never stopped visiting his women, on the contrary it was commented that he had regained much of the vigour of his youth. The other wives soon realised the value of my presence as a focus for things they preferred to avoid - the man was not sweetness and light to be with. There was no way I could be a threat to them so most of them were happy to be*



*friendly and we all avoided mentioning what might go on in his private suite. There were ups and downs, of course, but that was only to be expected in such an extended marriage group. Nothing we thought we couldn't handle. Top up your drink?"*

Within the first year that stupid bitch Sophia nearly upset things. She threatened to tell dear Daddy that she was not a true bride, finally outraged that she was passed over for such an ugly, uncivilized and disgusting piece of meat. That was me, in case you wondered. She thought she could easily match anything I could offer the Laird. That she couldn't was a secret she would never be party to. The whining could go on and on some days, and she made no real friends among the women who'd seen the full range of her husband's moods.

She picked the wrong night to make an issue of it. Trade negotiations with Cymraig were dragging; Failbhe was frustrated at the lack of progress, he'd been drinking and it was clear that he wanted to let off steam. The other wives steered clear of him, Sophia did the exact opposite. I don't think I've ever known anyone so misnamed. We might not have been friends, but she really had no clue how bad it could be. Eilionoir and the Chamberlain told me to mind my own business. This powerful pair had decided that it was time for her to realise just how fortunate she had been to have the prestige - and none of the drawbacks - of being a wife to the Lion of Alba.

Weeks passed before she was seen out in public again. In an outrageously successful piece of spin the news was reported that she had suffered a miscarriage and would not be able to have children in the future. Clever trick for a virgin. She was never quite so sure of things after that. It wasn't too long before she took herself off to some convent or other and the rest of us relaxed. Still, a double bonus for her social climbing family, she was a bride *and* a holy woman.

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Someone must have been speaking to the wrong people. It was inevitable, I guess, that word would get back to Elmet and the self-styled High King of the Isles. Whatever the formal relationship with our southern neighbour even Failbhe trod carefully when he caught the attention of Aeldred, his opposite number and leader of the expansionist Angles. Politics was still personal in the Western Isles. A loss of face for Failbhe was a loss of position in the formal dance between the five lands.

It fell out that the Laird hosted a meal for the incoming Angle ambassador. Classed as an informal get-together, the party arriving from Elmet included enough aides, assistants and advisors for each man to be sat opposite a wife of Alba. Though, I should say, by some 'mischance' there was one man too many for the official number of wives then in residence. It would have been such bad form to exclude any member of the delegation, an insult to include someone not in the immediate household. The answer was obvious.

The meal progressed long into the night in a good natured manner. Everyone sat according to rank, Failbhe opposite the ambassador at the far end of the table, his newest wife at his immediate left all the way up to Eilionoir to the right of emissary Omael. We were a unique collection reflecting the diversity of Alba – dark to light, petite to tall. All striking, all beautiful in our different ways. On the opposite side of the table the most junior member from the embassy faced the most senior wife and so on ... up to the bemused senior diplomat doing his best to avoid stating the blindingly obvious as I engaged him in intelligent small talk about this and that. That my presence was such a non-subject caused some confusion among the Angles. I could see that Failbhe was enjoying their unspoken consternation ... but maybe taking my hand in his as servants cleared away the remains of the meal was going a little too far.

Leaning over and kissing me was definitely too much.

As for what I did in return, well ...

The other consorts did a great job of acting as if this was an everyday occurrence but, up to then, we'd worked hard to avoid any physical contact in public. Talk about forcing the issue. Conversation stopped. Omael cleared his throat, a loud and intrusive noise from the far end of the table. He'd heard rumours of the depravity of the Alban court, but had not imagined that Failbhe's weakness would be shown so openly. If the great, fierce Lion of Alba was so far gone as to exhibit such offensive tenderness to a freak like me then what state was his state in?

You may have been wondering how I spent my time when I wasn't being hurt or fucked by my liege.

I studied. I pestered Moshen to take me to the ruins of the fallen past; the long dead things held a fascination for me. I learned to drive. I learned to ride. I visited the seraglio and learned some of the skills of the other wives. They might not have been needed then, but proved useful later. I exercised - countless hours to maintain the slim hard body he liked so much. I also worked to control that reflex for violence that had been such a surprise on my journey to the capital. In the process, and with the assistance of certain military specialists, I discovered and then honed a real talent for combat. A talent that had been successfully kept more of a secret than my existence.

It was an easy thing to respond to the challenge in the man's words. Easy for us to push the right buttons so that this particular freak could demand satisfaction from the best fighter in the group. Not the juniors of the party, they were probably minor scions of a noble house sent out for their first experiences in the barbarian north, nor the soft handed politicians towards my end of the table. As expected, the man who answered our words was non-descript, bland, the perfect type to fit in anywhere, the perfect type to be one of Aeldred's special weapons. Nothing at all like me. He stretched and shook out his limbs, taking up an easy, understated, stance in the space opened up when servants removed the divider to the larger dining room.

He had been clearly sent out with the group as a way of expressing the power of Elmet should the opportunity arise. And, on both sides, this would be a display of power. It was my turn to stand for the weakest of Alba against the aggression of the south.

Upper echelon wives were meant to be dutiful, polite, and - above all - modest in public. They were certainly not meant to strip to the waist to show architecturally sculpted muscles or - and this brought a gasp from the ladies to my side - or a line of scars cut and burned into flesh in an approximation of traditional bridal tattoos. I apologised to my sisters for my shocking nudity, reminding them (even though it was the first time I'd said it) how much I hated it when the staff had to clean blood out of my silks. There were more shocks as I released the seams on my long sheath skirt. The thigh length splits gave me a full range of movement ... and everyone else a good view of strong legs hidden from common sight since that first presentation years earlier.

Every eye followed my barefoot glide to our impromptu arena. I suspected that there was more than the one obvious person watching the sinuous movement of my leather wrapped hips with lust in their heart. Barefoot, yes, most of the time back then. It made me less intimidating, more like a household pet rather than over six feet of an affront to nature. Amazing how you keep going back to some habits.

Now, I like to think that I have never tended to cruelty. Once I had the measure of the man there was no need to draw things out longer than necessary. So, as a display it was certainly decisive. As a way of showing Failbhe's continuing strength it was unquestionable. As an insult to the manhood of Elmet I found it immensely satisfying to leave him gasping on the floor with dislocated joints and broken bones the only reward for all his expertise.

I was barely breathing hard by the time I had returned to stand by my lord's chair. Rapt attention followed my movement as, emboldened by my victory, I bent to his smiling face and returned to our interrupted kiss. Failbhe seemed equally happy to acknowledge his approval in this outrageous manner. No sounds this time from Omael as everyone was treated to a view of Wolf-Killer's wide hands pulling me down to sit in his lap, nails leaving crescents in my upper arms and down my back as he crushed me to him.

Someone needed to take control. Eilionoir, always the most practical and organised of us, called for a litter to be brought for the injured assassin. As ever, Deborah was in attendance - only the best care for those the Laird caused an injury to. Both ladies rose to their role with considerable aplomb, and quite possibly some glee. As if such a demonstration was as common as chatting about the weather the senior wife casually commented to the medic on the force needed to keep me in check while they ensured the poor man was as comfortable as he could be. Deborah concurred in an intimate but clear tone; after all, she was familiar with seeing the damage caused when Failbhe had had his way with me.

Too shaken by the casual way I had demolished their champion, the stage whispers went from female lips to male ears and the Angles left with their tail between their collective legs, wary of gainsaying any of the strong-minded women of Alba. No one would stop them or harm them ... and the formidable paring of wife and personal doctor would see the sacrificial lamb back to the embassy in unimpeachable safety.

And the remaining wives? Once the curious interlopers had been removed the other women thoughtfully, cleverly, nervously - for whatever reason - beat a timely retreat back to their accustomed rooms in the harem. Their exclamations and movements, and the opening and closing of doors, were a minor distraction, events at the periphery of my awareness as I concentrated on satisfying my lord's excitement. Buoyed by alcohol and adrenalin, I was ready to do anything he asked. And what a thing he asked of me as he sighed and lifted my head from his lap. Momentarily, even I was shaken by his request and his suggestion almost took away my ability to answer his desire. But who was I to deny the Lion of Alba his impulses?

For years I had been used as his woman. Whatever his need for my cum and the benefits it seemed to provide I had never been the dominant partner. Bending over the table he presented himself to me, he assured me it was what he wanted, begged me to take him even as I pleased him with my tongue. Like that first time, an instinct took over my actions and fucking him seemed the natural thing after violence. I gave the body beneath me that which it craved even as the controlling ego shuddered in the schizophrenic confusion of physical pleasure and conditioned disgust at such a submission. I tried to be gentle but, really, I was whatever my lord needed me to be, working hard to hold myself back until I just couldn't any more. Struggling with the intensity of my own feelings, trying to give all my attention to his reactions I forgot about where we were and cried out as I exploded inside him.

A shocked voice broke the panting calm that followed as I rested against Failbhe's broad back and we began to recover ourselves. I'd never heard that voice say that particular word in such a way before. In the years I had spent at court I should have guessed. Nothing had been said but I should have known. Of all the people to see the culmination of the Laird's wishes it was my friend Moshen, my most generous teacher, and the word he said was "Father!"

"Oh."

"Indeed. Oh."

Thankfully it was late and there were few people around the private areas of the palace, the servants knew better than to intrude when they were not summoned. Eilionoir had sent word to the Chamberlain as she'd escorted the Angles from the building. The old boy was already in bed. Amana had got the message and, by habit, had brought Moshen with her to ensure that all was well in the dining room. He must have known it could happen, maybe he'd assumed that it had been going on for a while. Still, you know, for him to actually see.

Cursing to herself about the stupidity of men the Chamberlain's young wife ordered the soldier to sit, and scolded me to get dressed even as she attended to our stunned looking lord and helped him restore his dignity. Amana disappointed was not a woman to cross. We did as we were told, then followed her like dutiful children back to the Laird's suite to sort ourselves out in complete privacy.

And so ... and so the first male wife and first female Chamberlain of Alba learned about the Laird's oldest son.

Moshen had been brought up knowing who he was and was comfortable with his position at court. It was such old news that no one ever mentioned it. Moshen had said nothing, ever. Even in the times we were alone we'd never spoken about our situation or our night together. His own mother hadn't said who his father was. And what of Failbhe? He'd ordered his son to teach me but saved the cherry for himself. I thought that I should have felt sickened by the thought ... but I didn't, and that made me feel vaguely sickened with myself.

As far as Amana was concerned the personal detail was not of primary importance in light of the other events of the evening. Like father like son was her terse summary of the situation and she told us to get over ourselves. So we did. It didn't occur to us, Failbhe included, to put up any resistance.

*I told you she was good. Actually, come to think of it, she was very much like Elvira, maybe that's why I never stand a chance when she wants something?*

Eilionoir and Deborah joined us. The medic disappeared briefly with Failbhe, giving me a cool look as they returned. No guesses what she had been checking, but what had he told her? I might have felt more comfortable had I been dismissed, thinking that my fate was being decided rather than

having to take responsibility for it myself. Instead I stayed. The young boy from World's End had gone years before.

Amana gave us all a rundown of the options following on from the night's events. So much for Alba being a male dominated society.

There was no ceremony, no pomp or distraction, but the next day I left the suite with a full wife braid in my hair. With my head held high I walked at the side of my husband. We passed servants and courtiers and eyes widened as they noticed the extra braid in his hair. It was easy to see, proud and alone at his left temple, an equal match to the one I wore, a silent declaration of our relationship. We met Eilionoir at the doors of the audience chamber and entered together. The Laird and his senior wives announced by a Chamberlain numbly following the instructions of the wife he hadn't realised he'd groomed to succeed him.

With no official news reports to note my change of status it suddenly became as if I'd always been there, miraculously visible and accepted overnight ... about seven years after my arrival. Maybe dissenters at court feared what might happen if anything they said was repeated back to Failbhe. Thanks to some subtle prompting from Eilionoir accounts of my demolition of the soldier from Elmet had swept through the palace in the following days. Maybe dissenters feared an ignominious end to their ambitions – who would risk the shame of being beaten by a wife?

I didn't care. It was what it was. I'd become unofficially official. And we had got over ourselves. As soon as I'd been allowed into the seraglio Moshen had told his father what had happened during our night together, and the strange side effect of being with me. He knew that Failbhe shared with no one. His own mother, unable to move on after her affair with Failbhe, was clear evidence of that. He had given up his chance with me for the good of his Laird and never mentioned the bond between them because he'd seen no reason to. I could only respect him for the loyalty he'd shown.

As for what may or may not have happened in private between Failbhe and myself, no one ever asked. It was what it was. And it was a good time.

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The entente with our southern neighbour had been cordiale enough following the affirmation of Failbhe's strength. Omael remained as ambassador. Like all diplomats he was polite when discussing matters with Failbhe, his wives, and the Chamberlain's staff and even extended invitations to the household for events at the Embassy. The boys I had seen at that first meal were also still in residence at the sprawling compound. As I'd guessed they were young nobles and seemed to be having a great time growing up away from the close attention of their own court. Aeldred had made no other move against Alba, surprised perhaps that Failbhe's position still seemed unassailable. But they both knew that it was an old game, one that had been played off and on for centuries for as long as the two countries had existed.

A council was called by Aeldred. Upheavals in the very south had left the Duchy without a clear ruler. Failbhe had been called to Elmet, along with Cymraig's Merlin and the Taosich of Eirenn, to decide on the best course of action. No one would refuse, all the lands had a stake in trying to stop the High King taking over the Duchy. Leaving Eilionoir as regent, supported by Amana and Lysanias, the heir apparent, Failbhe took his party south. Moshen went along to assist the Chamberlain. I was included – along with a few other wives – to support whatever mood took our lord on the journey.

Elmet was a strange place to us. The land was softer than our own but somehow the people were harsher, with their ugly accents and brutal clothes, their utilitarian drabness. They all seemed so small - truculent lumps jealous of my height and speechless at seeing Moshen taller still. I probably do them a disservice. Events cloud my impressions. It was the end of the good times.

There were games within games as the old rivalries vied for position. Eventually the Duchy issue seemed resolved and Cymraig and Eirenn took their leave, Aeldred honoured us by asking Alba to stay for the wedding of one of his sons. We never really considered the possibility that he would resort to actual violence. That would have been like admitting that he couldn't play the game anymore.

When the attack came even I couldn't save my lord. I was quick and strong and very skilled. But efficiency can only go so far against overwhelming odds. I might have been able to protect him from the ravages of time ... but time was something faced one day after another not a suicidal attack



by simultaneous weeks. He was no coward hiding behind his son and his freak of a wife bodyguard, but fought valiantly beside us.

In the end he surrendered. Spattered in the blood of these vile people he ordered me and Moshen to cease the fight and gave himself up to the bastard, fucking, spineless Angles so that our lives would be spared. He made his deal with the devil in exchange for a last call home to his beloved Eilionoir and exile in Europe for his last two defenders. What were we to do? He was our lord and we were sworn to follow him to the end.

He got his call home, but it was before all the High King's court. Facing a screen that made our world seem a million miles away he made his farewells to Eilionoir and reminded Lysanias of his duties. Then, oh the indignity, in view of both courts they cut our hair so it was like stubble on our heads. They stripped me of my kirtle and put me in man's trousers. I did not get to ... I could not say goodbye to a husband as a wife should. I never got to say goodbye. Never. I still feel the guilt.

Moshen held me up, kept me going as the soldiers took us away. I cried. I howled. I would have torn the hair from my head but that had already been taken. We were dumped in the brig of a boat that would take us over the water to the forbidden continent. I raved and beat my head against the walls of the cell. Eventually my body shut down and I slept. I think I would have killed myself with grief otherwise. Moshen watched over me, cleaned me as I slept, kept me safe.

A safe distance away from Elmet a signal was triggered and our lord, beloved husband and father, went to his eternal rest. Aeldred had violated the rules of the game. He had little time to savour his 'victory' over Alba, no time at all to appreciate the consequences of his failure as the dirty bomb hidden behind Failbhe's heart levelled his court, destroyed his bloodline and the core of Angle nobility, and laid the surrounding land to waste for generations to come.

Failbhe understood the game. He gave himself in a feint to ensure the survival of the next Laird. Alba would always endure even though individuals were lost.

*"Don't touch me. No, I'm not ok damn it. Christ! Let me get through this as quick as I can. Fucking men and their stupid fucking games."*

Anyway, the crew came for us. Already paid by the Angles, they had no love for Aeldred's people. We were put ashore in a small non-descript port in the middle of nowhere. I depended utterly on my best friend, my only friend. As I recovered we became the lovers we had wanted to be over a decade before. We were not in love, but we clung to each other for comfort, we were all each other had. His body, so long a stranger to me, became as familiar as my own as we turned to each other and away from the strange new world we had been cast adrift in.

I don't know, chance, bad luck ... just a stupid combination of things put us in a small town outside Paris when it got hit by a stray nuke from the Eternal Fronde. I never even knew which of those mad Gallic bastards had slung it. It wasn't a large warhead, but it was enough to take out the Church he'd gone into to buy supplies. I had to leave the town, couldn't turn back to look for him. People had seen me leave the blast zone apparently unharmed. It would only be a matter of time before the questions started and I would be in danger from their fears. No way could he have survived the blast, the destruction of the building or the radiation. Leaving was a rational decision but I hated myself for doing it. Another lover abandoned. More guilt.

Whatever I had felt before, it was the first time I had been truly alone.

What did I do next? Desolate, I fell back on what I knew and fucked my way across Fortress Europe. Stayed in some places longer than others, but mostly just went from bed to bed and tried to lose myself. Discovered by the salon set in Florence I was passed around like a party favour. In a steady haze of drink and drugs, I didn't care what was done to me. While my body always recovered from the tedious round of harm and damage it was so much more of a struggle to cast off the long ennui that now seemed my only true companion.

I moved on only when someone made the inevitable suggestion of pairing me with a woman. It always happened, just one of those things I guess, and was guaranteed to make me leave wherever I was. I've never had sex with a woman ... or a man who didn't realise he was a woman. I might have got used to being looked at, and even touched if I was off my head, but to do that thing? I always hoped you understood we never had a chance.

Eventually I met a man who reminded me that I was more than just a body to be used. An academic, he was happy to talk to me not just fuck me. He helped resurrect my interest in the past. There was no way I could enrol where he taught, no way could he risk discovery by being caught with me. However much I intrigued him I was, after all, only a dalliance; he would not risk his wife and family for a shallow fling. He gave me something to focus on other than my loss and, when his ardour for me cooled, I left him with fond memories and steered my apparently imperishable flesh and empty heart towards Egypt where he said I would find the birthplace of history.

*“Ok, sorry for that before, I know you meant well. Promise not to shout at you again. We good?”*

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I ended up in Alexandria-next-to-Egypt. A fabled place, gone under the waves years ago but, oh, back then it was a jewel of a city. You ever wondered how I got into the University there? Cheek and a winning smile. I had enough of an education by then to pass the matriculation board interview but I still had to support myself so I did what I could to get money in the most efficient way.

The Gilded Scarab was a club with a notorious reputation for pandering to darker urges, a predictable place for me to gravitate to. No questions asked and I began earning an income in the main bar. Soon after, most of my work was in the private rooms and for the more ... specialised clientele. Men would pay me to dance for them ... and anything else they wanted. It was easy to take the extra money to be had from letting strangers cut me. I wasn't particularly interested in their desires. I just knew that the pain felt good, it stopped me from thinking too much.

When asked I took my turn in the floorshows and became a something of an item. I would sing for them, strip for them, I would tease and excite them and I would give myself up to them. Mostly everyone stuck to unwritten rules of the blood mob, anyone who went too far ... well, I was a big boy and could take care of myself. No one crossed the line more than once. Actually, most who tried didn't manage to get all the way over the line the first time but there was always that undercurrent of excitement that someone might try.

I may have preferred the anonymity of crowd surfing in a darkened room filled with frenzied men but I understood the economics of my position very well. Anyone wanting faked, but dutiful, intimacy with me was charged the exorbitant rates agreed between me and 'Lady Alex', the owner. I saw no one from the club outside its walls. In the daytime world it was as if that place didn't exist. I kept myself to myself and concentrated on my studies. My body was just to make money; no one saw me, no one got me for free.

Oh, Lady Alex, now there was a piece of work. Such a beautiful wo/man. Perfect midnight dark skin, lips like honey, breasts that men wanted to get lost in, legs that went on forever, arse like a peach, biggest cock I ever ... ok, not everyone paid. But s/he was the only one. I knew my place.

The Scarab was within walking distance of the university. I knew that it was likely that there were some staff and students in the fervid audience but had guessed that no one would confess to seeing me there. Such an admission could open the door to things most clients wanted left unsaid – and those with enough money to be regulars also had enough to fear losing it.

I thought little of it one night when I was told that I was wanted immediately after the end of the 'show'. Skin blood slicked from cuts and bites, clothes in shreds, still wearing the various bodily fluids I had acquired on my journey through the crowd, I was taken aback when I saw a man and a woman in the private room. A large amount must have changed hands for a woman to be in the club. I just hoped she knew she wouldn't go beyond watching. The man I'd thought I'd seen before but couldn't quite place - an effete excuse of a man he didn't seem to be a likely partner for the petite, dark skinned, woman giving me a very cool look. Not my problem, they'd paid for me so they'd got me. The man held back, a bundle of nerves and repression, as the woman moved in to give me a close inspection like she was buying livestock. Oddest thing, there I was mostly naked and very male and her first comment was that I had lovely eyes. Surprised me a little, it seemed to have been a long time since anyone had found my face interesting.

That was my introduction to Selma Hawass and her single minded campaign to re-introduce the world to classical artistic ideals. Her offer to me was simple, being a model may not pay as much as the Scarab but there was little risk of injury and the hours were much more civilised.

While we discussed options her companion screwed up his courage to wash me down, fussing and tutting over wounds already healing as he sponged my pale flesh clean. I was marginally distracted as we negotiated fees, a side effect not so much of the man's attempts to fellate me but from the eventual realisation that he had been a pen pusher on the interview panel a couple of years before.

A bargain struck for future employment Selma discreetly withdrew to the shadows, leaving me to casually throw the anonymous faculty member onto the bed and give him the service they had paid for. My name was never used in the Scarab. I made certain he didn't get another look at my face.

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I'd been working for her for some time and we'd settled into a good routine after those initial settling in surprises. You know the kind of thing, Tuesday afternoons were out because I had a history of political theory class, yes I was really a student and, yes, I really was only into men. One day Selma said that there was someone she'd wanted me to meet, an old friend staying with her. He'd turned up on her doorstep and was down after being dumped by his woman. Half starved he wasn't eating; he spent most of his time moping around her place and was starting to get on her girlfriend's nerves. She wanted to try and get him to take an interest in things again, and she wanted to ask him if he'd model with me for a project she had.

Bizarrely, I thought at the time, she was hoping to have us as twins; so much did each of us remind her of the other.

It was yet another gorgeous day in Alexandria. I was modelling for one of the classical revival classes. You know the kind of thing she was into, Greek counterpoise, clean lines of muscle, head down, quite demure really. Butt naked, of course. It was nice and quiet in the studio. I liked it like that, very little hassle from the students and gave me time to catch up on my reading. Two hours of peace, thinking of nothing but the words scrolling up on my handheld.

I got the signal that the class was winding up, threw my clothes on and then ... and then there he was. I'm trying to be cool and just say 'Hi' when I offer him my hand and look him in the eye. It doesn't seem enough to say that it took my breath away to look at him. I don't know how to describe it. Like electricity, a hammer blow, a thunderclap. We shook hands and it was like there was only us, I didn't hear the introductions, didn't hear his name. And the best of it, the very best of it was that he looked as shocked as me. Then he was kissing me. No words. Felt like it went on forever, every nerve on fire like a light filling me and pouring out. Seismic. There you go, like in all the worst romance novels, the earth moved for me.

Eventually we had to break from the kiss. Some vestigial awareness of the outside world perhaps, or just that our lungs were burning from shared breath. Anyway, there I was again in the studio and at first I had no idea what he was saying to me, a whisper of lust in my ear, his cheek bone hard and sharp against mine. He did not see the stunned faces staring at us, Selma amongst them, but he must have been aware of the silence that had built up at his back. Whoever he was, whatever he said, I said yes. I would have agreed to anything to be near him.

No idea what we said, how we got away from the others. I remember running, just running with him. And laughing. I think we went back to Selma's. Wherever. There was a bed and there was us and no one else and ... and it felt so good, sex with this captivating stranger. Yes, we must have been at Selma's, she brought breakfast in to us the next morning. I finally got around to asking him his name. What a coincidence I said, the book I'd been reading in the life class was by historian called Dave Jensson. He agreed, amazing coincidence, he was the historian who'd written it. And then this ethereal, painfully thin, man stopped my questions with his mouth. No power games, no pain, a sharing as easy as being.

At first glance I thought we looked nothing like each other and yet I understood what Selma meant; somehow I had found another part of myself. Once we were together it was obvious we were always fated to meet. If it hadn't been courtesy of Selma there would have been a different place and time, but I am convinced that we would always be drawn together, would always have discovered we loved each other.

And that was what happened. In time, in the silences and pauses, in the gaps when we were apart, and the way we looked at each other when we were together we realised our feelings. His touch made me feel alive again and looking into his endless eyes made me weep for the bliss of being with him. He called me beautiful, he called me a boy. Though from our appearance there didn't seem to be that much between our ages – oh, I must have been about thirty-five by then and decades

off being a boy – sometimes he seemed lifetimes older than me. And sometimes we were both like teenagers fooling around together while the grown-ups were out of the way.

It was easy to give up my solitary apartment and move in with him in Selma's spare rooms. I remembered to ask, one time, why she didn't seem bothered about us taking up space in her home. Such an odd question she thought, most amusing. It might have been her home when I met her but the building had always been Dave's house. He'd invited her to stay a long, long time ago and found no reason to ask her to leave. Wherever he went he liked to know that there was somewhere he could go back to, and their arrangement gave him that security with no ties.

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One day Selma reminded me that she still had plans for us. I still thought he looked like he needed a good feed but she said she could prove that he was back to himself. In a locked cabinet, hidden among the clutter at the back of her private studio, she had sketches and paintings going back over thirty years and more. Some appeared to be studies, hurriedly done in an intense period; others were more thoughtful – all had clearly been done years apart. They all included variations on the same haunting figure. Though his face might not have been visible in every one it was impossible not to recognise the person I'd been waking up with.

She had no answer to my questions why or how. She could only tell me what she knew. Dave had been her friend for a long time, he had even been her lover from time to time ... and he had never seemed to age.

Selma saw things as they were and, on me, she pointed out the gradual reduction of scar tissue as he shared the ecstasy of himself with me. I had always healed fast, too fast compared to others, but my skin always retained the faint trace pain. Now, like some inexorable glacier his love smoothed away the evidence of my past, the most recent hurts the first to be erased. I had seen the effect on Failbhe, on Moshen, on maybe a handful of others in my journey to my new lover's bed. I had never seen it happen to me before.

So. The Gemini. She asked, we posed. I still have some of the initial studies in storage, one day I might show them ... but probably only to a very select audience. Whatever you might have heard about the development of the piece it is probably not as much fun as we had in the making of it. Eventually we admitted it might be better if we all settled down and let her complete her task. Looking at it now it is still a lovely piece of work and, yes, probably better for showing some restraint towards the subject.

*"Excuse me ... you posed for the Hawass Gemini? ... That must have been last century. She's been dead for decades. Are you having me on? You said you'd be honest. I've put up with you not mentioning any dates but come on ... you and Dave posed for the Gemini and you were thirty five?"*

*"No, sorry. You're right to interrupt. That wasn't accurate. There was a delay; we were just having too much fun. All just having too much fun. Truly, that woman would have got so much more finished if she had been just less sociable. By the time it was finished I must have been thirty eight, maybe thirty nine."*

*"..."*

*"You're gaping. It doesn't suit you."*

*"?"*

*"That's better. I'm not lying, I'm not intending to mislead. Mistakes are not deliberate, just the passage of time. A hell of a lot of time. Like I said when you asked me about this, I'm giving you pretty much everything. I trust you to make it anodyne and safe later."*

We posed for the Gemini. By the time it was done I must have been coming to the end of my first masters degree. Dave was doing some lecturing, nothing serious, just ticking over – said he didn't want to be tied down by work. Even back then he didn't seem concerned about money or too bothered by material things. It took me a while to realise it was because he was actually very wealthy. His stay in Alexandria-next-to-Egypt was always meant to be a temporary one he said, just to get his head straight after finding out he had become an 'ex' the day his lady friend in North America had refused to see him. Instead of leaving, he just said he was content to have a bit of fun; he would stay as long as he was enjoying himself.

We were not always gentle with each other as we explored the possibilities of our bodies. He could be so tender but I ... I showed him he could be whatever he wanted with me. I didn't want to lose all of my past; some of it had been good, all of it had made me. After Selma was done with us we worked on my bridal tattoo, re-cutting the outlines, learning how to control the healing reflex to maintain the scars I wanted.

We married. With a heart bursting with love I proposed, down on one knee if you can believe it. I think I was very, very, drunk at the time. We were at a party. It was probably just one of those mad spur of the moment things when I asked and he was surprised enough to say yes. Hand on heart, neither of us has regretted it. People who don't know us don't know.

Time passed in something of a happy fog. We went to parties and events and the opening of envelopes if people invited us. The fashionable, sexy, face of stuffy old academia on the periphery of the art set through our association with Selma. Alexandria-next-to-Egypt became, in turn, Alexandria-under-the-Waves and we all moved to Luxor after losing our home to the rising waters. Both of us joined the faculty at Temple and I was pleased to introduce myself as Dr Plaisir for the first time.

If our work meant we spent time apart we spent time apart. No big deal for us, we were just happy when we were together. Every now and then we took different lovers, sometimes we shared. I knew that Dave had women as well as men. No one ever came between us. To be honest, no one came even close to the experience I had with him, no matter how long we were together. I knew that he felt the same about me. He still does. When the time comes, I hope the girl understands. She's nice. I wouldn't like her to get hurt.

One long quiet summer we spent some months toying with the affections of an accountant. The affair was notable because we finally found out how much money he had and what we could do with it. Cue the Jensson Foundation, first director a rather creative and open minded bean counter. Now, there was a man who landed on his feet - or, maybe I should say, fell to his knees - and ended up set for life.

*"That's it. I had my partner, I had a life and I was happy. I had found my Field of Reeds. What more could there be?"*

*"But it's not everything."*

*"The important things were what made me, not what happened after."*

*"Tell me about Myk, how did he come into your world?"*

*"Why don't you ask him yourself? I know you see enough of him ... ah, course, you don't get round to much meaningful conversation with him do you? Oh, don't worry, and don't ever, ever, regret it. I know you're being good to each other."*

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We were not machines, time moved on. Life is change. It might not always be quick but it does happen. When Selma passed it was a shock. We'd not noticed how old she'd become, how everyone else seemed to have aged around us. Egypt was like that. There was very little sense of the passage of time, and even less when we did not seem to be affected by it. What were the lives of people compare to the houses of eternity? You know, you've fallen under the same spell. The stillness in the temple ruins as the sun rises. The light and the endless sky.

We were fascinated by the relationship between gods and men, the ideas of angels and the intercession of the saints. The notion of the gradual dilution of power from the on high, through the different agencies invented by religion, all the way down to a human level was an interesting one when viewed from the long perspective of the Black Land.

You know some of the things we worked on then. The research is easy enough to find, well, it is since we put it back together. Always, always, we found the pull of the 'other'. The historical development of the political and the secular never seemed to erase the attraction of the irrational and the religious. Millenarianism may still have been an appropriate response to circumstances in the seventeenth century, but the twentieth and twenty-first? All the way up to the Collapse? I was from that mad religious mind set and even I knew that the 'Great Fall' was because of man's irredeemable stupidity not any kind of battle between good and evil.

Anyway, this is just to say that Dave would wander off collecting stories of angels, visitations and miracles in the crumbling wastes of Europe. It got to be a bit of a game. He might be on some dig or other and get news of a miraculous event and be off. Later he would come home with tales of close



calls and credulous peasants and swear that he'd learned his lesson. And we would laugh, we both knew he meant 'until the next time'.

Only one time, he disappeared.

I got one of his usual cryptic messages; he was off to find the Angel of Arkangel. And then nothing. No point going looking for him, he could look after himself. I was confident he would come back when he was ready. I knew he wasn't dead, he couldn't be. He was just gone. I carried on doing what I was doing and made sure I would be his safe haven to return to.

Selma had loved parties. She threw some great ones. Among them would always be one big charity bash each year, the Gods and Monsters Ball. Even after she left us we continued the tradition of the big themed masked ball. Just like Egypt, ever changing, ever the same. Five years – five years! – after he dropped off the planet Dave came back during the Gods and Monsters. Just like that, no warning. The theme that year was Norse mythology. Were you at that one? I went as Heimdall. Honestly, some days you couldn't make up some of the stupid choices I've made.

So. The crowd parted and there he was, large as life, half as thin. Hair black and spiked, ebony clothes hanging off him, skin as pale as death. Absolutely perfect gothic version of the Sandman Loki. Bastard always knew how to get my attention. And he wasn't alone. The creature with him, all blond and tan in furs and armour, he was a stunner. Slightly shorter than us, but stocky, strong, he could have been about our age with his beard shot through with white.

OK, you know it wasn't like I'd completely locked myself away pining for Dave but when I saw him with this ...Viking ... I honestly thought I'd lost him. We left the blond thing with the small crowd of hormones, sorry, women he'd attracted and took our private words out to an empty service corridor.

Feeling threatened – no, let me be honest – feeling old, fat and ugly I was suddenly geared up for a fight. All the worry, all the fear, all the deep-seated insecurities I'd ever ignored were bitter gall in my mouth, ready to be spewed in his face. And he kissed me.

Five years without news from him, five years without his touch – what do you want me to say?

It wasn't pretty, certainly nothing as refined as our reunion here. We weren't particularly gentle with each other. Hell, we knew what we could take and the need was primal. Kissing is a weak word to describe what we did. Eating, yes, devouring would be more accurate. We tore each other's clothes to get at the flesh beneath, the need to be close so overwhelming.

In the gaps for breath in our tempest he begged my forgiveness, swore he could never stop loving me and, finally, told me he'd brought me an angel.

The blond thing – he was for me? Dave had brought me gifts before but never a person. Rather strenuously reassured of my place in his affections I allowed my love to take me back into the main room and introduce me to this 'angel'. What we must have looked like I didn't particularly care, but I wrapped my cloak about me and Dave buttoned up his long coat to stop others seeing the full extent of our dishevelled and bloodied appearance.

We made our way through the tight knot of ladies vying to welcome the newcomer to Luxor. Sat, flanked by Valkyries, he was being fed grapes and sipping mead. The first look up at me made no strong impression on either of us. The second was longer. The third became an outright stare and his handmaidens began to move away, they had the sense to recognise when they had been upstaged. His eyes were the blue of the clear dawn sky; they were young and impossibly old at the same time. There was none of the mad, drunken, passion of meeting my brown eyed love but still I recognised that he was another like us.

And this time, in my ear, I heard the words whispered to me; this was the Angel of Arkangel, an angel who had lost his wings. Whatever the magic between me and Dave, it hadn't been the same between him and the Viking. He'd brought the boy back to me he said, to see if I could complete him.

It was amazing. Just when I thought my heart was full there was room for more. Two became three. Should have become three, but things didn't quite work out. I should have had him that first night but time ... oh we thought we had endless time, and I needed Dave so much, what difference if I took time to get to know this new god first. Heimdall? I've never been more wrong.

I can't tell you what happened to Myk, that's his story, not mine. But it happened and we were all left with the consequences.

Dave did what he did to help him recover. I was kept out of it; he said it would be better, easier for me in the long run, if I wasn't involved. And, physically, he got better ... but it was like

something had died inside him. He wouldn't let either of us near him. All the hopes, all the joy and the happily ever after were crushed out of us. It wasn't good. No surprise, Dave blamed himself. Eventually he left. He couldn't take seeing the pain in those dawn sky eyes.

I made my promise to the boy. He knows I'll never leave him, so I wait. I've not cut my hair since then, another part of my early past that is with us every day. The rest you know and I don't need to say it. It's been such a long time. Now that Dave is back again ... who knows? We have other people to consider now. A different mix may take us to a different outcome. I can only hope.

*"That's enough. Like I said, you want more of that you try asking Myk. If he can talk about it it might a sign that he is getting over it. Actually, does Myk know how we used to know each other in Luxor ... before you became Gielen?"*

*"I've never wanted to bring up the past with him, either of our pasts. Anyway, the friend who paid for the change paid for a very, very good surgeon and excellent gene therapy. There's nothing left of the man I was, I saw no reason to worry Myk with the thought that I wasn't born a woman. In this city there's only ever been me and the special friend who knows. Ahh, you won't say?"*

*"It's not my place. Don't get me wrong, I know how you felt about me at the time, but you do make a stunning woman ... much better than the man you were trying to be. The state I got to ... I think I would have only hurt you and there's been far too much of that in my life. I was pleased to see you arrive here and it does my old heart good to see you happy with Elvira. What you have been getting up to with Myk – well, consenting adults and all that."*

*"You don't mind?"*

*"Gielen, I told you, it's not my place. The three of you together, the two of you together ... what difference does it make? He is not mine until he decides he wants to be. Even then I would not deny him his other pleasures if he wants them. No matter what happens I will love him for as long as I draw breath. Same as Dave."*

*"How can you be so calm about it?"*

*"I'm not always like this. You know what I've been like in the past. But, eventually, I guess you just get a different perspective once you accept you're not human."*

*"..."*

*"You're doing the gaping thing again. Did I miss that out? The thing that Dave had seen when we first met, the thing I didn't believe at first. Obvious once you know. Time has side-stepped around us. Different, special, separate. Take me at my word, whatever we look like, wherever we came from, we are not the same as you. Give yourself some time to think it over and come back to me with questions later. Kill the recording."*