She - Bearer of Bad News

Morgan, Logan

pages ∙ words

An elaborate peaked awning sheltered the main entrance to Redleaf Manor. It was a welcome respite for a weary traveler forced to navigate her way through the Port and City of Avon in the pounding rain. She paused, a pale, slender hand emerging to flip the wings of her cloak back over her shoulder and push back the hood. As she did so, it appeared as if a giant, invisible hand swept over her, sluicing the excess water from her clothes and hair. She checked the satchel at her hip to make sure its contents were not affected by the weather, and had in fact not been left behind on the ship that brought her. Finding evidence of neither mishap, she sighed and reached for the front bell. Her hand paused an inch away from the bell pull, and she took a deep breath to compose herself.

"*Stop stalling, Morgan,*" snapped a voice that only she could hear.

"That's easy for you to say, Logan" Morgan murmured under her breath. Her eyes flickered toward the apparition. He was not always visible to her, but she was always aware of his presence in her mind. "You're not the bearer of bad news here."

"*No. I'm just the bad news,*" the ghost retorted with a smirk.

"You're bad news alright. Especially if they catch on to your presence," she reminded him, raising her voice to audible levels for emphasis.

"*Well I'm not the one who keeps getting caught talking to someone who isn't there. You're the psychic, why can't you remember to project your thoughts?*" he reprimanded her for the hundredth time.

"I told you before; I can see you and hear you as if you're actually there. To me, you aren't dead, you aren't a ghost. When you show up at my elbow and start talking to me, I'm talking back to you before I realize what I'm doing," Morgan explained.

"*I appreciate that, I guess, but it doesn't change anything. I'm not 'out there' and you can't keep reacting as if I am. It's an illusion. You need to break free of it, Morgan. Or at least stay on your guard. Maybe it's best that we've come here,*" he declared, reaching out a spectral hand and clasping the bell pull.

"Logan! Wait--" Morgan tried to intercept the psychokinetic action, kicking her mind into high gear so she would be able to "grasp" the phantom, but Logan had caught her off guard once more. The front bell rang with a deep, penetrating throb. Morgan glared at the ghost and composed herself quickly as she felt a presence approaching the door from within. That was an unfortunate consequence of making unusual demands of her gifts. The deeper she tapped into her potential, the more open and vulnerable her psyche became. There was a brief pause in the resident's footsteps, in which a chime rang out to notify the staff that someone was responding to the visitor.

That someone, Morgan noticed at once, had a strong mental presence, a great deal of untapped psychic potential. Before she could prevent it, Morgan was treated to a sudden glimpse of the world through a stranger's eyes. As always, the experience was mildly shocking and disorienting. Her mind became absorbed in assimilating information from an unfamiliar perspective. In the blink of an eye, Morgan was privy to the perceptions of a woman a few years older than herself as she replaced the servants' bell on a side table in the foyer and reached for the latch.

"Amanda," Morgan whispered, as the woman's name surfaced in her mind along with the echo of her perceptions.

The specter beside her gave Morgan a startled look, taking note of the way her irises dilated as she slipped into a telepathic trance. He understood what that meant. For the next few moments, at least, she was going to be lost in the tides and currents of an alien mind. It was an experience he had tasted only once, and he had paid dearly for it.

Amanda opened the door to admit the sounds and smell of rushing rain, revealing a somewhat travel worn youth in Initiate garb poised in the shelter of the awning. The resident paused to study the visitor appreciatively, noticing at once that the stranger's stormy grey eyes were on the same level as hers, dominating a pale face with delicate, feminine features--all framed by an unruly mane of damp crimson hair. Glancing down for a moment, Amanda took in the cut and fit of the visitor's clothes, and the slender body they concealed. What she saw was a tall boy no more than fifteen summers old. Her mind tripped from that observation through a string of loose associations. A collage of boys introduced to manhood under her gentle ministrations flickered through her memory, underscored by the tenets of the vocation passed down to her through her mother. Then her mind composed itself around another observation, in amusement. If it were a month earlier, it would not even be necessary to ask about his business. Instead, as she brought her eyes back up to meet his, she had to wonder what he was doing this far from the Academy, three weeks into the autumn term.

"Welcome to Redleaf Manor," Amanda greeted belatedly.

"*Now would be a good time to introduce yourself, Morgan,*" the ghost suggested, giving the dazed, young red-head a solid nudge. Morgan remained entranced, so Logan continued to poke at her.

Amanda leaned forward a bit, quirking an eyebrow in growing curiosity. Another amused thought rolled close to the surface, apprehended by her nimble mind without articulation. Whatever introduction the boy had been prepared to make seemed to have fled his mind during her brief appraisal. As she studied him, he rocked back, blinking and shaking his head slightly. Amber smirked, imagining he had been stunned by her good looks. Her humor deepened when she noticed his lips moving, as if he was conversing with himself or rehearsing his introduction.

Morgan's inarticulate response to Logan's goading, was pure reflex. On a deeper level she was struggling to form her own thoughts. It was an effort akin to swimming for the shore while in grip of a rip tide.

"*That was just mumbling, Morgan. Let's try for something coherent, now,*" Logan coached, encouraged by the first signs of a response from the psychic. "*Pull it together, Girl. You can do it.*"

"--she is… --she thinks I’m… --and that…!" Morgan murmured.

"What can I do for you?" Amanda prompted, straining to hear what the boy was muttering to himself. He stopped suddenly and stared at her, as if aware of her interest. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Amanda cocked her head, finding it prudent to wait while he collected his wits.

It took a moment for Morgan to suppress the stream of thoughts and impressions from Amanda and shield herself from the prodding of phantom fingers. She let her breath out slowly, silently projecting her thoughts. "*You can stop now, Logan. I'm coming out of it. She just… threw me for a loop.*" As a telepath, she had learned long ago that people who existed in the same world did not necessarily live in the same reality. It was all just a matter of perspective. Composing herself, she shot off an accusative thought at Logan, "*You didn't tell me she was a courtesan!*"

"*Are you going to answer her or not?*"

Morgan gave him the mental equivalent of a glare. The sense of being in two places--of being two people--at once had receded as she restored her mental discipline. Morgan opened her eyes and attempted to respond to Amanda's question. "I'm sorry, I--"

"Who is at the door?" an imperious, female voice called out through the house, interrupting Morgan.

Amanda winced visibly at the tone. "It's a boy, Mother. From the Academy," Amanda called back over her shoulder, oblivious to the way Morgan twitched, but accurately clapping a hand on her shoulder to drag her in through the door.

A murmur of voices accompanied the abrupt action, a servant speaking with the lady of the house, then the woman raised her voice again, "Angels, Amanda! Bring them in, whoever they are, and shut the door! You're causing a draft!"

"As you say," Amanda replied with a strained smile, sealing the entrance with an audible thunk. "Well, then. What brings you? And do speak quickly," she demanded, slipping her hand away from Morgan's shoulder and waving the "boy" forward into the house.

Morgan hastened to comply, fumbling to produce a sheaf of papers from the satchel slung at her hip. As she presented the letters to the daughter of the house, she attempted again to correct the other woman's assumption. "I'm afraid I'm not--" was all she could get out, however.

Amanda had taken one look at the articles Morgan produced and interrupted her timid protest to call out a correction to her mother, "He seems to be a messenger."

There was a long pause, before the Amanda's mother replied, "Very well. Show him to my sitting room, and then see to the necessary arrangements."

"Please, there's something you need to understand--" Morgan tried to preempt the older girl.

"I'd love to hear what this is about, really, but it's best that you speak to Mother first. Come along," Amanda declared firmly, grabbing Morgan by the upper arm this time and escorting her swiftly out of the vaulted foyer.

They passed under the arch of curved, grand double stair cases, through a short passage under the second floor landing. Halfway down, the passage was intersected by side corridors to the right and left that, according to what Morgan picked up from Amanda, ran the length of the building. A few more steps brought them out into the main hall. Like the foyer, the main hall was a vaulted chamber extending up to the third floor, framed on the near end by an identical set of curved staircases that met at a landing on the second floor. At the center of the hall, to either side, were decorative archways leading into grand scale rooms suitable for hosting large parties. The far end was enclosed by the entrance to a glassed-in atrium, through which Morgan could see an exit to the rear garden.

While Morgan was taking in her surroundings, Amanda rambled on, "Mother has been like this since the start of the rainy season. If you ask me, she is simply put out because we do not have any girls to train this year. Not for lack of interest, you understand. Mother was a renowned courtesan before she wed Father, and turned Redleaf into a finishing school. No, there are plenty of girls desperate to come up under her wing, and no few noble houses eager to see their daughters' educations rounded off and polished here. Unfortunately, this is the year my youngest brother completed his initiation and we must focus on his marriage. Or, his bride, if one is to be specific."

"His… bride?" Morgan slipped the question in uneasily.

"Yes, my brother is remaining at the Academy for some advanced studies, but his betrothed, Hannah, is supposed to arrive here this week for some 'advanced studies' of her own," Amanda confided with a suggestive wink.

"His betrothed!? He didn't--" Morgan attempted to protest.

"You sound surprised. It's hardly uncommon, you know. I suppose you find the idea of having your wife chosen for you unsettling. Most boys do. Although," Amanda drew out conspiratorially, tapping a finger to her chin thoughtfully, "it is odd that he was stuck with this engagement, and not one of our older brothers. I suppose the girl's parents wanted them to grow up together, and poor Logan just happened to have been born at the right time." Amanda sighed theatrically. Turning right, just before reaching the atrium, she led Morgan to a side door, which she opened. Entering the unlit chamber, she gestured for Morgan to follow her.

Morgan just nodded, struggling to keep her thoughts from her face.

"The point being, Mother's been at loose ends for a month. Quite irritable, so it's best not to try her patience. Here now," Amanda came to a sudden stop in darkness. The courtesan murmured an activation phrase to bring up the lights, revealing a magnificently furnished room. "This is Mother's sitting room. You're in a sorry state, so I'm afraid you'll have to stand here and be careful not to touch anything. Give me your cloak. Do you have a kit?"

Morgan shook her head, "Everything is being carted up from the port."

"Oh? You've come with freight?" Amanda asked with faint surprise. She helped Morgan slip off her cloak and folded it carefully over one arm. Rather than wait for Morgan's answer, she hypothesized, "I suppose that would be Hannah's belongings from the Academy. I should have thought of that. Well, I'll have our groom look out for the porter." Amanda gave the room and the visitor a brief final examination, and then clapped a hand on Morgan's shoulder again. "I think that's everything. Mother will be along shortly. I'll have a bath drawn and a room prepared for you by the time she is through with you. You will be joining the staff in the kitchen for supper, I suppose."

"But I--" Morgan tried to stop her, to save her the trouble.

"Please. No false modesty. Bed and board is the least you can expect in a civilized household. You will not find us mean in that respect. It's not as if there will be a ship departing before you could make your way back to the port in this weather. It would be a pity to slog off to some damp, drafty ale house, to bed down on stale straw with naught but a sheet of wool for a blanket, when all the comforts of this house lie idle. No?" Amanda challenged, slipping her hand down Morgan's arm to give her bare hand a warm squeeze.

Morgan stood speechless.

"That's a good boy. Now, wait right here for my Mother. I need to get everything ready, so I'm afraid you will have to introduce yourself. I'll be sure to check on you later, once you're settled in," Amanda escaped with a wink and a glancing kiss to the "boy's" cheek, grinning at the blush that appeared on Morgan's face.

Morgan stood silent for a moment, trying to decide if the other girl really had propositioned her. Between Amanda's thoughts and actions, though, it was hard to reach any other conclusion. But even if she had been flirting with Morgan, Amanda had revealed something even more disturbing. Taking a deep breath, she made sure there was no one in earshot and turned an outraged eye toward Logan. "You were betrothed to Hannah!?"

The ghost paused in the act of exploring the room to quirk an eyebrow at Morgan, as if he was surprised she had not known.

"Don't give me that look, Logan. How could you neglect to mention something like that!?" Morgan hissed, trying to keep her voice down.

"*This isn't the time to discuss this,*" he declared, gesturing toward the door. Faint footsteps could be heard approaching.

Morgan tightened her hands into fists. "No, it isn't! We should have talked about this a long time ago! How could you bring me here without warning me about something as important as that?" she demanded in a hurt voice.

"*Hush. Mother's here,*" he warned, fading out of view.

"Damn," Morgan fumed under her breath, turning to watch the door.

The woman who entered the sitting room was the obvious source of both Logan and Amanda's good looks. She was a woman bred and reared specifically to please powerful, wealthy or important men. Though she must have been in her forties of fifties, she still presented the image of a stunning and cultured young woman. Unlike her mahogany haired offspring, however, she had hair as brilliantly red as Morgan herself. The woman commented on that significant trait immediately.

"Arden's Blood. What a pity you are a boy," Amanda's mother commented. She approached Morgan and took a lock of her hair between her fingers to examine it. She responded automatically to Morgan's look of confusion, lecturing, "There was a time when color this pure was the mark of royalty or nobility. It thrives as the mark of Arden's favor, a blessing most desirable in our daughters and a curse most despised in our sons. The maidens we train to please our lords and masters, and the men we shun—except to warm our beds in secret, in hopes of granting our daughters the mark of favor. Your mother, alas, was not fortunate."

Morgan was startled by this sudden speech. Pages of forgotten history were stirred to mind, legends about the origins of her people she had not known she had learned. Stories of a goddess who took in the human survivors of the cataclysm that ended the war of the gods, living among them and bearing children. Children who formed the refugees into a nation—which was named for the goddess—and ruled over the lands she had provided. They and their descendants had inherited the crimson hair and pale complexion of Arden, displaying it as proof of their lineage and authority: Arden's Blood.

Unfortunately, the kings and lords of Arden were overly generous with their affections, littering the domains with illegitimate offspring. Thus, the royal and noble houses undermined their own authority. These illegitimate sons and daughters, if they did not find service with the goddess, had often sought out the power that was supposed to be their birthright. Ill chosen alliances with wealthy merchant houses resulted in a tide of coups and conspiracies where the royal and noble houses were torn down, and those upstart lords and princes were in turn betrayed by their supporters. Ultimately, there were no legitimate heirs to the noble seats or the throne of Arden, and Arden's Blood became the mark of illegitimacy. Men who settled down and attempted to establish themselves became the targets of the new ruling houses, for fear they would gain popular support and attempt to lay claim to power. The women, always prized for their beauty and longevity, remained valuable prizes, but were forced into a role that forbade them from marrying into royal or noble houses. The alternative, service to the goddess, also forbade marriage. It had become nearly impossible for a favored child to be born with any kind of legitimacy.

The woman released the lock of hair and glided over to a chair. Settling down, she looked up at Morgan and introduced herself, "I am Amelia, Mistress of Redleaf Manor. May I have the honor of knowing you name?"

"I am called Morgan. Recently of the Aeryn Tear Academy," Morgan replied after a faint hesitation.

"Recently of?" Amelia took notice of the qualifier. It suggested Morgan could not properly claim the affiliation, and had no other to offer in introduction. She gave a thoughtful smile, indulging in the pleasure of deduction, "Yet, you are still dressed as an Initiate. You seem a bit young to have completed your training, boy. But then, as you are on the business of the Academy, you would be entitled to dress as you are, even if your training has ceased. Very well, then, what news do you have for me from the Academy?" She reached out her hand to receive the letters in Morgan's hand.

"It is… it's about your son, mostly. I'm afraid it is not good news." Morgan extended her hand with less confidence than she had in presenting the same missives to Amanda. Knowing what the letters contained, Morgan was forced to bite her lip as Amelia studied her warily. She kept her arm extended until the older woman took the messages and examined the seals. Amelia selected the message from Logan, breaking the seal and reading in silence for several long minutes. The woman frowned, glancing up to study Morgan at the conclusion of the first page.

"What do you make of this?" Amelia demanded, adjusting the page and reading aloud:

"When I came closer, I realized that I had been looking at a naked girl washed up on the beach. I rushed to her side, fearing that I had come upon a corpse. To my relief she was merely unconscious, no doubt having passed out once she reached the safety of the shore. I saw no signs of a shipwreck, but it was obvious she had come in with the tide. I carried her back to my room, leaving her in bed to warm up, while I went for a physician. She was awake when the physician and I returned, and we discovered that she had no idea where she was or how she had arrived. While she could recall her name and age, that was all she knew about who she was or where she came from. Physically, she turned out to be in perfect condition. There were no signs of drugs or head trauma. It was as if someone had deliberately wiped her mind of all but the most basic details.

"It's only necessary to look at her to know she ought to be a courtesan, and I swear the training is obvious in how she moves and carries herself. I do not believe that is what she truly is, however. She also seems to be a skilled gymnast and fencer. Most important of all, she is psychic. My guess is that she was a spy. It certainly seems plausible, given the lengths someone went to in order to eliminate her.

"I have never seen another person my age who possessed such extraordinary abilities, Mother. The idea that there might be someone ready to kill her on sight makes me wary of turning her over to the authorities. If I were one of the men who ditched her at sea, I would be on the look out for reports of bodies washed up on shore, alive or dead.

"Obviously, you are better equipped to help her than I am. The problem is finding a way to deliver Morgan to you without drawing the attention of whoever attempted to kill her."

Amelia stopped there and gave Morgan a stern look. "This person my son is describing, it is you." Though it was not a question, Morgan understood that the woman expected her to acknowledge the fact. At Morgan's brief nod, Amelia tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in interest. "Tell me, was it your intention to pass yourself off as a boy?"

Morgan blushed. "Oh, the clothes. I didn't have anything of my own, so I had to borrow some things Logan had outgrown. It was that or go naked."

"Well, that's sufficient for an answer. My dear girl, it takes more than mere clothing to pass as a man, particularly to deceive a courtesan. I suspect my son was correct about you. You've been trained in deception, and use that skill without even thinking about it," Amelia concluded, the glimmer of analytical delight in her eye again.

Morgan looked away, troubled by the notion that she might have been some sort of spy or assassin. "I'm sorry, then. It was not my intention to deceive you. To be honest, I am quite eager to clear up that same misunderstanding with your daughter as soon as possible."

"I am sure you will, although, I do not think that will accomplish what you hope." Amelia chuckled to herself, envisioning the poor girl's reaction to Amanda's stubborn affections. Then she concluded her observations. "Since it should not have been difficult to find you proper clothes at the Academy, I imagine my son thought it would be safer for you, traveling alone, if you were mistaken for a boy--especially since you seem to have a knack for it," Amelia noted, bending her head to continue reading.

Morgan resisted the urge to eavesdrop. It really was not necessary to read the woman's mind to know what she was thinking. A girl with no past, and Morgan's looks, could always establish herself in society as a courtesan with the proper training and references, but that was too obvious. There was a certain amount of anonymity to being a courtesan, but if she *had* been a spy who posed as a courtesan then that was not the guise she wanted to start a new life in. Alternatively, Morgan would certainly not stand out as a priestess, but Logan had found a different way to reinvent Morgan. A way that was certain to displease his mother, which was evident as Amelia reached the end of the letter, frowning and flushed with anger.

Morgan stood as still as she could, willing herself to become invisible—though not employing her gifts to literally obscure her presence.

Amelia surged from her chair and threw the letter in her hand onto the cushion in disgust. "Is this some kind of joke!?" she grated in restrained fury. She turned toward Morgan and raged on. "Taking you for his *wife?* And he dares send you to me with no warning, and only this for an explanation!? Where is he! Why isn't he here to explain himself in person!?"

Morgan opened her mouth but could not respond. Those were the very questions she did not know how to answer. The worst news had yet to be revealed, and Morgan was in a bad enough position having delivered it. Since she expected to bear the brunt of the family's anger and grief, she needed to distance herself from its disclosure as much as possible.

"What sort of explanation am I supposed to give his betrothed and her family? Do you have any idea how important that arrangement is to the pact between our two families?" Amelia continued to rant. "When they realize that the alliance of our houses has been cast aside in favor of some miserable little concubine, we will be fortunate if they do not declare a feud on us!"

Unable to respond to Amelia's outrage, but desperate to direct her attention away from herself, Morgan silently encouraged the woman to consider the other messages she had delivered. "***There has to be an explanation…***" Morgan prompted, using her telepathic gift coercively. "***The other letters… from Hannah… from the Court…***"

Those projected thoughts had an almost instantaneous effect. Amelia stepped back from the cringing messenger, composed herself, and returned to her chair. "Forgive me. He obviously is not here, and I cannot expect you to answer for him. But, if these other messages can shed no light on this matter, you and I will have a great deal to discuss, Daughter-In-Law."

Morgan simply bowed her head. To her relief, the woman picked up the letter from Hannah first. She allowed herself a sigh of reprieve. The news in the final message was the worst, and Morgan did not know if the one grain of hope she still held on to could be shared with Logan's mother. Logan had already warned her not to raise his family's hopes.

The letter from Hannah was originally addressed to Logan. He had resealed it and forwarded it to his home, giving Morgan only a vague explanation about what it contained. If Morgan had known about the betrothal, she would have demanded more of an explanation. This time, she did not hesitate to probe the older woman's mind to satisfy her curiosity.

Amelia arched an eyebrow at Morgan, curious about the intense stillness that suddenly possessed the young woman. To her experienced eye, the demure pose Morgan unconsciously slipped into was evidence that her son was correct. She *had* been trained as a courtesan. Making a mental note to examine her thoroughly later, Amelia broke the two seals on Hannah's letter. Unfolding the pages and smoothing them out, she began to read:

Logan,

It seems that the time for secrets between us is at an end. You must know now that I have discovered and destroyed your secret project. What you planned to do enraged me beyond reason. You also know that I have seen the young woman you have warming your bed. Taken together, you have given me sufficient reason to break our engagement.

While it is my intention to do so, neither your plan nor your involvement with Morgan is truly to blame. I understand enough of your project's purpose to know it would have been best for me to remain an ignorant accomplice in your experiment. And in all honesty, I cannot object to your liaisons with that courtesan. No doubt she is one of your mother's pets, a graduation present or some such. I don't really care. It is enough, however, that you have been keeping secrets from me.

As I have been keeping secrets from you.

Once, we were very close, you and I. Intimates of the first order. But you were always so brilliant, so driven. Learning became your first passion, eclipsing even your passion for me. The more you devoted yourself to the Art, the harder it became to capture your interest. The time you did give me was splendid, but it was so rare… a banquet once a month is not proof against starvation. Yet, what never seemed enough for me seemed more than sufficient for you. I do not doubt you loved me, but you loved probing and penetrating the mysteries of existence more. It eventually occurred to me that you had not abandoned me, so much as I was not able to accompany you on your greatest adventures.

I was lacking, but I was not the only one. There was another who would have flown with you to the gates of heaven and the depths of the abyss, if only he was able. Your friend and mine, Marshal. At first, neither of us sought to betray you. It was just so natural for us to spend our time together, when you never showed up to join us. It was inevitable, I suppose, that our efforts to entertain and amuse each other led to more intimate moments. And intimate moments led to feelings stronger than anything we ever experienced before. In allowing myself to fall in love with Marshal, I have betrayed my family and myself in addition to betraying you. Even worse, it made me realize that I never loved you enough.

So, with this, I surrender. I release you from our engagement, and release myself from the burden of keeping my betrayal a secret. I regret only that I am forced to accuse you of betraying me. If I confessed my true feelings to my family, they would simply forbid me to see Marshal again, and force me into marriage with you. I cannot see you desiring that, not after seeing the way you are with Morgan. All I am really asking is that you admit to two things that I believe are true. You did intend to exploit our marriage to further your study of the Art, and you have fallen in love with the girl that now occupies all of your time.

It is only necessary that you and I, and our beloved Marshal know that it was I who truly bears the blame.

In sincerity, if not in love,

Hannah

Amelia sighed in agitation. From the dates, and the fact that Hannah's letter had been referred to in Logan's, it was clear that the girl's confession had precipitated her son's marriage to Morgan. Apparently, Logan had not bothered to correct Hannah's assumptions about Morgan. He had not bothered to clarify certain details for his mother's benefit either. She could not even guess what the secret project or experiment that Hannah referred to actually was. That was simply another thing she wished her son were present to explain.

Morgan carefully withdrew from Amelia's mind.

There was only one letter remaining, though from the way Amelia brooded over Hannah's message Logan's mother was not in a hurry to read it. Nor did the woman seem inclined to comment on Hannah's confession.

As the moments passed, a strange urge came over Morgan. Despite her intentions to distance herself from the worst of the news she bore, she was the main witness to the events reported in the official documents from the courts of Aeryn Tear. In fact, she was indirectly the cause of the tragedy that befell Logan and herself on their wedding night. Arguably, the instrument of her husband's "demise", and while the court had exonerated her of blame, they had also made his death official, indifferent to her claim that it was still possible to save him.

She had read the transcripts of the investigation and hearings, and her instincts told her that it would be cruel to let Amelia read them unprepared. It would be better to make herself a target for the mother's fury and grief. Before Amelia could shift her attention to the final message, Morgan slipped forward and placed her hand over the sealed document.

Amelia looked up at her in surprise, concern entering her face as she saw the grim, sorrowful expression Morgan wore. "What is it?"

"Your questions, about why Logan is not here to- to introduce me in person a- and explain his actions--" Morgan tried to explain. She looked down for a moment, bangs falling forward to curtain her face. "I am so sorry. I- I didn't want to- I didn't know how to answer."

Apprehension slipped its crushing grip around Amelia. "No. Please…"

Morgan looked up sadly. She had said nothing, really, but already the mother suspected the truth. "On the night we were wed, as we consummated our union, a terrible thing happened, something that confirms the worst of Logan's suspicions about my past. Something that might even explain why I was stripped of my past and cast out to die." Morgan was forced to summon all the resources of her mental discipline as she revisited the traumatic event. If Logan's letter had not already revealed so much, she might not have been able to confide the following. "There was something inside me, something that I think explains my psychic abilities. A demon. I can only suppose that I was intended to serve as its host. The only memories I have recovered came to me that night.

"As a child, I was sacrificed to this thing, but instead, somehow, I managed to fight back. I trapped it within myself, locked it away, and tried my best to forget about it." Morgan took a deep breath, reminding herself that she needed to express the conclusions she and Logan had reached together as though she had figured them out herself. "I did not believe Logan's theory that I was some sort of spy or assassin, but the presence of the demon suggests that I was intended to be something horrible. Is it not said that demons and angels require human hosts to disguise their true natures? It seems reasonable that my masters might have discovered I was not the thing they had tried to create and decided to dispose of me," Morgan pulled a slim dagger from her belt sheath.

"What is that for?" Amelia asked nervously, caught up in the spell of Morgan's story.

Instead of answering, Morgan planted the tip of the blade in the center of her left palm and then thrust the blade through her hand. Blood pooled in her hand and ran down the blade protruding out the other side. Morgan slowly withdrew the dagger, then held the wounded extremity up to display the puncture to Amelia. As Morgan resumed speaking, the bleeding visibly stopped and the wound began to close up.

"This is the strongest of my powers. I heal very rapidly," Morgan confided, sheathing the dagger and swallowing a lump in her throat as she explained, "I think it was provoked by the torture I endured as a sacrifice. If I had to guess, I would say my masters did far worse than dump me naked in the ocean. I think the fact that they erased my mind suggests they were not certain what it would take to kill me. But I don't doubt that they tried."

"Because they stole my past, I had no clue that something might be trapped within me. Logan and I had no warning when, on my wedding night, I opened myself entirely to another human being for the first time in my life," Morgan returned to the main thread of her story. With obvious guilt, she declared, "I unwittingly exposed him to my childhood demon. I was in the throes of passion and did not even notice until my 'husband' attempted to kill me." The shock of suddenly being impaled by a long-sword, literally pinned to her wedding bed, gripped her as the memory flashed back in full detail. The horror of the next few moments, when Morgan was too stunned and confused to defend herself from the demon's wrath, was indescribable.

The torment evident on her face was the only thing keeping the older woman from interrupting. Instead, she closed her eyes and leaned back heavily, the life seeming to drain out of her.

Morgan wrenched her mind away from the images in her mind, taking note of Amelia's reaction. The silence was harder to bear than an outburst of anger or disbelief. "Logan was possessed by the demon," she finally put it in plain words. "People were drawn to my screams and the demon fled, chased to the cliffs where he leapt off. Some witnesses claimed to have seen Logan's body dashed on the rocks before the waves claimed it. This," she returned her hand to the last letter, "is the official notice of his death. It claims that the demon originated from some mishap in his training. I am sorry, I could not volunteer the truth to the court. I would have been executed, I am sure, and I could not allow that to happen."

"Why?" Amelia finally spoke, her tone aggrieved.

Morgan saw the emergence of the disbelief and accusation that she had dreaded, forming into a hatred directed at her. She bowed her head. "I do not believe he is dead. I believe it was within the demon's power to survive that leap, and I think it is possible to track it down and free Logan from it's possession," she declared with fierce conviction.

Amelia regarded Morgan thoughtfully for a few moments, struggling with the emotions unleashed by her tale. Part of her wanted to lash out, to have the girl thrown out in the rain never to be welcomed into her home again. Another part, a smaller part, was intrigued by the determination in her voice as she revealed her belief that there was still hope for her son. It suggested that Morgan did have some feelings for Logan, that maybe in their short time together a real foundation had formed in what was otherwise a marriage of convenience--at least as far as the girl's needs were concerned. But there was a doubt, and Amelia did not hesitate to challenge, "If you truly believe this, why waste time coming here? Why tell me my son is dead, if there is even a ghost of doubt in your mind?"

Morgan looked up, pausing to consider how much more to confide. Clearing her throat, she announced, "I was arrested that night, and held in prison while an investigation was conducted. After three days, I was brought before the court and cleared of blame by the witnesses' testimony. It was while I was in prison that I came to believe the demon would not have risked destroying its host after spending ten years trapped inside me. I started to investigate on my own, once I was released. I checked at every harbor on the island, and eventually found a man who claimed that a man fitting Logan's description came to him seeking passage to Athelon.

"It was also during that first week that I began to have nightmares in which I relived my abduction and sacrifice to the demon," Morgan interjected. "So, I had a notion of where the demon came from, and where it was going. With Logan's death, I became a ward of his mentor, who provided for my defense in court and carried out Logan's arrangements to send me here to you. Taking a chance, I described the place from my nightmares to him one day, hoping he could shed some light on where to seek out the demon's place of origin. He told me that the descriptions I gave brought to mind the accounts of the handful of men who survived the exploration of Aeslyn Tear."

"The ruins said to lie under the City of Avon," Amelia noted, intrigued.

"Yes. That was what he told me. I could have set off directly in pursuit of the demon, but to rescue Logan I would need to know what kind of demon it is and how it is named to be able to bind and banish it. So, I decided to stop here in Avon on my way to Athelon to explore the ruins. It made no sense to come this close to Logan's home and not pay you a visit." Morgan sighed and looked away, focusing on a rain spattered window. "There was only a small chance I would arrive before you heard word of Logan's death, but Logan's mentor was able to convince the court that, as his widow, I should be entrusted with the official notification.

"But, it was never my intention to impose upon your household," Morgan pointed out emphatically. "I am here solely to inform you of the tragedy, and assure you I will not rest until I have succeeded in tracking down and banishing the demon. I will only remain in Avon long enough to explore the ruins and gather the information I need to accomplish that mission," Morgan assured her, gathering herself for her expulsion from the manor.

"I see," Amelia noted, rising from her seat once more and ringing a small bell to summon the steward. She gave Morgan a strained and stricken look, appearing far closer to her age than before, and prepared to dismiss her. "This is all quite unexpected and overwhelming. I need some time alone to absorb all of this." The manservant entered the room and straightened to hear his mistress's request. "Chase, please escort my daughter-in-law to the bath and inform the staff to prepare Logan's room for her. My daughter should have something suitable for her to wear, please ask her to attend to Morgan and then accompany her to dinner," she instructed, gesturing for Morgan to accompany the steward. With a casual bow of the head, she concluded, "Now, if you will both excuse me, I am retiring for the night."

"Come along, then. The bath has been prepared for you," the elderly servant prompted.

Morgan bowed silently to the Mistress of Redleaf, and followed Chase out of the sitting room. She was faintly stunned to note that she had somehow cleared the first hurdle of her quest.

Two

The bath at Redleaf Manor turned out to be the centerpiece of the atrium Morgan had noticed on her way to Amelia's sitting room. It was a large heated pool clearly designed to project the illusion of a natural, outdoor setting. The thick foliage of a hundred varieties of tropical plants added immensely to the effect, which was almost breathtakingly beautiful. It was the sort of luxury one could only find in a palace, temple or--as the case happened to be--the home of a very successful courtesan. Not surprisingly, such an extravagance was not itself devoted to cleansing the body. Thus, Morgan had been escorted through the slice of paradise into a private washroom, shown the amenities, and then left to her own devices. On her seven day voyage from the Isle of Aeryn, she had been limited to sponge baths in the rare times when she had her cabin to herself, and an occasional cleansing with her psychokinetic abilities. Faced with the prospect of a genuine and proper bath, Morgan did not hesitate to strip out of her borrowed clothes.

The elements of an Initiate's garb were revealed in turn as she shed them. First, a loose, off-white tunic of fine, close-knit wool that hung down to mid thigh, with long sleeves, accented by the polished leather collar and cuffs. It was cinched in place by a wide, white leather belt matching the collar, cuffs and boots. Her pants were protected by off-white, suede chaps. Under that, she wore a white, cotton shirt tucked into white canvas pants. The mark of a true Initiate was the fact that it took a fairly competent mage or psychic to keep the entire outfit pristine. As she untied the shirt, she revealed a simple bodice she had fashioned from a discarded pair of chaps, which effectively flattened her modest bosom, worn over a silk-suede body stocking. She had just finished peeling herself out of that, and foot stockings of a similar material, when a flicker at the edge of her vision resolved into the figure of a man looming over her.

Stunned at her failure to detect the intruder's approach, Morgan leapt away in breathless surprise, instinctively putting distance between them.

At the same time, the intruder announced himself. "*Morgan, we need to talk.*" The unearthly quality of his voice identified him instantly as Logan. Recognition hit Morgan mid-leap, distracting her from her landing as she came down on a slick patch of tile on the opposite side of the washroom. Logan stood open mouthed, words interrupted by her sudden surge of motion, watching as Morgan lost her footing and sprawled gracelessly on her rear.

"Demons!" she swore, gasping with one hand pressed over her heart as Logan roared with laughter. Instinctively, she pulled her knees together, tucking her feet close to her haunches, while shifting her weight to rest on her right hip and thigh. In coordination, she clasped her left arm over her bosom while she braced herself with the other. Not even aware of protecting her modesty, she glared up at the intangible man. "Why do you always pop up when I'm taking a bath!?"

"*Why do you always get so excited about it?*" Logan teased, eyes riveted to the sight of his wife in such a provocatively demure pose. The glint of fire in her eyes only made her seem more beautiful to him. The ache of what he had gained and lost in one night blossomed into the exquisite agony that served, in his incorporeal existence, as a cry for sustenance. *The living*, he thought acidly, *know nothing of true hunger.*

"I'll give you excited!" Morgan threatened, surging quickly to her feet, catching a bucket full of water in one hand as she did, and flung it's contents full into Logan's face. In spite of being a phantom, Logan could not help flinching, closing his eyes in anticipation of the splash. With her other hand, Morgan had snatched up a towel, which she draped across her front while Logan's eyes were closed. While Logan was noticing, to his chagrin, that the water had passed harmlessly through him, Morgan braced her feet and held up the bucket threateningly. "What does a girl have to do to get some privacy around you?"

"*Calm down,*" Logan urged hastily, gesturing with both hands for her to lower her weapon. In spite of himself, he was reminded of their "courtship" as he now regarded their first--and only--week of living together. He would never forget the beating he got when she woke up naked in his bed that first night. The physician he had brought had ultimately expended more effort on Logan than he did that night on Morgan. With a sigh, he forced the memories from his mind and started to talk her down. "*Now listen, you're not the only one concerned about privacy here. Which is what a bath generally affords. There are few enough places where it's safe for you to talk to me, and in this land I should warn you, you can't always be certain of that.*"

"Oh, great," Morgan moaned, lowering her upraised arm and glancing around herself. "So I can expect someone *else* to walk in on me too?"

"*This is Arden, Morgan,*" he noted acerbically, though Morgan had to read him quickly to determine if he was annoyed with her ignorance or the fact that he could never predict what parts of her education remained intact. Of course, reading him was actually a matter of just not blocking out or ignoring the workings of his mind. Her look of incomprehension prompted him to elaborate. "*Ardannan's are notoriously indifferent to nudity. We're all so fond of swimming, you can walk through the heart of any city stark naked and the first thing anyone is going to say about it is, 'You forgot your towel'!*"

"You're kidding!" Morgan piped, uncertain whether to laugh or scowl.

"*Not at all,*" he assured her. While he talked, he watched Morgan collecting bathing implements and supplies, her attention focused on him. "*In spite of the fact that we're on the northern continent, most of Arden is extremely temperate. We get almost nine months of rain, and it's rarely cold enough for anyone to even need clothes.*"

"So, I *could* have just wandered around naked?" Morgan interjected, settling down on a stool. She had been joking when she told Amelia that was the only alternative she'd had to wearing Logan's clothes. She smirked softly to herself, not sure if she should be amused or disturbed by the revelation. She had a general knowledge about the world and its various cultures that seemed intact as far as she could tell. Except, knowledge about her native culture seemed to have been wiped from her mind along with the specifics of her past.

"*Well. I didn't say you wouldn't invite unwanted attention. Human customs do not change human nature,*" Logan revised, with a philosophical shrug.

"Ah, so men are still men, then." Morgan gave him a pointed look as she proceeded to rinse herself down and begin scrubbing. On a deeper level, she was considering the native custom and how it appealed to her. Even beyond what she could remember, it seemed to Morgan that she had never felt entirely comfortable wearing clothing. Her skin was too sensitive for the constant contact, which inevitably became too abrasive or too arousing. It was refreshing to think that she could just pick up a towel and head out the door, and no one would say two words about it. Not only that, but she would most likely never be alone in doing so, if "everyone" was as fond of water sport as Logan claimed. There were some fairly obvious risks, but she did not find them discouraging, confident in her ability to take care of her self, even when perfectly nude.

"*More importantly,*" Logan added pointedly, interrupting her musing, "*not all men in Arden are Ardannan.*" He gave her a meaningful look, a not so subtle reminder of previous warnings.

Morgan considered the men she had shared a cabin with on her way to Arden. Morgan had been forced to deflect the taunts and advances of her cabin mates from the first hour of their voyage. Either her "knack for posing as a boy" had not been working that day, or, in the absence of a desirable female, those men considered a "pretty, young boy" an acceptable substitute. Whatever the case, their attentions encouraged the ship's mate to take Morgan aside. *"A man can be well on his way to enjoying your company before you get wind of it,"* he had commented, stopping her as she descended to her cabin for the night and edging his way into a warning*. "A body asleep don't argue too much, and don't take no special courtin'. If he has clever hands he can rouse you out of sleep willing to do just about anything he fancies. If you care to have a say in the matter, keep your pants on--hells, keep your belt and boots on too, 'cuz naked's the same as willin' as far as some sorts are concerned."*

Morgan shuddered, trying not to imagine the consequences of an encounter between her former cabin mates and some unfortunate girl on her way to her favorite swimming hole. It might not have been happening right at that moment, but it could happen at any moment, and certainly had happened in the past. That probably explained why the Port of Avon existed as a separate entity from the City of Avon.

Morgan paused and gestured toward the atrium. "This is sort of the answer to that problem then? At least, if you happen to live in a major city or port. Not so much a private bath, but an open bath in a secure setting. Not only that, a place like this serves to introduce foreigners to our customs."

"*Yes,*" her ethereal mate responded, perched on a tall stool from which he had a delightful view of her. He had become so caught up in gazing, he had almost forgotten why he had intruded on her in the first place. "*Bathing has always been a social activity in Arden, so the bath is set in the public areas of a household to entertain guests. Washrooms afford a little more privacy, housing wash basins and eliminatories together to ensure all soiled water is diverted to the sewers or leech fields. And speaking of privacy, you might recall I did have a reason for invading yours.*"

"All right. Fine," Morgan agreed in faint exasperation, not particularly eager to hear his reaction to what she confided to his mother. As she returned to scrubbing herself down, she suggested, "Since you're here, though, you can wash my back while you tell me what you're so eager to talk about."

"*Temptations, temptations,*" Logan sighed, slipping off the stool to kneel behind her. One of the quirks of their strange connection gave him access to her psychokinetic ability, allowing him to influence the world around her as if he was physically present. It added *some* substance to his presence automatically, allowing him to touch her at any time, and only a little concentration was necessary to pick up an extra brush, lather it with a thick, soapy foam, and massage it into her back. Another quirk, while his phantom body had ways to perceive the physical world, there was nothing exactly equivalent to a sense of touch. Instead, he tuned into Morgan's perceptions, aware of the sensations she experienced. Thus, in order to feel pleasure, he had to cause her pleasure.

"Logan," Morgan protested weakly, as he "accidentally" stimulated more and more of her erogenous areas. In the dark days after Logan's "death" his phantom love making had sufficed more than once to preserve their sanity, but after only two weeks he knew her so well that she only had one chance to protest before she succumbed to his delightful torments.

"*We are married,*" he reminded her, kissing the side of her neck. His phantasmal arms had slipped around to embrace her from behind, as he pulled her back against his chest. He was torn between the sensations he was awakening in her and the odd interaction between the foamy film of soap between her skin and his psychokinetic presence.

"Weren't you just saying someone might walk in on me at any moment?" Morgan managed weakly, hating herself for discouraging his attentions, but clinging to the last thread of caution with all the discipline she could muster.

"*That would be… awkward,*" Logan admitted slowly, ceasing his seductive caresses and simply holding her tight. The ache he had awakened in her was a pleasant companion to the ache that never left him. It was enough to allow him to drink in the pure physicality of her existence, to remind himself what life tasted like. To prevent himself from resuming his caresses, he dumped her out of his lap and stood over her. He took what a mortal might call a deep breath, and trained his mind on what he had wanted to say when he intruded. The frustration of his desire made it easier to recapture the annoyance he had felt over her interview with his mother. "*Morgan, what were you thinking? I told you not to raise any hopes.*"

"I'm sorry, Logan." Morgan composed herself once more on the tile basin of the washroom. She took her ejection and his muted anger in stride. It simply confirmed what she had expected from the moment she confided in Amelia. At least their mutual distractions had allowed some corner of her mind time to come up with an analysis of what she had been feeling or thinking when she ignored his request. Looking up at him, she tried to explain herself. "I just couldn't let her believe that you died such a pointless death. It would have been simpler to lie to her outright and claim you sent me here to be set up as a courtesan."

"*But the news would have eventually caught up to us. You had to tell her about our marriage, and you had to tell her that 'officially' I had been declared dead. That was the reason you came here!*" Logan insisted passionately.

"No. It was not *my* idea to come here," she corrected him firmly. "*You* wanted me to come stay here while I was in Avon. *You* wanted your family to *accept* me. If I had done as you say, she would have cast me out."

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"*But think about what you said! You told her I was* possessed *by the demon. If that were actually true, I wouldn't be here!*"

"What's your point?"

"*My point is, the demon* stole *my body, and there is nothing written or theorized about how to undo that! We still don't know how I got kicked out of my body and trapped in your mind. The tale you told my mother offers the chance of certain success. If you identify the demon and succeed in tracking it down, there are thousands of priests or clerics capable of binding and banishing it. What we are actually trying to do, however--getting me out of your head and back into my own body--has never been done. I don't think such a thing has ever even been heard of!*"

"I don't care, Logan. I *am* going to get you your body back!"

"*I am touched by your determination, but… my intentions were to provide you with the support of my family in the event that you can not. Now, if you fail, Mother will despise you. She will denounce you and banish you from this household.*"

"If I fail, Logan, I won't need your family. I'll be with you."

"*Morgan…*"

"So. You are a girl."

"Amanda?"

"*Oh, this is so like you! I should have known…*"

"Here, let me wash your back."

"That's not necessary…"

"Nonsense. It's common courtesy, and I hope you will return the favor."

"*I'm sorry, Morgan. You're on your own.*"

"I thought it was common to wash in private."

"We are in private. Were you or were you not trained as a courtesan?"

"What?"

"Oh, I suppose you don't remember. Poor thing."

"Who told you--?"

"I pinched the letters from Mother's sitting room, kitten. I must say, I just about fell through the floor. So many surprises. It is going to be fun having you around."

"But- but then you know--"

"Everything, pet. Is it true? Did you have only one night with him?"

"Aren't you upset?"

"About his death? I suppose you did not have much time to get to know him, Morgan. Logan and I, we are very much alike in some regards. Neither of us could settle for anything at face value. We were always too stubborn and inquisitive to follow convention. You only have to challenge the status quo once to discover how dangerous curiosity can be. I know that the Art was Logan's passion. He took risks that terrified even his instructors. If you would have asked me before this happened, I would have told you my brother was most likely to die experimenting with magic. I can also tell you, that is the way he would have wanted to go."

"But still…"

"Hush. I know what you are asking. The thing you are not considering is *your* loss, Morgan. Mother is no doubt inclined to strangle you, because she is so angry at him. Me, I am proud of what he did. I am glad he slipped free of that worthless cheat. I don't doubt for a moment that he fell in love with you, and that makes you something special."

"…"

"In any case, it's a good thing you came straight to the manor. It is not safe to wander around Avon alone these days."

"Please, I'm not as helpless as I look, whether I appear to be a boy or a woman."

"I mean no insult, Morgan. I am very serious. There have been an unusual number of dead bodies turning up lately."

"I've heard it's not unusual to have three or four murders a day in a large city. What do you mean by an 'unusual' number?"

"Well, maybe it would be more correct to say there have been a number of unusual dead bodies turning up, then. Dozens of naked children, most about the age you appeared to be as a boy, some younger, but all ripped limb from limb. Also, often at the same time and place, full grown men and women who seem to have been mauled to death.