She/I - Crossing the Threshold

A collection of early drafts that remain well suited to the story as it is currently conceived.

pages ∙ words

*A beginning is a shattered mind’s way of escaping from the uncertainty between dreaming and dying.*

Naked awareness. She could not remember anything at first. Memory did not exist. Nothing seemed to exist. She had no points of reference. Oblivion engulfed her, marred only by her own awareness of it. It was a familiar silence. She understood—for lack of a better word—though there was nothing to understand. It was barely enough to bring her back from the edge. In lieu of anything else, that glimmering awareness absorbed her. The idea of herself. Focused, a single naked thought. Alone.

You are not alone.

The enshrouding darkness reverberated to that intruding thought. I tried to look but I had not realized yet that there was nothing to look *at*. Suddenly it was vitally important to regain the thread of my last rational thought. I flailed desperately for a measureless eternity but the only points of reference I could find was the hard presence which had projected its thought within me. I became aware then of the limit of my understanding and I was terrified.

I don’t understand! my entire being cried out. The explosion of emotion expended in that outburst drained me to the core. I could feel what little understanding I had turning to ash as the flare was absorbed by the unknown.

You are dying. The tendril of foreign thought breathed on the ember of my soul. I felt a quickening as the threat implications penetrated and became part of my dwindling consciousness. Why? I demanded of the universe. What did I do wrong? Why can’t I remember anything? A rush of passion filled me and extended my existence in anticipation of the answer.

Does it matter why? the voice probed.

I responded to the touch like a caress. A velvet tongue savoring a fleeting echo of spice and sweetness. My being vibrated as the image unfolded and devoured me, extending my being into a vivid sensual reality. The resolution collapsed as I tried to gear my attention to capture the thread. I almost touched the forgotten life on the other side of oblivion. I fell away from it hungry. This impulse was far stronger. I could suddenly feel the aching of my insides. The pulling of a desire as ancient as the ocean. Longing and pain.

A ghost shadow of flesh aching for the unimaginable. Confusion. I could not remember the reality of hunger. I felt the starvation of the mind. I craved sensation. All that there was to feel however, was the strange presence that seemingly held me between its lips. Please, I begged from some unknown depth. I projected all I was into the sweeping embrace of the Other. What madness is this? The voice queried. Even as it recoiled, its whispering filled the thread of my being with hints and echoes of contact. The interferrence strumming across the naked thread of my soul and awakening the fire within. I felt the stirring of my spirit. I felt the reunion of my shredded will with my ruined mind. You are dying! The Other shouted through me. There is nothing to come back to but pain. Not even a shell. You are carnage, it declared projecting rage, shock and sorrow mixed in with satisfaction.

Parts of me absorbed this report and cringed. The horror, the mental agony I felt at the idea that whatever life was, I had gathered my self to confront only the worst possible aspect of it. And yet, I could not comprehend any other possability. My understanding, my being, was dedicated to living. To existing. I could not wrap my self around the concept “not to be”. I want to feel... whatever there is to feel. I cannot turn away. I cannot recall the magnitude of desparation and anguish that was in my mental voice, all I could feel was need.

An awareness—instant and eternal—floated naked against oblivion. Awareness without conception in which the angels and demons of thought flared without birth or passage. An unbounded and formless shadow to swallow light without reflection. A dragon. A darkness dancing. An endless caress. A silent shade of dreaming, streaming in and over and through a sea of dragons. Selfless in their one and many shades of oblivion. Each possessing, and yet unable to possess, that glittering truth about which each has coiled.

An idea—a sense of self. A dragon knows this in a language that needs no expressing. It leaps and devours that brilliant star only to be devoured. It becomes the shadow of its own light. A mote of consciousness stirred from the ashes of its own oblivion. Newborn in this rare translation, the spark flies through what was once a sea of dragons.

Penetrating coils reduced to strands of silk. Gossamer sheets of tangled cobwebs that settle and cling to trap an ephemeral awareness. The growing weight of weave becoming sensation. A body; taunting a still waking mind with an understanding that transcended expression.

A truth. A secret.

Listless thoughts drifted, as always, toward this revelation. The idea was its own explanation, and yet it threatened to escape its own comprehension. This confusion knotted into a kind of pain; a vain struggle to find a word that language lacked. *There* was a mystery. While words beckoned to translate, and thus harness this *world* that sensation described, the absence of one word proved daunting.

*I remember this,* she realized. This conscious thought slipping her free of the seductive embrace of dreams. She lay on the shore of unconscious and tried to remember the meaning of her confusion. So sought, the sense of it escaped her. Of its own accord, her mind fetched itself even further back. Trying to capture her vast waking revelation in the pathetic grip of words.

In this, too, they failed her; reducing the visions to dust.

A quiet despair fluttered within her. Was there nothing she understood? A temptation—as wordless as the understanding that had eluded her—tried to lure her back to the depths she had abandoned. But though her questing mind had not captured that enlightenment, it did return to her with a prize that needed no explanation. She smiled to herself, as her senses—her flesh—fought for her attention. She had remembered herself.

Aes Eden.

Eden's smile broadened—from dreams she had been delivered into the embrace of another. Little surprise, then, that her body had a stronger claim on her than dreams. The heat of this other body captured her imagination. Through closed eyes, Eden could almost see her through that tacit perception. She was Aes Amadea; of that there could be no question. Lying cheek to cheek, Eden stretched her full length and still Amadea's toes exceeded her reach. Her body was pleasantly solid; her skin was taut and healthy, its texture silken. Her temperature was almost feverish. Her muscles firm and richly toned. The body of an active individual. Eden cuddled up against her. Amadea remained still. Reaching beyond the limits of her own mind she brushed the thread of Amadea's submerged awareness. Images came into her mind—disjointed, fleeting. Alluring. Their pull drawing her under.

So Eden opened her eyes.

Muted light seeped through the draped windows. The heavy down comforter pressed her and Amadea's heat back down on them. Eden sat up and the cover slid from her shoulder to bunch up in her lap. A mischievous glint sparked in her eye, and she slid powerfully from the bed, dragging away the comforter—the only covering they had needed. It slid fluidly off of her and pooled on the hardwood floor unnoticed. Turning triumphantly, to see if this maneuver had been enough to stir Amadea, she happened to catch a glimpse of herself in the picture mirror on the wall.

Eden confronted an unprecedented being.

Her hair, long and sheer, seemed darker than black. Devouring the light. Her complexion was smooth and flawless; tinted like smoked glass. Her face was strong and yet delicate. Accented by sculptured cheekbones and jawline, a slender neck, sharp nose, and full mouth. Her eyes were stunning; deep blue under boyish eyebrows. Her frame was quite distinctively female—slender torso, tapered waist, and wide hips. And as flat-chested as any male. Her flesh, firm and unexpectedly resilient. To all casual appearances, a young woman; perhaps a bit on the athletic side. Only five foot eight, and slender—not unusually tall for a woman, and yet not unusually short for a man.

But while her loins spoke not of manhood, neither did they prove a woman's.

*A true enigma,* she thought. All at once, she understood her waking confusion. There was indeed a lack in language where understanding her body was concerned. An ommission which eternally denied Eden the convenience of being either *he* or *she.* However, this "neither-he-or-she" had already submited to a little lie. The one that appearance suggested.

It was a natural deception that could not deceive Aes Eden. People unwittingly thought of *her* as a female. Until they saw her in her full glory. Then they, like herself, struggled pointlessly with the innaccuracy of *she* and the absence of *what she really was.* It had been a long time since she had really thought about it. Whatever she may be, she had an idea of what she was not. She had chosen to call herself an androgyne, rather than a hermaphrodite. Synthesis, rather than composite.

It was disturbing to have come so unexpectedly back to this trial of her childhood. As she stared into the mirror, she recalled little moments which had impressed her difference upon her. The day she discovered that no other daughter shared the secret of her hidden sex. The embarrasing attempts to hide her uniqueness lest others know her for a freak. Or worse, seek to remove that which made a lie of her girlhood. Though she knew that such a thing might end her exile, it would make her less than what she truly was. For, having perservered until adolescence, she found herself able to take—yet despaired of ever finding—a lover. So why now, when that fear had proved a phantom, should this old malady take hold?

Remembering herself, she returned her attention to Amadea, who seemed to be happily oblivious to the prank. Eden sighed pleasantly and shrugged. Slinking back over to the bed, Eden gazed lovingly at Amadea. And remembered how very much she preferred to call her An. She pronounced it very specifically with a denounced—almost swallowed "n". Saying that name made Eden feel the way An herself made her feel. Eden devoured her with her eyes.

An ageless young woman. Long of limb and fair complected. Her pillow was draped by flowing red and gold hair—framing her face as well. Her face suggested and eclipsed a simple heart shaped frame—the slight difference between demure and predatorial beauty. Which was An, in a word. This was not a voluptuous woman. Her beauty was that of elegant simplicity. An animal beauty. Unable to resist, Eden began to explore with other senses as well. With a caress, confirming the sculpture of her face—strong, high cheekbones. A well turned jaw. Tracing the delicate line to the rounded point of her chin. Fingers descending along her slender neck—and lips faintly brushed under her chin. She arched under Eden and Eden pulled back to regard her.

Her face was still vacant with dreams.

Emotions rose in Eden as her eyes slid down her lover's body. Desire and fascination feeding each other. She could spend the rest of her life exploring the most common or intimate details that An embodied. Even now, she could not stop her hands from caressing; even as she noticed that An's mouth had opened seductively—her breathing become fast and shallow. She could not help but note familiar details as her attention was drawn to An's mouth. Her teeth were white, sharp and straight, with pronounced canines.

A peculiar ache was eating at Eden. Slipping very close, she caressed An with her full body—ending with her nose under An's ear and fully embracing her. Because she could not help it, Eden slid on top of An. Her body read the softness of the flesh and the hardness of the bones within it under her weight. Very gently, she held open An's mouth with hers and sucked the air out of her lungs. Then exhaling, gave their breath back to An. Eden controlled their breathing—feeling An's body raise and fall in complement to her's—until she began to get dizzy. Increasing the rhythm until she had An breathing at a waking pace. An rose from the depths of sleep starved for air and drunk on the breath they had shared. Opening her eyes, she found herself gazing deeply into Eden's. With the caresses, the weight upon her and the kiss of breath, An awoke fully aroused. Her arms clasped Eden's body and she responded fully to the kiss.

Desperate for air, they parted—gasping hungrily for breath as they passionately continued to steal each other's mouths for kisses. The taste of sleep was sour in their mouths, but rush of breath as they gasped with their mouths open and close was sweet. Eden pulled her legs up and braced her knees on either side of An's waist—pulling herself up on all fours over An. An's arms slid down Eden's back, her hands stroking their way down to Eden's thighs—hooking her thumbs in the bend of hip and thigh and then gripping Eden there hungrily. Trying to pull Eden back down on her.

Eden held An's head possessively, pulling it up to her and exploring An's face with her lips. Forehead, cheekbones, eyes, jaw, and down to her neck, where she bit and licked provocatively. An arched under Eden and pressed her belly against Eden's—driven by that nameless hunger that consumes the flesh. The appetite that Eden's use of her was meant to evoke.

Grabbing her by the neck and forcing her head down into the pillow, Eden pinned her and turned her attention to tormenting the sensitive spots at the base of her neck, her collarbones, and breasts. Tantalizing the aureoles, but denying them her attentions. Eden wanted her to moan, but An swallowed her torment. Eden shifted herself to one side. She planted her other hand in An's midsection, pushing An down into the mattress. An struggled just enough to keep Eden's hold intense—while Eden virtually savaged her breasts and ribs. Grazing the skin stretched over her ribs; enough to bruise, enough to be felt in the bones—but not enough to break the skin.

An began to break. Gasping and moaning. Her voice begging and crying of its own accord. Eden's hand slid down to her groin, pressing down. She needed a grip on the delicate flesh to control her, knowing An to rely more on the use of leverage over strength. Transfixing her with the hold on her pubic arch. The hand around her throat holding her firmly, but not cutting off her breath. Except if she tried to pull away.

An felt like she was being devoured. Images streamed into her mind, still vividly close to dreaming. Her hands were running up and down Eden's body. One hand going behind Eden's neck; trying to pull, trying to push, but never deciding between encouraging and discouraging the androgyne's attention. The other hand found its way to Eden's crotch.

Under the skin, An felt the muscles of Eden's abdomen tighten. The heel of her hand braced on the androgyne's pubic arch. The down tickled her palms and the heat seemed intoxicating. Pinned down, An was at the extent of her reach, keeping her hand up between Eden's legs. Exploring. In her way, taunting the sensitive flesh. Lightly applying pressure along the seam, tickling. Sliding her finger along and slightly parting the coital lips. Dipping toward the secret of Eden's gender.

A secret An was fully aware of.

Not—in the vernacular—a cunt. Pushing into her lover's body with a finger, she succeeded in distracting Eden. Her grip slakened, and An thrust herself upright. Wrestling Eden to her back, An turned her attention to—in their own slang—her coit (with a silent "t"). The sensation impaled Eden. Within her abdomen a pulling thrill caught her in the grip of Tantalus.

An's finger was probing and stroking. Deceiving the androgyne's body. Arousing that which lay within her to assume its female aspect. In a flash she was desperate for an embrace which An could not provide. Writhing with frustration, but unable to find release under the taunting seduction of An's fingers. When she had Eden begging, she finally stopped and leaned back away from her. Smiling deviously.

Wound up around whetted lust, they locked in a frenzied glare for a minute before Eden smiled, saying reverberantly, "Good morning An."

An laughed pleasantly. Leaning forward, and rising to hands and knees, she advanced toward the androgyne. In a husky voice queried, "Now that you have my undivided attention, was there something you wanted from me, or do you just get off disturbing my dreams?" The mock severity in her voice was belied by the amorous glint in her eye.

Eden lay back, smiling. An prowled forward, then above Eden.

*What do you want?* An asked, silently.

*Open up to me. Let's step up,* Came the eerie reply.

An hunched down and tasted Eden's mouth. In a part of her mind, the walls between them came down. Like two hands coming together, they both shared the sensation of mouth on mouth, two tongues seeking for each other. From the coil in Eden's abdomen, another tongue emerged, assuming the male aspect of her gender. Their psychic embrace eclipsed the embrace of their flesh. Awareness of their own bodies became only an attribute of their personalities, aware of each other's realm of sensation. Between them, the world was redefined. Each caress an accent in both minds. Each ache and pleasure read and each gesture executed with total conviction. No doubts. No searching. Playing the elusive senses of their bodies like an instrument. And their music—intimately private—was indescribable.

Their intercourse embedded in an intercourse of thought, they fenced ideas and impressions. Their rapport teaching them how to fit together in ways a lifetime of searching could not. In ways two bodies can never quite fit together. The object, not sex, was pure sensation. A song for the sense of touch.

The penetration of each other's minds realized as a penetration of the unknowable depths of each other's bodies. The friction between them a thought that, alone, neither could hope to know. Sharing this, they found the patience to stretch the envelope of sensation. The deliberation to build up wave upon wave of devestating erotic pulses—each a brush with the knife of orgasm. Tempted. Then recoiling. Returning to the hunger. Then resumed. Reaching repeatedly a higher intensity until it became too much. Too fast. Losing themselves as with one mind seeking that final stab beyond endurance. And even when their bodies were spent and vibrating with the echoes of orgasm, they held each other tight. Even as they became able to sort out who was who—even as the passion died—they remained open to one another.

They spoke no words, nor thought no thoughts of love.

Their possession of one another spoke far more than they, themselves, ever could.

Quietly, they explored each other and theirselves. They were a polarized mind bereft of boundries. A shared consciousness bound between two distinct wills. Seamlessly mated together in the most perfect embrace, they were for the moment a single being torn between a pair of bodies woefully unable to express what they had become. Aes. Union. As they had always been, but for the moment awake. Aware. And Aes was fascinated at the structure of their bodies, and moved by the passion evoked from them. Removed from the notion of a physical self, Aes regarded its bodies as incomprehensibly rare objects. A pair of lenses through which the diune will refracted; split by the immortal sparks that were the ultimate selves of An and Eden. Each realizing that they were seeing each other—seeing themselves through each other's eyes. Each other's feelings.

They lay together until they had managed to overcome being enraptured with one another. They swapped a secret smile. It was for rapture of the moment of reunion that they inevitably suffered the agony of severing their bond. But they would not sever it again so soon. They turned their attention to dealing with the world. The demands of nature their love making had postponed. A task requiring them to keep the functions of each body distinct in the unity of mind they held. Fortunately, they had taken pains to master this long before. They showered together. Another sensual experience, but one they chose not to succumb to. Returning to their bed, they considered the day ahead.

It was still early. Perhaps an hour remained until the time they usually broke fast. Together, they left the room and wandered sculpted stone corridors until they found a sunny terrace where they could bathe in the warm morning sun and let the wind dry their hair.

Conversation was absent in favor of sharing their impressions of the morning's details. They sat facing one another, and thus shared between them a full three hundred and sixty degree view of the world. It was second nature for them to make themselves part of each other's scenery—unconsciously making their bodies into objects for each other's scenic composition. Here, as in most parts of the estate, the distinction of indoors and outdoors was utterly obscure. The area where they lived was the only true indoors—nestled within the embrace of terraces like this one, and gardens and waterways. Even within that sheltered space, however, there were exceptions. Atriums, balconies and alcoves open to the sky or the wilderness accented many of the rooms and corridors. All adding a dimension to their vision. The morning light cut sideways through branches, leaves and vines; high lighting marble columns and their selves. Red and gold glints struck from An's hair. Her flesh glowing semi-translucently like mother of pearl and Eden's like smoked quartz. Blue sky lured their eyes through gold and pink tinted banners and banks of clouds. The world seemed an enrapturing art to which they added the finishing touch—a focus—with their own presence. Beholders and the beheld.

They drank deeply of a sense of peace that could be described as transcendental. So beautiful that it actually hurt. And that, they relished too.

*It's almost too incredible to be real,* thought An poignantly.

"But, it is too perfect to be unreal," replied Eden in a soft voice. Neither the content, nor the detail of what they were looking at was incongruous. The scenery was exactly what it always was. It was the mood that was so unique—though a completely natural mood for the limits of weather and climate. Eden added objectively, "And yet, what we are really seeing that is so sublime is what we are bringing out of ourselves to *see* it." They both realized how true that was, and held the realization with awe and sudden sobriety. They continued to watch the clouds roll by for a while. Casually, one or the other would stretch languorously. Knowing the pangs of attraction these innocent movements caused, neither could say if they were not particularly deliberate. In wordless agreement, they stood up and walked out of the courtyard.

Rhys strolled the open corridor, basking in provocative thoughts. He was a sandy haired young man, on whom the suggestion of a smile was almost enough to balance the features of a much too serious face. His thoughts were warmly inspired by the memory of a pleasantly unexpected reward from his morning chores. Normally, weeding was a dull pain, but then the muses had come and sat on the terrace in full view of where he was hunkered down to the pavestone. Young men had not been designed to resist the lure of naked young women on display. At that moment, Rhys had not been any exception. But what mattered was that they could not see *him* so easily. He had been suitably concealed by the typically immense, intricate web of open and closed spaces that characterized the vast estate. Which was a blessing to Rhys. He would not have dared to stare so lustfully at them if there was even a ghost of a chance that they would know. Confronted by the scene they had presented, he could not have done otherwise.

When they had left without even a glance in his direction he had almost shouted in triumph. As he thought about it now he nearly grinned. It was not a crime to admire. Not even an insult. But desire... Desire was dangerous. Desire could lead to disasterous actions. As unfettered and open as they were, it was only a reflection of the amount of trust they had in the tenders. No matter how much his hormones might boil at such a sight, as a tender he dared not compromise that trust. Even with muse charges as self possessed and strong minded as these two.

But at this moment, he was quite guilty of desire. It burned him so strongly he had to stop walking for a moment as the memory of that first close courted disaster came. It was barely a year ago, when he had come as a supplicant to join the tenders. That was when he had first seen them. Not knowing who they were, he had made his own assumptions; based on what he observed in passing. Quiet, solicitous beauties who moved with the most sensual grace, exuding the mind-body harmony only possible in a trained exotic. Surely, he had thought, they were here to provide pleasure for the many attendants, leaders and scholars endlessly drawn to the unparallelled archival library of the estate. What a shock to have learned otherwise! If he hadn't been so besotted he might have noticed the signs. If their unsisterly affection had not vexed him so much he might have understood it.

But having seen so clearly the bond of intimacy between them, he only became more determined to impose himself on them; as any young man had the right to demand of an exotic. Fortunately for him, his interest was noticed by his sponsor. Just as he was about to approach them the tender had pulled him aside and explained the truth to him.

The instant he heard their true status he had cooled off fearfully. He could hardly question the veracity of a tender's word, but he still could not believe it. To think that they were muses. However unlikely, they had attained the inattainable goal. All at once he had understood their true role here. They served a living function that was neither political or religious. Simply by being who they were they could not help but be an inspiration to others. Bluntly put, they were a priceless addition to the archive. A living resource to be employed in the advancement of the race. Protected by their unique authority—an absolute possession of their own selves.

Above all things, a tender was sworn never to shatter that illusion. Rhys, in his turn had been sworn to secrecy on the spot that night. Then and there forbidden to seek the favors of the two most precious sources of human enlightenment kept at the estate. So abruptly initiated, he had received his instructions. As far as local custom was concerned, An and Eden belonged to the estate. To them had been given the gates of Xanadau; because as muses it would never have occurred to them to want it. No doubt they would have rejected it if they had known what it would mean. Common belief held that they were destined to inherit all of this, but among the tenders it was decreed that they were no more than an essential part of the collection. Prisoners who must never know that they were imprisoned.

And so they were marked. They were there to be used but not by the tenders.

Rhys fumed at the turn in his musing. He had understood the implications of their unwitting role and had found it little to his liking. In any other circumstances a muse was not untouchable. If he had not become a tender he could have freely sought their favors for as long as his motives were honest. By being a tender he was gradually succombing to the attitude that the muses were property not people. He had had a friend in his lust for the pair who had fallen prey to thoughts of possession. Before he had died he had warned him with an old maxim: *Xasaen laq a'eu, diasaen laq u'a /willingly given, is the embrace of life; unwillingly given, is the embrace of death/.* He had not understood it until the next morning when An had dragged his body before the majordomo. She had repeated his friend's words to the tenders, and then stepped into a fountain to wash off the blood of the unexplained encounter.

Eden had stepped into the water with An and washed her back. They stared cooly at the gathered tenders who all averted their eyes. Rhys was the last to look away, but not before their predatorial gaze had peirced him. The message had been clear enough. They were as bold as brass and they knew it. They could do what they wanted because they damn well knew how to take care of themselves. Only a great fool could forget even in lust that a muse had attained the ultimate name; and knew twice as many ways to kill as they did to pleasure.

Rhys had hoped never to make such a mistake. He had fostered that special blindness to the muses that was a tender's protection against their animal magnitism. And it had failed him this morning. In spite of his fear he had welcomed for once the opportunity to appreciate and savour. Now that he had admitted his personal demon, he was at a loss over what to do about it.

Absorbed by this inner conflict, he crouched down and snagged a weed out of the flagstones without consciously taking note of the young woman who turned toward him from an intersecting passageway. She, however, noticed him well enough. She slipped right over to him and tapped his shoulder to get his attention. Rhys took in the white clad legs with their dancer's feet, and scanned up her body as his eyes rose with the rest of him. And finally locked on those all too familiar opalescent grey eyes. A red eyebrow quirked up as he stammered. His own sense of guilt took rule of his thoughts. All at once he knew that she had seen him watching her. She had gone and dressed and hunted him down here near the fallow gardens.

*"Je ni rue, vou neistani,"* he uttered in shock.

She looked at him blankly for a moment. *Aedanau* is a strange language, and at instances such as this it can be misleading. Interpreted in the polite form, she quickly noted, it was an accusation. She glared at him. In her mind she had performed an analysis something like...

*Je ni rue /I am undone/ derived from:*

*Je /polite self referent; in slang, a selfless form indicating abasement/*

*ni /transitive verb, "you are negating"/*

*rue /infinitive, "the doing of"/*

*vou neistani /no doubt dead because of you/ derived from:*

*vou /absolute, "oblivion", result of the arguement/*

*neistani /conjugated verb, "you do not forgive", cause of arguement/*

Considering that the accusation was unprovoked, it made no sense to her. Obviously, this was not a polite form. The prankish part of her mind illuminated a more fitting slang translation, */fuck me, I'm not getting out of this one/.* She grabbed him by the shoulders and stared intently into his eyes. He flinched but didn't try to pull away. What she saw compelled her to go with the irreverent form, which made her laugh knowingly. He stared at her and pulled away almost fearfully. She released him and grinned rackishly. *"Xan ni aido vou cleu'ai,"* she chided, answering in slang */There is no escape when you dig the grave yourself/.*

*"Eizo no ai?"* he asked, meaning */Then you know?/*.

*"Niyeizo,"* she replied off-handedly. */I know nothing/*.

Rhys stared open mouthed for a second before restoring his composure. Realizing that his secret guilt was safe he nodded and declared, *"Je qu aneistais ue." /I owe you an apology/.*

She shrugged, *"Ni. Alu qu sai loq na." /Forget it. Just watch your mouth/.* After this little exchange, she didn't want to entrust him with the errand she had approached him to perform. Instead, she simply waved him off and turned into a garden that had been allowed to grow wild where she could think. Rhys gave a thankful bow and left her to her own devices.

Aes An/Eden strolled unhurredly in the shadow of the manor. The seat of the many concentric shells that defined the heart of the estate was in itself a formidable mansion controlling access to the subterranian archives. Normally they were compelled to descend into that labyrinth shortly after breakfast. As yet they were not sure if today should follow that pattern. Even as the thought surfaced, they agreed to put off that decision until after they ate. Neither was yet in a mood for such serious thoughts. They entertained little else in their role as *meu xan,* muses. Deep illuminating thought was their stock and trade. But passion and unfettered whimsy was their crucial need. Though they were left to their own devices to guard their sanity, they had no power over the stress brought on them by those who scryed inspiration through them. In many ways their eccentric behavior was fueled by the strange byproducts of being used as they were. To open up unreservedly, sparing nothing in themselves, they allowed their user to take everything they could give to awaken that other's potential. Sometimes all they unveiled were ideas. Often enough they had been bared to the soul. As much as it managed to surprise them, they had yet to disappoint their benefactors. Never failed an expectation. Which for some reason seemed no more than to be true to themselves.

Odd fact, that. They had spent half of their days in the world striving to meet the standards of human excellence, and the other half inexplicably beyond them. As Ideals, they had known where they stood in the world. Not so now. Indeed, the significance of their role in society was one which defied explanation. Simply put, each was an embodiment of what this culture valued most highly in their race. *Meu xan,* the ultimate name made them totally autonomous. It was called the last marrage. *Meu xan* was married to itself.

Not even an Ideal could hold power over them. Ever watchful leaders and protectors of the race; the learned, the wise and the nobel. The Ideals. The most exalted followers of the Threefold Path. The Path was the life of humanity and there was no station outside of it; though there was one station above it. What An and Eden had become. Where the rest of humanity looked for answers. Neither of them really knew when they had exceeded the Path and the Ideals. They had been tested though and found worthy. They had acheived enlightenment to become members of the only community of perfect equals. The difference being that they were so young. The youngest ever. A pair of prodigals, and thus carefully watched with the greatest expectation.

An and Eden knew this, of course.

Even now when they desperately wished to, they could not forget it. Every tender they saw was a silent reminder of it. Especially Rhys, who watched more openly than the rest. They were not surprised in the least when he literally gaped at them as he crossed their path. But when he spoke, it was a shock.

*"Nai anai, qu te rue'ai?"* he asked in distress.

Could they have heard him right? */Why and why must you torment me like this?/* Their minds combined in a whirl of amazement. An turned a hard eye on him. His face was a pallid mask, and his use of the imperitive "qu" was unprecedented. In a flash his guard was back up, and his face unreadable. They paused from their internal communion and acknowledged him. Looking An straight in the eye, he genuflected and apologized for interrupting their thoughts. This immediately intrigued her. Despite his recovery, she could tell that something had shaken him to the core. Something he immediately blamed on her. She had seen this symptom in users who had ventured too far into her being. But never had it been unprovoked. Though she had never expected it, there was no reason why a tender could not be snapped open over prolonged exposure to her or Eden. She immediately responded to his need. She stepped over to him and cupped his face in her hands. Probing gently she explored his potential. But as soon as her flesh contacted his, his spirit recoiled. Gravely wounded.

He broke into a cold sweat drenching her hands. *My God, he's terrified of me! What did he see?* She enfolded him in her arms feeling him go rigid. Eden pulled her away from him and examined him closely, he seemed to relax a bit, but the fear didn't go away. In intimate counsel, they agreed that he had experienced a first order trauma. For the sake of his sanity they had to get to the root of the shock and help him reconcile whatever it was with his grasp of reality. If poor Rhys had known what they stood ready to offer them, he would have rejoiced. Unwitting, he failed to grasp the possability when An began her inquiry. *"Keistia daima, Rhys,"* she paused to collect her wits, *"iyeizo no ai ue'rue?"* It was a leading question. */How do I help, Rhys, I do not know what I have done?/*

He remembered the advice—*Alu qu sai loq na*—and thought very carefully. He dared not convict himself. He was positive that they were disciplining him, and the lesson had to be discretion. That had to be it, he nodded to himself. Show that you have learned discretion. *"/Then you do not remember speaking to me but a moment ago in the fallow garden; the lower one?/"* he asked carefully.

She looked at him inscrutibly. He was staring at her naked body, figuring the time it would have to take to run ahead of him, undress and contrive to aproach casually from the opposite direction to her rooms. It was not possible. He would have seen *something*. He had followed the shortest route, wasting no time, to this spot. Under his breath he lamented, *"Qu daima? Nai ni athael, leth il nade?"* Hearing this, An looked away. She could not tell him how. She had not spoken with him as he said, nor did she ellude him, undress and contrive to confront him in a way that was impossible.

In fact, it made no sense at all.

Eden corrected her. What he assumed made no sense and certainly had not happened. But what he described had. There was another explanation, one which did not involve her after all. An immediately identified the scenario. Mistaken identity. Following the first rule, she had to look for a mundane explanation. In this case there was an immediate suspicion. She consulted with Eden and found they had reached the same conclusion. She nodded with sweet and sour disappointment. While not a sign of awakened potential in Rhys, this confrontation had revealed unexpected good news. Smiling radiantly she answered Rhys, *"/No, I'm sorry. That was not me you spoke to, but one of our guests, who has just arrived./"*

Rhys looked confused. It suddenly dawned on him that his guilty conscience had reamed him again. *But how?* He was not able to voice his dismay without seeming to argue or contradict An. After a moment of intense thought, he completed the chain of logic parallel to An's own analysis. The woman had not been Amadea. *"/Then you know this person?/"*

*"/There is only one person it can be, and yes, she does bear an uncanny resemblance,/"* An answered, anticipating the course of his inquiry. *"/I am sure this will make more sense if we can find our lady guest and see about making proper arrangements for her stay, yes?/"*

This was an entirely reasonable suggestion to Rhys, and he competently employed himself in escorting An and Eden in the direction from which he had come. Feeling that they had answered the puzzle, they allowed the incident to drop from their minds. Unfortunately, it was all Rhys could think about. Too late, he saw the opportunity he had missed. Though he did not know it, he had been scarred, and lest he confided in An or Eden, it would not heal. He merely marveled at the nerve of An and Eden walking beside him. It neither crossed their minds, nor did it much matter to them, that they were going to confront their guest in the nude.

[Knowing who they were about to receive in their company, it really wasn't even an issue. This turn of events stirred an excitement in the two of them that completely altered their expectation for the day or so ahead. But they revealed their pleasure and anticipation only in the knowing smiles on their faces and the gleam in their eyes. They neared the fallow garden, one of many open areas—a subtle transition from indoor to outdoor space defined erratically by columns—that had been relieved from cultivation to grow wild.]

[Rhys looked around for her, the intrepid guest who had wandered from where he had left her to delve curiously deeper into the undergrowth. Eden caught An's eye, and their smiles broadened with delight. The young woman seemed completely oblivious to them, but without warning turned to face them and waved; her expression was distant but amused. To say that she bore an uncanny resemblance to An was an understatement. They were physically so identical that it took one a moment to realize that the differences in personality made them immeasurably distinct. Avonjea, or Av, appeared to be a nineteen year old, exotic young woman; with a mane of red hair, prismatic grey eyes—wont to shift according to her moods, and mother of pearl complexion. Her lithe frame, sculpted by a lifetime of athletic and acrobatic activity held a perfect balance between strength and suppleness. Muscles that would be sharply defined in motion now lay smooth and unobtrusive, at rest. Only enough bodyfat to suggest youth and femininity of contour lay under her taut skin. She unabashedly wore a skin tight body glove of pristine white that sheathed her from the tips of fingers and toes to the top of her elegant throat. Light weight, and breathable, on her it was literally a second skin.]

Taking in An and Eden's state of undress, Avonjea tilted her head to the side and opened in English, "Did I come at a bad time?" Her voice was a few notes deeper than An's and had a strong timbre.

"Not at all," replied Eden, non chalantly.

"Never. I'm glad to see you again," asserted An warmly. She stepped into the garden and quickly found a perch on a stone table dividing the more internal from the more external space. "I have missed you, Avonjea," she added, with unexpected feeling.

A shadow passed through Avonjea's expression, and in a strange voice, she replied, "Yeah, I've missed me too." Then she smiled self consciously, dismissing the jaded comment, "I would have sent word, if I could, but you know how it is with me. I get here when I can, otherwise my movements are generally unpredictable. Of course, this time I don't have any obligations to drag me away any time soon."

"You're not just passing through, then?" asked Eden.

"No. I am here specifically to visit. In fact, I was sort of hoping you could put me up for a while," she explained, a little sheepishly.

An looked at Eden inscrutably. "Well, how long?" Eden asked encouragingly.

Avonjea ran one hand through her hair, pulling it back from her face. It had a darker, more lustrous red to it. Thick and perhaps a bit wild. "Well," Av said, after a few seconds, "as long as you two want me around, I guess." She looked An in the eye, and An could see that there was a lot meant in that look. There was something hurt and angry in Av's eyes. It suddenly occurred to An that Av was here because she didn't really have anywhere else to go. She had gone through an extreme change since An had seen her last.

Eden—still wholly attuned to An—picked up on her musing and silently acknowledged Av's request. An looked at Rhys and smiled conspiratorially. He wore a strange expression, unable to comprehend the metallic sounds of their alien language. "If you leave it up to us, Av, we might just decide to keep you here forever," An threatened mockingly.

"I love this place. It always feels like *home,*" Avonjea commented languorously.

"Well then, welcome home," purred Amadea, embracing her physical reflection warmly.

Avonjea sat among the columns of an expansive arcade, waiting for An and Eden to dress and join her for breakfast. Since she honestly could not fathom how long it had been since her last meal, she had responded to the invitation with delight. But, though she had hoped that the company of these kindred spirits would destract her from her troubled mind, even this slight isolation set her brooding. It was not possible to be here without an awareness why she was. Or dwell on the terrible severing of her past and its obligations. Behind a placid face seethed an anguish at her dismal abdication of responsibility. It did not salve her conscience any to admit that to remain where, and what, she was would have been even more a torture. She willed her thoughts to turn. This was but the smallest part of her wound. Yet, though she had passed several years, it remained as fresh as the moment it peirced her.

She was here because she *had* to heal. Because without her friends' help she might never heal.

But then, that is why she brooded. Deep inside, she knew that in order for their care to heal her, they would no doubt have to learn of what had happened to her and what she had consequently done. And so, she was miserable. Miserable with that anticipation; even though she was delighted beyond words to be here. Ironic.

With a sigh, she accepted the armor of her sense of humor, and quietly laughed at herself.

Her hosts arrived to this laughter, and were not too dull to recognise the bitter self mocking ring it carried. An raised an eyebrow, and set her teeth with the intent to unearth the cause for such a black marr in the heart of her dear friend. With the grace of familiarity, the trio gathered for a light breakfast of new bread and various fresh fruits. Their conversation was light; much lighter for Avonjea's polite reluctance to participate.

An and Eden pretended ignorance of the mood long enough to ensure a pleasant meal, but as they relaxed over a cup of coffee, An pinned down her friend with a severe look. Av considered herself well warned and resigned herself to an interrogation.

"It must be pretty bad," was all she said.

The remark so subtly cut through her defenses, that Av responded without the slightest consideration. "He killed me," she mewed. The voice was her pain, and the words were an immediate fact, though they had not found utterance in the years she had borne that wound.

Despite the incongruity of Av's words, their ring of truth had impresssed the pair. It was an admission that raised very interesting questions. Questions too difficult to ask bluntly.

Eden graced her with a conspiritorial grin. "Well, maybe it is not so bad as we feared. You survived it," she averred.

Av returned a stricken look, "I'm not so sure I have."

"Can you tell us about it?"

Av's face drained as she sought for the words to express what she had endured. She struggled so hard with it she began to tremble. Eden gazed into her eyes and for an instant glimpsed beyond the veil of consciousness. *A dragon in the infinte coil. The star of day flying above. Even as the dragon watched, the brilliant sun slipped into the embrace of shadow. A shadow stretching across the vast to fall upon the dragon. A caress and the dragon's flesh began to unravel and slough off. Devouring darkness feasted on the proud beast, tearing asunder that noble coil. A fleshy mantle blown away as easily as flame from a wick. And with the quenching of the sun itself, in all that darkness only one spark remained. The gleam in the slain dragon's eye. And in the brilliance cast from that infinitessimal point stretched a shadow that encompassed the entire dragon sea. One great dragon in which the others dwelt.*

Eden jerked spasmodically, drawing an alarmed glance from An.

"What?" she begged.

But Eden now wore the same mute stare as Av.

"Well then, *who?"* An cried, turning to her twin.

Av met her eye and said in a distant voice, "Sivai."

A chorus of silence rose up.

This was not a light name to pass. An mused darkly, *Indeed. He could very well kill her and leave her living to remember. The question is, why?* Eden heard the thought and turned to her with an unvoiced question. "Sivai," An reminded her, "is a god. The aspect you know of as the Devourer."

A small cough, beyond the capacity of a human throat, caught their attention. Snapping around their eyes fell on the vacancy of Avonjea's chair. The memory brought up by this short exchanged had proved too much for the girl to bear. Eden leapt from her seat only to be caught by An's hand.

"No. She'll be back. Let her find her composure," she advised. "Besides, we have another guest to attend to soon."

Eden stared at her, and then wondered how she could have forgotten.

"Welcome, MIchael," Eden greeted their guest and peer with a warm hug. The three of them stood on the grand steps of the East Gate. Below them the train of riders that had escourted Michael to the estate were turning his meager belongings over to one of the tenders and cinching up to continue their journey. They would return along the retreat road back to the highway. From there they would be a half days train from the town of teachers' archives, or a days train from the city of leaders. Feeling the warm touch of Eden, Michael regretted what he had been sent here to do. He stepped out of Eden's embrace and into An's.

"It is good to see you again," she sighed into his ear. "How long has it been?"

He grinned and drew back enough to include both of them in his gaze, "Only a couple of weeks." He patted her on the shoulders and then extended his right arm to encircle Eden's shoulders as well. Together, they finished ascending the steps and passed through the gate while he continued in his friendly musing, "Before that almost a month. But I have been fortunate. I have been able to resolve my affairs to allow myself more frequent visits to this retreat."

"Well, glad we are to hear it," Eden volunteered, aware that An shared her delight at the prospect of having more time to share with Michael. The interest he had shown in participating in their studies and research had been very encouraging. Especially so, with what he could already demonstrate of his dedication, "You have been progressing magnificently in your study of English."

"Thank you," he said with a wink. He concealed a sudden disquiet. There were certain things that had begun to fester in the minds of the local council of leaders, and which had lead to his being sent here to investigate. The council refused to accept the existence of the English language. What these two chose to call the English language was more widely known of as the Mystery language. So, one of the things he had to investigate was the truth behind their mastery of the Mystery language and the reason for inventing the verbal form they called English. He did not like the job he was given, but he would rather have it himself than leave it in the hands of An and Eden's enemies. He hoped that he would be able to win their complete confidence and convince them to share the truth about themselves.

He doubted that the council would hurt them, but if they proved that these two had deceived the people they would be stripped of their names. They would be cast out of the retreat. He chided himself for thinking that he could be here for even instant without being reminded of his obligation. Unhappy that it had come up, he still couldnot pass up such an opening.

"I don't have to tell you what an effect it has had on everyone, your knack with the Mystery language. Anyone who has any hope of attaining an Ideal will have to study with you eventually. But being able to speak it, it was something people could never even dream of until you came along. A day does not go by that you don't hear someone wondering how you ever devised it," he remarked.

An gave him an odd look. Then innocent, stating, "Why, we didn't devise it."

"So you've said, everytime someone asked you," he confirmed. The group rounded a corner and he addeded, "This troubles our people. They come to other muses like myself wondering where you could have learned it." He shrugged, "You can imagine how frustrating this is for us. There are so few who know of it and not even a handful who speak it. Learned from you, for the most part. So, all we can answer is that you learned it on your own somehow. There is no other explanation. No honest explanation," he clarified.

"Nonesense. We learned it from..." An began guilelessly, only to be interrupted by Eden's prudent:

"...we were children. Wherever it was we came from originally, that is the language they spoke. That was the language we learned to read. The Mystery language is simply the language of some other people," which reasserted the puzzle of an older question. Michael resisted the urge to groan. Too fast. This was simply going too fast. He had been picked to do this becasue he knew the two of them so well. They had given him extensive accounts of who they had said they were and where they came from. He knew that one of the biggest questions their enemies had was where they came from and why. He had not expected to have to ask them about that until they had started to trust him. They didn't even know yet that they shouldn't trust him. They didn't know that he was here to find out if their enemies should destroy them. He couldn't just come right out and tell them. He had to find the answer to this important question without giving himself away. He could simply follow the lead of the conversation or try to get back to it later. But the odds were that if they were liable to slip and give him the truth he had to push now when their guard was down.

Michael tried to keep his manor conversational as he pressed, "Well, naturally, the Mystery language had to belong to *someone* at one time or other. That is not in question. It is just that people thought it was a dead language. It's been around for how long? No, what seems strange is the idea that there is anyone alive who still uses it. The fact that no known race has ever been found speaking it. People who want to believe that you picked it up from some lost tribe don't know where this tribe is. Is there some conspiracy? Some family that has kept the language alive in secret for millenia? You can't tell us. Not if you don't know where you came from," he argued in their defense. "I mean, what do you say when they come to you and ask where you came from?"

An and Eden shared a look. They had given several answers to this question; each true in its own right, and never well accepted. An played spokesman this time, stating casually, "We cannot say."

"Why not?" he asked, the way someone does to fit an answer to support his arguement.

"Because there is no way to credit it," Eden countered his quick retort.

Here was a chance to play it much the way he would naturally. Michael smiled with friendly adversity, still aiming for more of an answer, "What do you mean?" They just looked at him. He set up a situation for them, conscious of how close to the truth it was. "Say it was me asking. We are having a conversation about our childhoods and I asked where you were born. Who were your parents. I've pretty much asked where you come from. What kind of answer would you try and give me?"

"Come on, Michael" An laughed, "We know you. You will not abide unsupportable statements or claims," she accused. He raised a dissenting eyebrow and she stared it back down. He gave her a hurt look, and she relented. "We were scarcely five years old when we were found, orphaned" she reminded. "What we remember from before then seems to be completely alien. We cannot support the theories of our origins, so we must maintain that our origins are lost," she explained, logically.

"Well, yes," he had to admit. Whatever they thought about their origins, they had some reason to believe that people would find them facetious. From what he had heard about it from reports by others, he had to agree, "So I have heard."

"Besides, what does it matter the origins of our English?" Eden dismissed, "It is enough that it is a language that we know and that it is comprehensible to any who bother to learn it."

Michael got her point. He knew well enough that it worked. He was willing to believe that they had been taught the language, rather than somehow contriving to make it up. There was enough on record about the two of them since they had been found. To fulfill his commission, he would have to learn as much as he could about their first five years. About the people they remembered, the places they saw. if he could figure out what had happened back then, it was possible to find out who it was who abandoned them and establish the existence of a people who mainteined a living version of the Mystery language. "Fair enough" he surrendered. They walked on a bit longer in silence. Soon enough they arrived at the Grand Atrium Terrace, and found themselves seats in a crescent lounge. This recessed couch, like numerous others, overlooked the biggest of the inner gardens of the retreat. While they got comfortable, a tender came by and asked if they wanted anything, offering drinks. An selected a few for them, which the tender left before excusing herself.

Eden sensed An's thoughts turning toward their other guest and revived the conversation. "So, what brings you this morning?" she asked with a turn toward Michael.

"Why to visit you, no other reason," he said with a sketched bow. Technically, it was the truth. It was very bad to lie to a muse, because most could read people too well. No doubt, that was why he had been given this task. While most people could honestly claim to come visiting the two of them in the same way, few of them could get away with talking about their personal histories.

"Well, with a quote like that, I suspect you might have a little interest in perusing our library," An charged with friendly accusation.

He deined this with a casual shake of the head, but took interest in the topic. "If it had not been for that library, I would scarce have mastered English," he announced, deftly returning to thrust of his earlier interrogation. Yes, the Library. That too figured into this little indictment. In fact if it hadn't been for the library, the mystery language wouldn't really matter much. "So, tell me, how did you two react when you discovered the existence of such a vast collection of books in a language which only the two of you can understand like a native?"

As one, the pair greeted this with a suspicious humor. Confering silently with each other they realized what Michael was doing. He was interrogating them. With practiced naivity, An played along, to see if he was aware of the slip he had made. "We were delighted. Both of us were Exotics at the time. We had only had each other to talk to in our childhood tongue, and we weren't that good at it. We only remembered enough of it to figure out the rest, once we discovered the library." She recalled those days, specifically how they had begun, "It was an accident that one of us happened to stumble across one of the books taken from this library and read it. It was such a find! We got together and studied it like a survival manual. The only link to our past we had found besides each other. When we were found reading it, it caused a commotion. At first someone tried to suggest that we only pretended to read, until we deciphered what we read. Then they asked how we came to know how to read this language and we confessed that we learned to read it a few years after we learned to speak it.

"Which shocked our elders," An emphasized.

"They could hardly believe that the nonsense tongue we had spoken when we were found was the very same one no one had ever learned to speak," Eden inserted. "One considered arcane, and known of only by the most studied scholars. There was quite an uproar. The scholars could not believe our story was entirely true. They tried to claim that someone who had studied the Mystery language must have contrived to make up the pronunciations and teach it to us. Even though there was no proof to support this. We didn't know then what it meant. We didn't know about the library here; that it had always been here."

"That was what inspired us to join the Way of Mind, even though we were still initiates of the Way of Body. It allowed us to join the reasearchers here, even though we were still children. We were as much a find to the library as the library was to us," Av continued. "You know about the library, how people have long attempted to decipher the contents of the books. They had made excellent progress over the ages. That's why people have understood the English language as a written language for ages."

He interjected, "Yes, and until the two of you came along, it remained an unspeakable language. That was why they chose you," he said, alluding to their investment here upon becoming muses. "Of course, you are too modest to say how the two of you outstripped every scholar in the study and translation of the archive. You became the highest authority and almost overnight began the transformation of our own language; creating concepts to express the endless secrets that never translated before. I don't think there is a branch of society that you haven't reformed. Science, medicine, politics, war, nature; this library held secrets that have elluded people for generations. Why, if you weren't muses, you would be the two most powerful people alive," he pronounced, suddenly realizing why they had the enemies they did. It was so obvious. Even as mere muses, they had more influece over individual people that the government of councils.

"No doubt, that frightens some people," Eden observed, observing the reaction Michael had failed to hide. She had known that this would happen one day, and she was thankful that it had come in the person of Michael. "I don't doubt that one of these days one of the monor councils, or even the government of councils will send someone in here to kill us in our sleep," she predicted cheerfully, "Of course I'm sure youu already know this, don't you Michael?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Why? Well, you're an intelligent man, Michael, surely you are smart enough to have seen it," Av said, catching his eyes.

"No, I mean, why would they come to kill you? Don't you think that they would try and determine if you were some kind of threat first?" he argued.

"That's what I thought," she said slyly. He was practically mesmerized by her gaze. Too late, he realized his mistake. Especially as she finished. "What is it you are trying to get out of us?" Totally disarmed, he couldn't answer. They had figured him out and he hadn't learned a single useful thing. Except that they were dangerously perceptive. "You are a strange one, Michael," An murmured forgivingly. "If you have such suspicions about us, why not cross examine us plainly?"

Michael straightened and shrugged, "Because I'm not entirely sure what it is that I'm trying to determine about you," he uttered honestly. He didn't have any of his own prejudices about them, except fondness. He was only supposed to find out who they really were and what they were really there for. He had to admit that they were ridiculous questions to ask of any muse. But now that it was started, now that he had asked those questions, he realized that he did have doubts.

"Then tell us about your suspicions."

"I suspect that there are things about who you two really are and where you come from that you are not telling me," he confesssed. In spite of himself, he drew about him the childhood armor of uncertainty. In an instant it had anchored itself down to his soul.

An sighed, "Can we tell you what we aren't sure about ourselves?"

Michael caught the troubled glint in her eye, and stammered, "Of course not. However, I feel that you are more sure about yourselves than you ever let on. How else could you have attained the ultimate name?" There was something dark and forboding about having his doubts about their origins attached to their name status.

An nodded. "Some things are easy for one to understand personally that are impossible to explain to another."

Michael knew the premise as well as they, but challenged, "Like?"

An's eyebrows drew together in a frown. It went against her nature to deny an answer to someone who really wanted it, "Like waking up in the world one morning to find that it no longer resembled the one you remembered from the night before."

"Both of you?" he asked pointedly.

"Each of us," Eden submitted, aware that their solidarity was a big point of contention.

Which he confirmed, with, "How did you come to meet each other?"

"We woke up together" An said in a small voice, looking away.

"Say, you're not siblings, are you?" he demanded edgily, feeling a sudden twist of unpleasantness. It was an unworthy impulse, considering the intimate moments they had shared. The momentary thought of incest did cast an averse pallor over those memories. Threatening to turn against his affection for them. If he could have thought about it, he might wonder what else dark in himself he had embraced with his old armor. But for the moment, he was a man who had regained prejudice.

Which was brought up short as Eden denied, "I doubt it. We had never seen each other before that moment."

"But you both spoke the same language."

"Yes, thank God," An declared. "If we hadn't had that in common, we might have believed that we had been insane. To remember a world, a life that suddenly seemed nonexistent..." she began to confess.

But he interrupted, "You think the world could have changed somehow? Or did you just imagine or dream that the world had changed so much?" he modified, with a kind of accusation.

"Both of us?" Eden challenged. "With the same delusion?" she dismissed the implication with a delicate snort. Michael gave her a disbelieving look.

An intercepted it, saying, "Well, there is the trap of logic. What do you do when the tool you use to justify the notion of a sane world tries to show you something insane?" He turned to her with a mute look. So, she answered her own question, "Look at the facts and then ask that question" she directed.

"The facts?" he mumbled, unconvinced.

Eden scooted next to him and counted off, "What record is there of either of our existence prior to the age of five? What explanation is there for our common language and experience? How is it that we were found here in this very retreat and no one saw us delivered or arriving on our own? These are the questions you asked us. How much of an answer do you have then?"

He absorbed this and replied, honestly, "I do not know." But, he picked up the implication that they really were trying to help him understand, as much as simply giving him an answer to his basic question. "Where in the world do you *think* you are from?" he asked, realizing that there was still something vital missing.

"That's just it, we don't think we are *from* this world," Eden revealed in a gentle tone.

That was imposible, Michael felt, but he couldn't say that. If he told that to the council thay would laugh at him for being played for a fool. Still, for the moment he tried to consider the notion, asking in dismay, "But, how can you prove that?"

An shook her head with a potent sigh. "But we're not talking about proving this," she averred. "We are talking about what we understand that you perhaps might not," she reminded. "There is nothing to prove or disprove. The question is whether we are willing to accept the possibilities."

He returned a skeptical glare.

"To try to prove anything is a waste of time," she declared. "The only thing that matters is if there are any consequences. How much time have have people wasted trying to prove the existence of gods? If a god exists, and actually did anything we would ever notice, it would still not be enough proof for people. But that is an extreme example, and I don't mean to get off the topic," she realized, as she remembered that this culture had not possessed the concept of gods until she and Eden had explained it to them. "I only said it to make a point."

"Which is?"

"When we think about what we don't understand we tend to clutch desperately to what we are comfortable with," she advanced with a shrug.

If not for the fact that this observation was being applied to him, he might have seen the truth of it. But at the moment, he resisted it, "Isn't that an exaggeration?" he argued, "How can anyone understand something if they don't hold on to what they already know for reference?"

An gave him a solomn nod, as Eden watched her with a pleased expression. "Therein lies the catch," she explained. "If what you already believe is pitted against the unknown, whatever you learn is bound to change your beliefs. So there comes that irrational fear upon entering the unknown that if you allow your belief to be changed then you might not be able to escape the unknown."

"Perhaps," he edged, beginning to feel lectured. "So, what is the other side of this point you are trying to make?" he asked, knowing how the two of them worked.

"Thinking requires perspective," Eden offered. "It is the same point, really. Turn it inside out. The less perspective you have the more disturbing it is to really think about what you don't understand."

"I don't see the difference," he complained with a shaking of his head. "Perspective is just another way of saying *belief.*"

"Not hardly," An said, with wide eyes. "Perspective is what you are. It defeats the fear of the unknown because like you it is designed to grow and evolve. It feeds on the unknown. But, with growth comes growing pains." Michael sat back, and decided that this had become a debate, with him as the dissenting party.

"That is the real reason why most people don't deal with the unknown very well," Eden was adding as Michael reflected. "It makes them uncomfortable."

Michael's attention latched onto that point. "Are you saying that it is bad to want comfort?"

"No. What I am saying is that avoiding the discomfort of growing up is only going to make you grow up to be uncomfortable with your self," Eden professed. "What do you think it is we learn by facing the unknown?"

Michael didn't know how to answer that.

"All we are trying to say, really, is that if you really want to understand us then you might as well give up expecting to be comfortable with it," An placated.

"Do I have a choice?" he complained.

"You have three choices," Eden replied. "Believe it. Doubt it. Or, understand it."

When Michael made no move to comment, An aired, "The question is, in what regard do you hold the choice itself?"

"I beg your pardon?" Michael quirked.

"I'll explain." An grinned. "Before the matter of choice can really be applied you have to determine first how you look at the possability of choice. Do you doubt your ability to choose? Do you understand that you have a choice? Do you believe that you have a choice?" she fired off in retoricals.

"Does this have to be personal?" he asked sharply. He was beginning to feel outnumbered.

"Do you wish to take it personally?" An returned archly.

"Never mind," he grumbled, realizing that he had been baited. "I hardly doubt that I have the freedom to make some choices," he pointed out sensibly.

"But not all?" Eden challenged.

"Some choices I do not have the ability to back up," he countered, turning to her with a sardonic grin. He had to admire the way they had disarmed and unbalanced him to bait him so well. Not only had he lost controll of the conversation, he had begun to get lost in it.

"That is your choice," Eden retorted calmly.

Michael recoiled as though from an accusation. "No, that is simply reality," he defended, alarmed.

"Like I said, that is your choice," Eden returned with penetrating finality.

Michael gasped in amazement. In a flash, he realized that they had penetrated far deeper than the original question and challenged one of his most primal beliefs—confronting him with it. Somehow they had seperated him from his objective of investigating them and showed him that he harbored some innate prejudice against understanding their answers. It would take him quite a while to understand what this meant, and even longer to know how it would effect his report back to the council. "My God, you two are devious!" he cried, "Have you given me an answer or what?"

They shared an enigmatic look. An shrugged as Eden lilted, "Whatever."

MIchael turned toward the two of them, a challenge in his eye. But he stopped as he opened his mouth to speak and stared past them. They gazed at him in wonderment for a moment then turned to see what had astonished him.

There, advancing with catlike steps, was Avonjea. Confronted by their attention, she smiled shyly and greeted them in a more self possessed tone, "Hello."

Day one, a second later

Michael had been born in a small village. He had learned how things worked by the time he was three. It was an accomplishment that had awakened him to a world of possabilities. And it was an accomplishment he would go on to repeat many more times as he strove to understand a changing world. Even as a child he had understood the significance of his name. Of having a name. While any man and woman could give their bodies to each other for pleasure, their greatest hope was to give their bodies to each other for life. That life, that child, was to them a second name. A marrage to each other through the union of their flesh. Only, however, if they wanted the child. That was what it meant to have a name. It meant you had been willingly born and accepted by those who gave you life. An unwanted child had to earn the first name. Michael had had to earn his first name. No one bore his name second.

So, he had been taken into the protection of a muse. One of those individuals who had attained the ultimate name. A person who's name status transcended the status of names. Each name was a marrage, a bond. First and second names—and a person could have any number of second names—were bonds to life itself. All other names were bonds with society. This muse had accepted him and allowed him to earn a name which meant that society accepted him. Then he had set him on a path to gain a name by which he could accept society. So, he had become a student.

With dedication and study, he attained a name of mind. This name would evolve as his mastery of arts and letters—among other things—evolved. By the time he had turned fifteen, he had reached the station of Ideal in the name of mind. In a chain of learning and teaching those he was qualified to teach, he had become qualified to teach at the highest level. But he was no longer a student of teachers. From that point on, he became one who had to learn from his students.

But education had only whetted his appetite for being a part of society, and had done little to feed it. So he had decided to become an exotic. Which allowed him to gain a name of the body. It worked the same way, but what it taught was how to experience. How to express. The exotics sought to help people understand their bodies. How to care for them, and how to express themselves through them. How to communicate on many levels; and in all cases, well. As an adolescent, he delighted to find so many ways to stretch his familiarity with his body. How to push his limits; to run, to jump, to master it in martial combat. And how to make love. How to explore his senses. All people went some distance in the toutering of the exotics as children and again as adolescents. To become an exotic was to be one of those who was trusted to awaken and enlighten the bodies of their fellow humans. In so doing, they came to *be* exotic. And because he was a passionate and open hearted young man, and becasue he had learned how to learn, he was soon an exotic Ideal.

He would have gone on to build his bonds with life, and give life to children he swore would never be unaccepted, but he had been called to be a leader. So he began to earn his name of spirit. Apprenticed to the making and breaking of patterns. The organization of men and resources. The policing of the cities and towns, and even small villages like his birth home. Served as a soldier, and later as an officer in times of war. And studied the power of design which lived behind the reality of all forms and expressions. This knowledge allowed him to bring his experience in the attainment of Ideality in mind and body into a dynamic understanding of humanity's true potential; even as he attained the spiritual Ideal. In fact, he had become—quite unintentionally—an expression of this profound human potential.

Which he realized in attaining the Ultimate name; becoming a muse himself.

The problem of attaining something that is considered the highest, most distinguished role in society is that one often thinks that there is no higher station to attain. Or no further for a man to go. Of course this was not true. To become a muse is really only to become an individual who can be truly self possessed. To become an individual who the potential that humans generally only dream of. And this, was something that Michael had not really come to understand yet. Which is the only reason that meeting Avonjea was almost the undoing of him from the instant they met.

Even as An and Eden were taking note of her arrival, Michael was struggling to keep his sanity. He had confronted this unexpected event armed only with doubt. When he looked upon Av he could not see her as a distinct person. What he saw was Amadea. To him, the subtle differences between Avonjea and Amadea, were not sufficient to displace the notion that some fundamental principal of nature was being violated. His reaction was the same as Rhys' had experienced; taken to an extreme. He assumed automatically that they were the same person. But confronted with the two of them at once, it could only be a paradox.

The terrible thing about presuming the catastrophic nature of paradox is the notion that confronting the impossible will shatter reality. Michael was in a momentary mental tormoil. The object of his quandry was viewing him calmly. While reality itself was not threatening to rip apart, his mind seemed in some danger of rending. In its own defense, it sought for a way to disarm the explosion. It was enough to admit that there was something lacking in his understanding. Some of the turbulence evaporated as he recognized that thought—of some fashion at least—still resided within him. He was not in a position to question why his first assessment of the situation was so catastrophic. He could only fight it. Rationally, there must be some explanation. Unfortunately, he could not fathom what it was. Not that he found this mystery wholly disturbing, rather, it conspired to fascinate him.

And besides, reality still seemed intact.

While Eden studied Michael's reaction carefully, An was caught up in subduing the relief that had surged forth on spying her troubled friend. She managed to present a casual smile and a smooth, "Hi, Av." Avonjea returned a calm smile. Still looking at Av, she asked aside, "Michael, have you met Avonjea?"

This prompted a dazed response, "No, I don't think I've had that pleasure." He stood up and inclined his head, "Avonjea." She returned the slight bow and Michael murmured impulsively, "This is quite extraordinary. Are you and An twins?" he asked seeking for the easiest, if not most rational, explanation.

Smiling impishly, she replied, "No. Please, call me Av" she urged, extending her friendship.

"Av and An," he recited. "Even your names are similar," he redunded.

"True," she allowed. Others had reacted adversely to the sight of her and An together, their first time, so she could guess the cause of his distraction. But she had never seen anyone take it this bad. She sensed his unease, and despaired of salving it. Then she took in the implications of the three of them gathered in this location and divined a way to pave some common ground with him. "So, are these two talking your ears off?"

"Yes," he grinned. The spell was beginning to wear off. As she had intended, this had nudged him back into familiar territory. "But," he decided to add, confiding, "that is what I like to come here for. An and Eden are always good at provoking thought." Av nodded knowingly.

"That's what we are here for," chirped An magnanamously.

"So, Av, are you a regular visitor to this retreat?" he coached. It was a perfectly mundane question, of course. The kind that made people more comfortable to talk, and in this instance, which made him more comfortable with the idea of so strange a coincidence.

She passed a wry glance over her hosts and qualified, "Regular in a sort of irregular way, you could say. I really have to go out of my way to see them, usually."

"Your English is very good," he amazed as this potent fact finally cleared his daze. *Better than mine, I don't doubt,* he suspected. He didn't know what gave him that idea. But, trying to figure it out would go far to putting him past the strange reaction her appearance had cause. It was as if he *felt* a difference in the way she commanded the language. Rather than the air of someone who had only studied it, she possessed the unconscious grace of someone who lived with it. Much like An and Eden; but with a telling difference. A difference that set her significantly apart from An. Seizing on the exotic lilt of her speech, he declared, "But, you are not a native to that tongue."

She replied easily, "Neither, I would say, are you, Michael."

He raised an eyebrow. He realized that he had failed to impress her. Took heart in that he had recovered quick enough emotionally to *want* to. "So," he started after the pause had begun to stretch, "you say you cannot come here very often, and I cannot say I recognize your accent..." once it was out of his mouth, he cut himself off. He was an expert on languages and dialects. How could he *not* recognize one? He made a quick adjustment, and realized that he had no difficulty classifying it; there was simply no one dialect which was spoken that way. It raised an interesting question. "Where are you from?" he asked with professional curiosity.

"Me?" she returned with wide eyed innocence. "Oh, I'm a true nomad. I'm from everywhere," she shrugged off the question.

"Well," he sighed, detecting her reluctance. "But where were you born?" he prodded, "I am not that poorly traveled myself." He was intrigued now, and wanted to learn what agglomeration of dialects had been combined to this unique effect.

"Um. Do you really want to know?" she countered, with a look that suggested that he would not.

"If you'd rather not say, I won't push," he relented, noting the hint.

"Thank you," she sighed, which only made him more curious. "It's nothing personal, but my history is rather complicated," she elaborated, by way of giving him some explanation. Then she turned the focus back on him, "But... how well do you know An and Eden?"

"Long enough to learn English," he dodged in mock spite.

"Ah," she observed, in the way of wise men, "but are you a fast learner?"

He smiled, "When I put my mind to it," he obscured. He was beginning to enjoy fencing words with her. Right at this moment he was deciding to put his mind to learning as much as he could about this mysterious doppelganger.

"Av, please sit down," An interrupted, beginning to get a crick in her neck lookiing up and back at her friend. "Get comfortable."

Av and Michael gave a mild start. Realizing that they had squared off almost like opponants, they visibly relaxed at this suggestion. Av came around and asked, while she and Michael sat down, "So, what is the topic of discussion?"

"I'm starting to wonder what isn't," he complained half-heartedly, as the question reminded him of the debate her arrival had interrupted.

"One of those, huh?" Av commented sympathetically.

Seeing her settled, An offered politely, "Would you care for a drink, Av? Tea, coffee—I think we still have some juice, too."

Av took note of the vessels on the dias in front of the lounge. "Oh, yes. Tea will be fine," she accepted. While An poured her a glass, Av turned back to Michael, "So, Michael, what do you do when you are not here having your ears chewed off?"

"I'm just me," he responded affably. "Like An and Eden," he clarified, indicating that he too was a muse. It was a casual response, typical of those who had attained the ultimate name. And with it, that position of leadership devoid of command.

"Mmmm," was her inscrutible reply, sipping her tea.

"And you?" he queried, implying the same question.

"Me?" she murmured, pointing to herself. Her eyes took on a distance, "Oh, I'm just me. Of course, I can't mean it like the three of you," she quickly ammended, "I'm not a muse."

"What are you?" he asked, finding her answer cryptic.

"Unpromised," she replied, deadpan. Michael recoiled, anger roiling behind his eyes.

"I see," he grated dangerously.

Av's eyes widened, as she realized the social blunder she had unwittingly made. "Oh! I don't mean it the way you do," she hurriedly interjected, trying to dispell the unintentional insult. "I'm sorry. That really sounded bad. I sometimes forget how you do things here," she explained. She gave it a little thought and realized that it was not so much an insult, but an anti-social statement, and wondered what it was that made Michael take it as such an insult. She quiclky reviewed the conversation in her mind and noticed where it was leading. Realizing that she was close to violating an old agreement she had made with An on her first visit.

"Now you have intrigued me," he said, growing aware that she had honestly not meant to insult. Also aware that the only explanation for such a mistake seemed implausible for an adult. "You talk like you haven't earned the first name," he stated.

"Not here, no," she admitted. It was an answer that begged for an explanation she could not offer.

"Unbelievable," he breathed. Her reply was so candid that he refrained from suspecting her of lying, but there was still a major contradiction between her conduct and confession. "You've given me your name. That must mean something," he pointed out. She had refuted the claim that she had rejected her name, and maintained that she had never earned it. So on what grounds did whe use it?

Av caught the gist of his inquiry, and frowned. "I'm sorry," she begged, biting her lip and glancing sidewise at An. "When I said I wasn't from around here, I really meant I wasn't from around here," she said, bending her promise to the limit. She dared not reveal any more. "There is a simple explaination, but I don't think you'd think so," she said, hoping that he would let it rest at that, and hoping that she had not already said too much.

But An and Eden were not glaring at her. On the contrary, they both were beaming with amusement as Michael persisted, "You'll have to try me."

Av was astonished. "Is he okay?" she puzzled.

"You can trust him," Eden nodded. "After all, he *is* a muse."

Av absorbed this and adjusted with a shrug. Michael witnessed this exchange with accellerating curiosity. He had caught on to the idea that for some reason her past was so disturbing that An or Eden had forbidden her to speak of it in front of strangers. He was instantly obsessed with gleaning the answer to this growing mystery because he could not even conceive of something bad enough to warrant such measures.

But Av was already explaining, "I said I was unpromised."

"Yes, I got that," he answered impatiently.

"I meant that in reference to my world, not yours," she declared with a peircing look. Michael sat there dumbfounded. Difficult as this statement was to credit, there was far more to it which he was immediately aware of. The prodigal muses had forbidden her to reveal an unworldly origin. Which is only what they had done themselves. Which no one believed in anyway. His look turned to suspicion as Av continued, "I am unpromised to my god." He took another reel. Followed immediately by another one as Av added, "I used to be an avatar."

He valiently resisted the urge to go back into shock. Using the simple expedient of disbelief. Oh, her reply was perfectly candid. That was what was scary about it. The concepts in her declaration were untenable. These were all words that he had had to grapple with heroically in his study of English. Like many of the concepts of this language, these were ones which had no direct compliments in the mother tongue. In his terms all beings worshipped the Absolute, and were part of the Absolute. The idea of beings that were not the Absolute, but which had powers which could only be attributed to the Absolute was threatening. Alien. When he had come to understand this, he had come to understand why the masters of the Mystery language had declared its knowledge occult and dangerous. Ideas clicked in his head. Her natural familiarity with this dangerous language, her seeming disregard or ignorance of Names, her obscure accent hinting at obscure origins all combined to present two disturbing pictures. She was lying, or worse, she was telling the truth. He sucked air looking for his voice a few times before he managed to croak, "Literally."

"On my soul," she confirmed solomnly.

He collected his wits and frowned. He did not believe it. He gave her a challenging look.

Av met his silent challenge nonplussed. In an inimicable tone she said, "There are mysteries, Michael."

Eden nodded, and hooked a thumb in Avonjea's direction, adding, "Believe her, Michael, she should know."

He turned on Eden crying incredulously, "You support her story?" This was an even more alarming idea. It stirred up certain suspicious observations. From out of nowhere these two had become the foremost authorities of the Mystery language. They lived, steeped in the occult knowledge contained in the vast retreat library. Translating, teaching. Which brought to mind other irritations. There were rumors that the two of them had profound responsibilities that other muses such as himself knew nothing of. That they had become the teachers of *muses.* He suddenly wondered what it was they were supposed to *teach.* Alarmed, he summoned all of his mental defenses. Keyed his mind to its sharpest, clearest edges. He couldn't guess why, but he suddenly feared that his soul was in terrible danger. This casual meeting was far more than it seemed, and—he suspected—deviously less.

"Would we refute the truth?" An and Eden replied in unison.

Michael retreated from this united front. With an effort, he remembered that one of the traditional functions of muses over the ages *had* been to act as explorers of the invisible and unknown worlds. While he always thought of that metaphorically, it occurred to him that in some cases it might be more literal. It was a sobering thought, if not one he was ready to subscribe to. Still, as a muse, he was supposed to have an open mind. A significant point, considering the rumor he had recalled. It was plausible that they had set him up again. Present him with a situation sure to push his buttons as a lesson to be open minded. Turning inward he analyzed his feelings. After a few moments, he discovered that his rage and disbelief stemmed from disappointment. He had been steered toward one of his secret desires and it had not met his expectations. He had met an individual who had identified herself as an agent of the invisible and unknown world. And she seemed perfectly natural and human. A disgusted inner voice growled, *why, she's no more divine than I am!* But a recriminating voice followed up, *just so.* It gave him a moment of confusion. After some more silent argument, he decided that he could accept that she could *claim* what she had; but he didn't have to believe it without proof. This calmed him down enough to ask, "Forgive me, Av, I don't suppose you have any way to prove this?"

"I beg your pardon?" she demanded, slightly unsettled.

"Gods," he muttered, "Avatars. I mean, if I heard this right, you just said you were a god..."

"Avatar," she interrupted. "I said avatar. Where did you get the idea that I claimed to be a god?" she criticized. She looked genuinely hurt.

He tried to explain, maintining, "Is not an avater but an incarnation of a god? How can you claim to be one and not the other?" He sensed her growing irritation and mollified, "I am not trying to start an arguement. I just want to be sure I understand you. English is not my forté," he admitted. "Help me put your claim into perspective."

"Spend your time improving your perspective on your own existence before you worry about that of gods," she bit back. No one had to explain to her that he didn't believe her. She was considering pointing out that he *had* asked—rather *pushed* her to declare herself, while she had been perfectly content to avoid the subject altogether. But his reply held her her off for the moment.

"Well said. However, I think that understanding this will help me *improve* my perspective greatly. I can accept the idea that you are a god, or avatar or whatever; if there were, say, some way you could substantiate your claim?" he cozened honestly. He couldn't argue with divinity if he could see it. But, true to An's assesment of him, he could not abide such a claim unsupported.

"I'm afraid not," she sighed. "I'm an ex-avatar. All I have left is magic."

"I don't believe in magic," he said reflexively, with disappointment.

Av considered that and began to reply "That's your..."

"...Don't tell me," he interrupted with irritation. "Its my choice. Do the three of you coordinate your attacks?" he grumbled. He was seriously thinking that really was all this was; a set up.

"What?" Avonjea dismayed, not understanding the attack.

"Don't mind him, Av," Eden counseled. "We were talking about choice a bit earlier and really ground his nose into it. He is still a little sensitive."

"I'm sorry, Av," Michael tried to sooth recalcatrently. "The way you said it just seemed too much of a coincidence."

"That's okay," she accepted. "These two have caught me in their line of fire before. I don't mind."

Michael thought for a moment. It was an irritating bit of circular argument. Naturally, she couldn't prove herself an avatar if she had ceased to be one. It was a built in defense. Not proof, but at least it supported the idea that she had no present claim to divinity. Which satisfied his need to expect more of divinity that she had presented him with. He could understand delusions of godhood well enough, and was sensible enough to keep his oar out of that whirlpool. So he focused on her next unsupported claim, "But you say you know magic."

"I don't advertize, but yes I did say that," she qualified.

"And you meant it?" he pressed. He saw her control a wince.

"Lies are a waste of time," she comented indirectly. "What would be the point? To impress or mystify you?" she challenged. Still, she was patient. An had explained to her that this culture did not have a concept of magic equatible with the English associations. The closest their thinking came to a word like magic was "to do the impossible". Paradox. But Michael was responding.

"You believe that?" he was asking.

"That's not a belief," she refuted. "That is the way I am. If it was a belief, I could change my mind," she pointed out.

"You are saying you never lie?" he puzzled.

"That's impossible," she corrected, "Words are so hard to control. I meant only that I try to say what I mean," she elaborated, wondering if she had just said what she had meant.

He struggled with it too, quickly giving it up. "Would you care to show me some of your magic?" he requested, seeing this as the best way to resolve the issue.

"Would you recognize it if you saw it?" she asked doubtfully.

"Just do something that would be impossible to misinterpret," he retorted helpfully.

Av stared at him with shock. Suddenly, she began to tremble; her fingers twitching spasmodically. A strange glint illuminated her gaze and her expression turned most fearsome. With an effort, she stiffened the strange seizure, and stood with a jerk. "Would you excuse me?" she asked in a raspy voice, and turned before anyone could respond, stalking out of sight.

Michael turned to Eden for an explanation for this absurd withdrawal.

Eden just shook her head, remarkiing, "You know, that was really very low."

He stared at them, waiting for an explanation, but the two of them remained stock still and silent until Av returned and resumed her seat.

She Took a few calming breaths before turning to Michael and apologizing, "Sorry, I just needed to clear my head."

He didn't understand it, but he accepted the apology. "I didn't mean to upset you," he stammered, "It's just, well... it would be so amazing to suddenly find that magic exists, is all." He looked to An for support. She was looking at him wondering if her was ready for this after all.

But all she said was, "Weren't we talking about this earlier?"

He frowned, disputing her question with irritation, "We were talking about a lot of things, but I don't remember this being one of them."

"We were talking about questioning the reality of things simply because we don't understand them," she clarified. She stared at him cooly, picking absently at non existent lint on the lounge cushions.

He returned the stare with a quirked eyebrow, "How do you come up with that?"

Av was watching this exchange with interest. "It started the same way it started here," An told. "You were asking us to explain ourselves—justify ourselves—but you weren't willing to accept what we told you. You tell me what we were talking about," she prompted.

"I thought we were just talking," he shrugged. Then he thought it over for a second and added grudgingly, "But, I see your point."

"And right now, you are asking if magic is real," An pointed out.

Michael shrugged again. Turning to the other redhead he appealed, "Is it, Av?" She tilted her head disapprovingly at the question, forcing him to prod, "You say... rather, what you said suggests that magic exists."

"It doesn't matter whether magic exists or not," she declared.

Michael was obviously unsatisfied with that, and looked about ready to push Av too far, when Eden interrupted. Realizing that most of the argument that was building up here was the difference between the way each of them regarded the concept of magic. There was a point that had to be made if Michael were to begin to understand Avonjea's evasiveness. "The impossible happens, regardless of who takes credit for it," she said, supporting Av's declaration. Michael considered this and gave a half nod. Eden continued, "However, if someone had the clarity of mind to understand reality (whatever that is) well enough to effect changes in it—beyond those as natural as moving your hand or waking up in the morning—well, by doing what you asked..."

"I'd be simply *giving* magic to you," Av interjected vehemantly.

Eden grinned, going on, "...well, yes. Proof is a crutch."

"Maybe so," Michael allowed. "However. It is easier to build something if you use scaffolding," he countered. "The only point to asking the question is to get an answer and get on with it. Proof of magic would make a great difference in the way people lived."

"But that's just it," Av sighed heavily, "Magic is not the issue; life is."

Michael narrowed his eyes. He could not see any reason why magic had to be such a secret unless it was false. "Why is it that anyone who has claims to magic must always obscure it?"

"There is a difference in mind set, mostly," Av answered, calming down enough to sound conciliatory. Back when she was younger, she had never been so careful about describing and demonstrating magic. The consequences had been almost catastrophic a few instances too many. Not because there was anything special to it, but that the individuals had been, like Michael, a bit too tightly wound to accept such a shift in their world view. She could not explain that to him, but she could explain this, "People have strange notions about what magic is, while those who 'have' it are confronted with a lot of expectations conceived by those notions."

"Then, what is magic?" he demanded softly.

He was a muse. Like An and Eden. She decided to trust him with an answer. "Magic is nothing more than figuring out how to exceed our limits," she said, picking the answer true to the spirit of the matter. "Magic is being able to learn from oneself," she went on, "If you want to exceed your limits—one way or another you will have to believe in magic—believe that it is possible to grow so much. Ironically, magic exists because people find it easier to believe in ideas than in themselves. If people could believe in themselves the whole question would become simple.

"Techniques are mostly psychological window dressing. Harnessing the power of ideas built up into certain associations and given their own validity. What seperates magic from miracles or other divine forces is a dearth of spiritual perspective. The effect is dictated by the ideas, not by some agency. Find or define something you want, and put your mind and spirit (will, whatever) into making it real," she sketched. With a shrug she assessed, "But, it is no more impossible than making tomorrow real."

He looked at her puzzled. She passed him a half grin and pointed out, "The hard part is realizing that tomorrow is going to come whether you help bring it about or not. The difference is that if you make the effort, then tomorrow becomes *your* tomorrow."

He thought hard about these statements. It sounded to him as though magic was nothing more than a trick of the mind. He didn't understand how it worked, but he could easily appreciate the suggestion that it worked once you managed to convince yourself that it would. But, the conclusion remained, and he voiced it warily, "So magic isn't real."

"What is?" Av retorted with a casual toss of her head. Then she narrowed her eyes on him asking, "You have to ask, what is reality—in truth?"

Michael paled. This was very different from asking what is real. It was not within his nature to question the validity of reality itself. He bore her steely gaze in mute helplessness. Eden, seeing that he could not answer, did so herself. Michael's eyes darted over to her.

"I will tell you what reality is. Reality is a matter of faith and belief. Faith and belief in the idea that you are going to die and there is nothing you can do about—so there is no point in worrying or doing anything about it," she stated flatly. Michael was not sure he agreed with this, but he kept his silence. The statement had a ring of truth to it, but he was not sure it accounted for *all* of Reality. He would ask her about the extent of it later. "Reality is believing *'I am this: \_\_\_\_\_\_,'* and *'that cannot really change in any meaningful way'.* Magic is choosing *'I am what I have the will to be'* and in that way you must take responsibility for your life. You embody it, you design it, you bring it about and you live it," she elaborated.

"Very just," Av said, "Very simple."

"And it doesn't matter how you do it," Eden said. "If you do it selfish and stupid then, well, you are just selfish and stupid. If you do it wise and awake, then you really don't have anything to complain about."

This gave Av the opportunity to give him a more useful answer to his previous question. "Magic is not real, not like air; not like blood and bones," she asserted, "Magic is creative intelligence. Applied intelligence, and the only way to prove that is to be intelligent and creative. Magic is not a noun, magic is a verb. It is action.

"No one can show you magic," she simplified meaningfully, "You have to see it."

"And that is not some mystery or riddle," Amadea pointed out. "It is simple common sense."

Michael was giving it some thought, but still more was needed to answer the questions he had started out with. Av continued, "I will tell you what a great magician is. A great magician is an individual who realizes that he is alive and that that is more important than money, power, reason, doubt... whatever you can name, really, because it is *life.* If you take it. Well, the magician takes it. If he has the creativity and intelligence, he figures out how to evolve, how to survive.

"If he learns what the real question is, then he might even learn how to never die. He might learn that you can't die. Because death is meaningless," she emphasized. "If we just simply turn off and all of our life just blinks out of existence like a computer's memory as it is turned off, then you will never know that you are dead. The capacity to have that knowledge will be gone before it can be known. You will just have one last awareness from which you will never move.

"Time stops" she clipped off. Michael twitched, gesturing for her to add more. "Everything meaningful stops," she shrugged.

"And awareness?" she turned to him with another challenge. He didn't even try answering. "Can that stop, or us being trapped in it, how can we move beyond that last awareness and truly reach oblivion?" she added retorically. She held up her hands and fanned her fingers, "Only by somewhere escaping the limitations of our existence. We can't even die without magic." Her hands dropped, and she gave him a consoling look, "That is the truth. But, don't take it from me—find your own truth, whatever works for you."

The illustration defied him. It was a paradox, and a well built one. He even said as much.

"And that is why magic is so damned scary!" she pointed out.

He just stared at her. She got up and walked over to the railing encircling the interior garden. An and Eden followed her movement with their eyes, curious. The turn of conversation had brought back to mind her personal circumstances. Her own confrontation with the event she had just described. Softly, mostly to herself, she murmured, "I never accepted the idea of death."

An and Eden's eyes widened with realization, and Michael's narrowed with curiosity.

Av turned, feeling the weight of their attention and twisted her remark to fit the discussion. "I understand the reality of it, of course, but I do not accept that we must die," she asserted. "Death for us makes about as much sense as a chick expiring simply because it refused to hatch."

Michael asked her to illustrate what she meant.

"Like the chick," she complied, "we go through this development stage of our existence with a certain potential for growth, which is limited and can be expended. If, like a stubborn chick, we refuse to hatch out of our shell, we simply begin to suffocate, atrophy and eventually die. For us, this is old age." Her manner had become serenely severe. She rephrased this with deliberation, "People begin to die when they cease to grow."

"You, ah, take this very seriously," Michael observed.

"You have to take it seriously," she returned soberly, "Especially if you live it."

He took her point and reflected on what she had told him. Some of it he could accept readily enough. He voiced his assessment, seeking confirmation, "So the question is not magic. The question is how you choose to perceive the way things happen. Yes? No?"

"Close enough," Av allowed. "For me, there are things that I have learned to do that certainly seem to defy explanation. So the observer sees magic. But to confront someone who has no concept of magic with the same thing, it offers only madness. It happens too quick. It offers no plausible explanation. Think about it, if he sees someone does something that is patently impossible then how can he deal with it? People who believe in magic rarely go into shock. Nor do they go insane. Sure they may be afraid. Who isn't afraid of someone who can do things they can't do? You're much safer confronting the subtle phenomina. Learn to believe in magic if you plan to risk confronting it. If you want to see something magical to you, look for something that can't be taken for granted," she advised.

"Anything?" he asked with a wry grin.

"You have to start somewhere," she nodded pointedly.

He chuckled nervously, scratching the nape of his neck, "Well, um, I have to admit, I have been silently trying to figure out why the three of you are dressed the way you are." It had come to his attention gradually. Mostly because he had needed to penetrate the folds of An and Eden's tunics to spot the underlying theme.

"Pardon?" she asked. It seemed that he had suddenly changed the topic.

"Didn't any of you notice that all three of you are wearing... what do you call that anyway?" he asked, realizing that they weren't exactly tights. It looked like nothing more than that the three of them had been dipped to the neck into a thick paint. An and Eden, dipped in black, wore theirs as an undergarment to their long, wide necked tunics. Av wore hers casually unadorned by anything else. She was dressed more by her attitude than by it.

"This?" She glanced down at herself then over at her friends. "I guess you'd call it a body glove."

An and Eden laughed. Micheal looked at them in askance. An explained, "Ironically, this is something all of us do take for granted." She was pleased that he had actually stumbled onto it. It was as good a hook as anything else, and it was crtainly the last thing she would have thought of using. She savored a secret smile, as she thought of an gentle way to break it on him. "Okay. You've picked something that you can't really take for granted. Now all you have to do is decide how you want to see it," she said.

"You mean, 'do I think there's something magical about it'? Don't be ridiculous!" he scoffed. He had only asked why they all word this odd garment. Hell, they probably all shared the same wardrobe, considering how close they all were in stature.

"Not at all. You're a rational man. You could easily manage to figure out the real reason why we all wear these sheaths. But what question are you really asking? A question about us, or a question about them?" she riddled.

"Why would I ask anything about a bit of clothing? It doesn't make any sense to ask a question where there isn't any answer," he said.

"You can get an answer from anything you investigate," she corrected, "you simply prefer to look for an answer you already suspect. It's not uncommon, but it certainly explains why you never see anything as magical." She pinned him with the smile that followed. "Michael, you don't understand this now, but you will."

"I just wish you would back up you ideas." He deliberately swept his gaze throughout the atrium to shake off her eyes.

"Which would you prefer," she asked, all businesslike, "to understand what is out there before confronting the unknown, or being thrust in totally unprepared?"

That wasn't herd to answer. "Well, naturally I would like to have at least a clue, first."

"There, you see!" she declared. "You have to admit that what you want is for one of us to prove to you that somethings there before you will even think of going after it. What do you think your reaction will be if one of us were to perform some action that completely dismounts your notions of reality? Call it a dream?"

"I honestly don't know." He stretched and walked around the lounge. After a moment he felt like kicking himself in the head. Both for opening his mouth in the first place and for not thinking once he had. She was right. All three of them were right. For whatever stupid reason, he had wanted them to shatter his reality—without even a clue as to how he would get by afterwards. He made his mind up in resolution. "I admit it. I am being a real asshole about things today. You're right about what you say. Sure, some of it is just clever words. But, I figured out what you were trying to say. I don't think about what might be possible. I only think about what is probable. As pennance, I will figure out what your sheath things are and why you all wear them.

"As for you, Av," he turned, "I will figure out how it is possible that you are telling me the literal truth. If that means that I have to understand magic, fine. If that means I discover gods are real, fine too. And if, for any reason, I don't understand the world or reality well enough to answer either of these questions, then I will find a way to learn how." Av gave him a heartening smile, and their hosts hid a beam of pride behind pleasant, patient expressions.

"Don't hesitate to ask for help, Michael," An bade, resting her hand on his arm, "Eden and I got to help each other when we first faced these kinds of questions, so there is no reason why you shouldn't have our help. If you want it," she allowed graciously. Reminding him that they were still peers. He looked uncertain for a moment.

Av saw this and leaned over. "I have studied magical arts in countless places, but I've never known anyone who could translate the mysterious into as much common sense as An and Eden."

Eden giggled, "That is because you have been raised to perceive magic as part of the collusion."

Michael wondered what 'shady agreement' Eden was talking about, and it reminded him that he couldn't take up their offer without careful thought. He would do as he said, even more so, since he was silently adding another resolution to the list. All of which only served to support the resolution he made before even coming here. Now, while there was a lapse in conversation, he had best excuse himself, he thought. "Ladies, I must withdraw. If I don't stop and think about this for a bit, I am going to lose track of it all. Shall we get together again later, so you can try to convince me to accept your help while I'm feeling a bit more gracious about it?" he asked. They gave him their nods and he left.

When she was sure he was out of earshot, Av turned to the pair and apologized for breaking her promise. "I become Unpromised and now I act like no promise is sacred."

"We only asked that you refrain from telling people things they aren't ready to know," Eden forgave, "we never said you couldn't answer if someone honestly asked."

Av thought about that for a moment, then wondered, "Was he asking honestly?"

An and Eden shared a troubled look. "He was being honest in his doubts, but I am far from sure about his intentions," they confided. Av shivered, knowing how well they could think as one mind. She suspected that it was not the only reason they were both named Aes.

In the quiet that followed, An considered the picture that had been glimpsed in this conversation. As it regarded Av, it had hinted even more than it told. For Michael's part, he had fused himself solidly into this picture, bringing a hard edge that belied his honest nature. She shared her fears with Eden, who agreed that whatever the purpose, it did not promise to help Av's wounded soul.

Day one, afternoon

Avonjea had truly been born on another world. And for her, the first time she had faced the reality of arriving in another had been a rebirth. For it had been a world removed not only in space. It had been removed from time and apparently from reality itself. At least as she had ever known it. It was because of this, and largely due to the manner in which she had been removed from the comfort of her own world that she had come to be the avatar she had confessed to being. And it was through this divine appointment that she had been able to find Xanadau. Where she had met Amadea. One might imagine that that meeting had been disorienting for the two of them, and in that one would have imagined only the truth. They had both been deeply shocked at that confrontation. But, what no one could have expected was that they would have fallen in love. Which should raise a few eyebrows, regardless of individual states of enlightenment of morality. In each other they had found themselves with a difference, and with that initial fascination had come a very animal lust. It had begun quite innocently to be sure. Just a touch to confirm the reality of the reflection. But that touch had been electirc for both. A naive curiosity to see how far and deep the resemblance went had conspired to lure them into an embrace that shook each to their very foundation.

This fascination compelled them to delve even deeper than their senses. Curious to know the person that lay behind each half of the reflection, they had described their lives and circumstances to one another. In an ironic turn, it was this meeting of the minds that had soothed the doubts that Amadea had entertained about her own memories of her otherworldly origins. Convinced her of an Earth where she had been an unwanted child and from which she had somehow slipped free. Convinced her, because Avonjea had seen this Earth—or at least a significant part of it. But in learning of Avonjea's hsitory, it came as more of a contrast to Amadea's experiences on the rational side of Xanadau.

Avonjea had been born of a nobel humanoid race. A race that the English language might term as fey. One which her own culture modestly and uninformedly called Exotic. But her mother and father had fallen out of grace before her birth. There was a complicated reason, but the end result was that this nobel child had been born in the lowly confines of a circus. Which began a trend that continued throughout her life; the devolution of her name.

Born Av'naoma Nineveh, she had borne the derivitive name Avonjeara Nineveh, in honor of her mother's name Anjeara. Casually shortened to Avonjea. Which had gradually retracted to Av. And though the truest name for her was Nineveh, Av was the only part of her name she felt she could belong to. It was a reflection of how much of herself she had been forced by her experiences to give up.

Av wondered if her friends could understand that. As far as they had known, she had everything a soul could desire. A nobel station, a divine office, membership in the most sacred of societies, and a certainty of heaven. But nothing had ever been certain in her service to Amaranth. She had been forced to give up her self, her life, to her god. She had been Unpromised before her god had taken her for Her own. When Sivai had come for her, it had been to die in her master's place. Death had not released her from her promise to her god. It had been a common rape, and the confusion of a child cloned of her own flesh that had shown her that she could not remain a slave of Amaranth. Av knew that by telling Michael that she was Unpromised, she had told An and Eden that she had rejected her god. So she knew that there was no way now to prevent them from asking her why.

Michael had forced her hand. What she had wanted was time and space. A chance to work out her frustration and come to terms with the nagging emptiness that had driven her away from Amaranth and yet continued to fill her. Now, instead of healing, An and Eden would do their best to pry open this festering wound. They would want to understand how it was possible for the hand of a god to sever itself from its divinity. And she would have to tell them that it was not. She would have to admit that she had stolen herself back from Her. And for the life of her, she could not understand how she had gotten away with it. She, who had stared into the face of her god and then turned her back on Her, had walked away not just with herself, but everything she had learned. It had to be something akin to stealing a peice of divinity. A peice of God. And there had been no retribution.

Which is not to say that there would not be.

It would be a disaster. It was one thing to let slip a confession of what she had been. With An and Eden there, it had hardly been a breach of contract. It was quite another to confess that her being here might be sufficient reason for Amaranth or Sivai to pay this world a visit. Damn. Sure it is easy to doubt and deny the existence of gods when you never have a chance to meet one; but when one decides to show up there is little doubt and boundless fear and superstition. All of their careful and delicate work enlightening the people of this world would come to a catastrophic end. If it happened, it would be the grossest violation of her promise to An. *Do not give them proof of God.* She still did not know why it would be wrong, but her love of her accidental twin was too great for her to deny her request. Should it happen that her god or Her lover, Sivai, should come after her, she would not fight. She would do all she could to deny them any reason to extend their vengence an iota beyond her own person. Between this resolution, and the fact that she belonged nowhere else, she had permitted herself to stay. She did not know if, once An and Eden knew the truth, *they* would permit her to.

Fortunately, they had been occupied in their own thoughts since Michael had left them that morning. They had even left her alone after a light dinner to take care of the arrangements for their two guests. They had told her that they would take her down to the water terraces for the afternoon, which meant that they would be by to pick her up any minute.

Already, Av looked forward to it. The only anxiety she had about it was whether or not Michael would be with them. At one time, An had told Av what it was that she and Eden really did here. Enough for her to know that they had invited Michael to awaken to his full potential. They were offering him the chance to become what An hed been when Av had found her in Xanadau. And they were going to use Av to get him there. *She* was the thing he had not been able to take for granted. The moment he saw her, he near about shattered. Without a doubt, *she* was the lure; the mystery into which they would throw him in the hopes of teaching him the Truth. But Av knew that the only thing he could possible see in her was herself. She sincerely wished that An and Eden had at least *asked* her before doing this to her.

Not even An and Eden were ready to see through her. But now, Michael *would*. He *had* to.

But this worry was laid to rest as An and Eden showed up alone. Though her concern was fresh in her mind, she decided that it would be rude of her to bring it up. So she forgot it and turned her mind over to enjoying their company. Together, the three of them wandered through the retreat until they picked up the stream that would lead them to the Water Terrace. Av marveled at the marble collumns and stairways that traversed the streambed. From atop the collumns sprouted arches and gables, as often becoming part of the greenwood as it did the vaulting cathedral ceilings of the semi enclosures. They climbed through the gentle assent up the side of the bowl of the retreat proper. At the ridge, they saw the first of the waterfalls, where the inner stream they had followed up split away from the Water Terrace.

From here thet could see the cliffs that guarded the north side of the retreat. The water trickled and flowed through the face of this massif from an even greater height of the mountains. If they had wandered west, they would have come around to the Overlook, the great sea cliff that the retreat fronted, looking out over the ocean. From here, however, they could work their way into the canyon into the old quarry. There among the many ravines and gullies were the birthplaces of the retreat's masonry. Perhaps it was here that the work of man had blended with the work of nature and inspired the ruling motif of the entire estate.

By following the old quarry steps into the canyon, they found their way into the WaterTerrace. What nature had started, the builders had enhanced. Pool after pool descended before them in giant steps. The Terrace was a maze, An had often told Av. A maze enough that there were several pools that only An and Eden had ever found. Over the centuries, the wildlife had taken up thick residence here, and provided the cover to completely hide some of the most magnificent of pools from casual discovery. It did not take long for Av to become completely enraptured and forget her problems. She became the playful, adventurous child she had once been. When they arrived at their favorite swimming hole they quickly stripped out of their sheathes and tunics, racing up the face of cliff and waterfall. Av was first among them, and threw herself out over the water in an acrobatic dive. She watched the surface rise under her, seeing through the crystal water to the black stone basin which gave the illusion of impenetrable depths.

Then she was plunging into those depths.

[A decision is made regarding the activities for the remainder of the day. The set up is occupied with an easy familiarization of the characters as they entertain themselves and attempt to coax Av to open up. Venturing through the water terraces, they come to their favorite falls and pools. They frolick and relax while subtly trying to elicit the reasons for the ominous current running beneath Av's playful surface. Some of it starts to trickle out, but Av makes a noticable effort to divert the question.

Much that is magical and wonderous is explored in their play and their conversation, clearly this is the common ground they share. The strange attraction of the three is aroused, as it tends to be, and their play becomes erotic. Before retuning up to the retreat, Av is compelled to go prowling for a bit.]

I sit and reflect, and listen.

Life wants to get a reaction out of us.

Any world, whether real, surreal, or ideal, is hungry.

Do you know what creates reality? What creates the world in its intense, vivid intricacy? Participation.

The interaction of individuals of an infinite variety.

The presence of mind for the most part.

Some worlds are fantastic, but the serious ones are infinitely devious.

Awareness is trapped in such worlds by a rather nasty trick, a collusion.

If you can imagine it, a world that paranoid and miserly, banking on life, holding souls in an agreement that is impossible to fulfill.

Collusion is hard to break.

So, I contemplate action.

Writing is different than thinking.

It is too deliberate.

I used it to stop my thoughts of what I was doing.

What I was going to do.

Thinking of doing does not lead to action.

It leads to distraction and failure.

Thinking is like looking.

It misses the point.

Have you ever read Castaneda?

It helps to be able to refer to concepts that have been widely aired.

I refer to the difference between looking and seeing as expressed by Don Juan.

As such, the parallel is thinking versus doing.

There is a form of thinking that is active.

Beyond that it is just dissembling.

When thinking is no longer the active path, then one must abandon thought and proceed to act.

Thought like action should be succinct.

Not redundant.

If it becomes redundant, then the only recourse is not doing.

And that was Don Juan's opinion?

Who knows what his opinion was.

Ideas expressed in books are cooked meat.

You have to chew it up, swallow it and digest it to bring it back to life.

You have to make it a part of yourself.

I can only say that, now, this is the way I understand it.

If your action is thought, then think.

If your action is intuition, then see.

If your action is motion, then move.

If your action is reaction, then do anything else the instant it begins to repeat.

What that means is the only acceptable cause for repetitious action is if each act is as deliberate and involved as any other true action.

Otherwise it is just a habit—another chain around your neck.

Also important, if your action is motion, do not think.

If your action is not doing, then let go until its done.

Well, I admire Carlos, but it is a shame that he didn't understand what he was learning for most of his apprenticeship.

And, either he developed unprecedented humility, or else I should think that most of the time he spent writing, he still didn't really get it.

Av, the problem any being on the path to transcendence has is the matter of language.

The only suitable language is intuition, which is beyond the capacities of any skeptic.

Therefore, any `initiate' will end up speaking in abstracts.

Thus encouraging any number of disparaging input from skeptics.

I use words in my own way and for my own benefit, so, from the beginning all that I write is unfriendly to skepticism.

If you care enough to get into it with me, try to have enough of an open mind to find out what I mean with the words I use.

Assume nothing.

`To enact an intent inclusion, the veil of possibilities must be pierced, as must the void of doubt.

The cycle of things is such that anything can be made manifest—if it can be driven by intent through the fold of inclusion.

Folded into the sphere of perception, it slips beyond all doubt into certain structure.

The action of awareness structured through interpretation of perceptions is simultaneous and synchronized by the action of intent implemented through articulation of associations.

Inclusion is instantaneous.

As is intent.

Focus, on the other hand, is often elusive and drawn out.

Intent awaits engagement at the perfect moment of focus.

If you have difficulty with intent, then what you really have is difficulty getting in gear.'

See what I mean?

That was pretty thick.

You sounded truly occult.

However, to me it was a precise indictment of how to manifest a thought in the world as a very deterministic object.

I have considered a lot of things, and a lot of the things I have considered have tied me in knots.

I neither agree nor disagree with my own comments on not doing.

As it stands, it has merit only in terms of itself.

I acknowledge it out of respect for what it is for.

I recognize not doing simply because I find that I have no reason for what I have done.

The same could be said of my writing.

Especially when I look at the thousands of pieces I have written to date.

Even my journal has yet to escape that.

For now, it is one of the things I do that has nothing to do with my purpose.

In fact the way I am making a living would be not doing as far as that is concerned.

My life is an order of not doing.

I imagine the trick of it is to pay attention to what that has done for me.

How can you make a living *not doing?*

You will find this odd, but to the people who live and work here, my job is to be me.

And that is sufficient for all of them.

Of course I am strongly given to conversation, so conversing at length is part of being me.

In that regard, my benefactors have made fortunes listening to my conversation.

I have to admit, there is a lot about you I don't really know.

Once again, I am intrigued, how can your converstion make fortunes?

My conversations I have had to recognize as a conduit for my intuition.

I do not ask questions of my intuition so it has sought to find many ways to speak to me.

Writing is another.

As irony would have it, both seek to find the most provokative manifestation possible in reach of my senses.

Both have taught me designs for my growth in existence.

Understanding is a focusing of awareness into a singularity which can guide intent.

Intuition is the purest understanding.

A sorcerer who sees has a strong intuition.

This keeps him in almost constant contact with intent.

As intuition is something of a perception, it is difficult for interpretations to handle.

Allusion is a form of interpretation which could handle intuition, even guide awareness in an exploration of intuition—as it has for me.

I can rest on my intent for it has returned to me as an intuitive understanding.

It is not a matter if I believe it.

It now simply is.

It cannot be undone.

It can only be changed with an intent.

I have no intention of fostering the very antithesis of intuitive understanding, a creature called doubt, in its blind endeavor of robbing me of the action of my intent.

What this means is I am no longer human.

I am in ways better, worse and undistinguishable from that condition.

And it can cost me.

I am quite content with that.

I refuse to stop growing so long as there is any potential for me to develop in my existence.

My perpetual problem in my life was having more potential than I could develop in the time I had.

A problem compounded by the demands placed on me as a member of society—the demands placed on my time.

As of now, my time is my own.

And I intend to find many ways to keep it such.

If I am to live in that world, I will do so on my terms.

At this time, I live here out of choice, and my reasons are sound enough for me.

I have an extraordinary grasp of the abstract.

There are no specific directions or paths to follow in what I do.

Often it is better to move in ways removed from preconception than cleave to them as models.

There are things to learn from examining the unknown reaches.

There are degrees of penetration into the unknown.

The virtual examination goes far enough to recognize the unknown before a flinch drives one back to where one began.

Fear of the unknown often restricts most to only virtual examinations.

The determined examination goes deeper, sees how far it can go and still return to the known or knowable.

Only an intent exploration can go fully into it and past it.

Once one has gone past it, one can never really come back.

You can only go on.

Make it a part of you.

I am never at a want for answers.

What I have some weakness in is questions.

When I write, zillions of odd things just crawl out that I would never think to ask of myself as questions.

My best questions are always written down for me to happen upon and answer later.

Or it comes up in conversation and drags me along.

Eden is just the same.

If you want a real fright, just get the two of us involved in a conversation.

I mentioned that there was a cost.

Well sometimes I manage to make so much sense out of the meat of a conversation that my entire perspective shifts out of whack.

After that, I am often at a loss in making actions.

I ask to be or not to be and I pause and go what...

It is not a thing per se.

I just have not been pressed with much need to make great gestures.

I adore them, but do not pursue them.

Except that I do.

Immortality.

Immutability.

By that I mean omnimutability.

To become anything without losing myself.

These are great gestures.

They go straight to the absolute.

They, the gestures, demand it.

She died. She had found nothing but oblivion. And she had no doubts about it. Sivai had torn her body to shreds. Ripped her spirit and mind from the dying flesh and anhilated them. All thought and even dreams of herself were slain. When she lay broken and naked in soul, she had been the barest mote of light. A pitiful, depthless soul vastly overshadowed by the endless abyss of the Devourer. Then, for no reason at all, she woke up on Earth. Nobody. Sivai had passed her being through his own and abandoned her like a peice of offal in a harsh world with no idea who she was. Faced with this inexplicable situation she became, once more, herself.

She had wandered through the invisible world for a while, trying to understand what she was supposed to be doing. She had often slipped into the material worlds to seek for more concrete answers, but each answer she found only brought more questions. Finally she tried to go back to the world where she ahd died. Before she could do anything she encuontered a young woman who had been conceived from the genetic material she had left behind. She took this woman aside and found in her all the potential to be what she had become but not even a hint of the thing in Av that was plaguing her. In her distraction she feel prey to and was raped repeatedly by a man who's power she could not even comprehend. Before she escaped him, she discovered that he had been looking for her for ages. Time beyond time. He believed that he owned her and that through her he could have anything he desired. For some reason, she forced him to kill her, rather than risk fighting him. But this death was barely a shadow to the one that Sivai had given her. But it taught her that she had to confront Amaranth. She had to find the reason for why both a god and a mortal had been allowed to rape her.

As soon as she could, she went back to her god and demanded to know why she had been so abominably used. When Amaranth told her that it had been what Av herself had wanted, she simply walked away. She quit.

For the sake of her promise, she was compelled to keep herself tightly restrained in his presence. After their conversation, there was very little of her true nature she could afford to reveal without giving him something to call proof of magic or even divinity. Now that she was in this bind, she finally understood why An had placed the gaes on her in the first place. The kind of proof that Michael could get from seeing what she could do would be false proof.