She - Fear of the Dark

20081120 : To adapt this material, it could be placed before Morgan returns to face her childhood demons. However, it might be appropriate to set it after Ash is turned into a girl, placing it before she discovers that her nightmares are based on actual events.

Tristan and Drake are two of Morgan’s friends, but they should be replaced here with Morgan-the-boy and Logan.

pages ∙ words

At the heart of the ruin, perched on top of the cliffs, the restless pounding of the surf could be heard making its eternal assault on the beaches below. Normally, there were hundreds of students climbing among the rocks and frolicking among the waves. Now, only a few remained, enjoying the beach or exploring the ancient fortifications one last time. Their days at the academy had come to an end, marked by the passing of the summer solstice.

As they contemplated the beginning of their adult lives, the trio lingered to watch the sun set. Near an entrance to the labyrinth of underground corridors carved deep into the coastal rock, stone stairs led the way up to the ramparts. At the foot of the stairs, outside the reinforced steel doors, the trio shed their backpacks and split up. The two boys moved to inspect the dark tunnels while the girl, clearly avoiding the enclosed depths, mounted the steps.

Out of the shelter of the bunker the stiffening breeze carried a tang of salt. Climbing the outer wall she found a perch atop the battements from which her eyes command a majestic view of the ocean.

Light stabbed through her veil of blood red hair, glowing orange and gold as the wind whipped it about her like a miniature inferno. It also teased the fabric of her blouse. Typical of her choice of dress, it was a loose fitting, oversized shirt, hanging to the tips of her fingers and brushing at her knees. Her opalescent grey eyes gazed out over the waves. The water was losing its glimmer beneath a towering thunderhead riding the wind in from the sea. In almost no time the mounting clouds had blotted out the sun. It made for a brilliant sunset, but it promised to be a stormy night.

A glance at sky was enough to tell her that they should have left over an hour ago. That was how long it would take to return to the dorms for their final night’s rest. They were now going to have to hike back in the dark, though the rain.

Behind her, one of the boys appeared. She frowned at having missed any sign of his approach. As he climbed up beside her she looked at him. He was a slender youth, graced with an elegance of form many girls envied. His short, blond hair was almost chalk-white, and his eyes were a complex, tawny hazel. At the moment, those eyes were watching the storm clouds warily. She voiced her thoughts to him, “Any chance we’ll get home before it starts?”

His face took on a measuring look as the clouds rolled menacingly closer. In spite of the hour, the wind was warm and charged with electricity. He shrugged, as aware as she that their plans had gone amiss somewhere. “Even if our guide had showed on time, I doubt we would have beaten the rain home. We expected to be getting home after dark. But that’s not what you’re really asking.” He shrugged. “I hate to say it, Dawn, but I think we are going to have a long and unpleasant walk home,” he observed grimly.

She glared at him. “You know I don’t like my friends using that nickname.”

He frowned his eyebrows at her, “Yeah, I know, but Dusk’s name is Morgan too. How could you fall in love with a guy with the same name as you? I never heard of anything like it before I met Morgan and you. Why confuse the issue further the way you do?” he asked critically. “Why not pick a nickname you do like?”

Morgan sighed. “It’s not that confusing for us, when it’s just us. Even when you’re talking to one of us about the other, it isn’t really a problem. Calling us by our House names is too formal and impersonal. Talk to me like a friend,” she countered calmly. “I mean really, you practically get hives if your friends call you ‘Bone’,” she jabbed with a sharp grin.

He winced, and smiled at her. “I get the message, Morgan,” he said ruefully. “Still, I guess... it’s just that I really like the sound of ‘Dawn’ better. It’s short, simple and elegant,” he trailed off when she turned to stare at him as though he’d suddenly started speaking Swahili. “At least it isn’t also slang for ‘penis’,” he teased in retort.

“Oh,” she responded flatly. “Well, I guess I don’t mind you using it so much as some others,” she warmed. She decided not to remind him that, as the only person alive with her House name, it was a constant reminder of her loss. Her gaze was drawn back over the water. The sun shone vainly through the clouds, conspiring to make an ugly prospect disturbingly beautiful. After a short silence, she returned to the subject. “Anyway, since we can’t possibly get home intact,” she grinned, “what do you think we should do?”

He glanced up and smiled devilishly, “Maybe we should run,” he got out before the first wet drop slapped the concrete between them. The smell of rain had been seeping up on them and Morgan suddenly realized how strong it had become. A second drop struck nearby as Tristan continued, “Lets go find Drake, he knows his way around here a lot better than we do.”

Morgan considered the suggestion, as she looked up at the cumulostratus looming over them. “Why don’t you go ahead?” she prompted, casually gesturing to the real thunderhead, the cumulonimbus, “*One* of us should start picking his brain for ideas—*I* want to watch *that* come in,” she trailed off into a sigh. She didn’t particularly relish getting drenched, but then again she was not in the least inclined to delve into any dark tunnels in a hurry, either. “He’s still in the bunker, isn’t he?” she asked with a slight shudder, knowing full well the answer.

Tristan considered that as he regained his feet. He was picking up some of her uneasiness but attributed it to the storm. “You know,” he offered, voicing the logical evolution of his thought, “we could wait out the storm right here in the bunker. We have plenty of food, some blankets... why, we could stay for the whole night comfortably enough if we had to,” he pointed out.

Morgan clasped her arms around herself to mask the sudden quaking in her hands. Eyeing the storm nervously, she asked, “Do we have a choice?”

“Not really,” he shrugged, noticing the tension in her voice. A sharp chill thrilled its way through her, darting down her spine. She turned away from Tristan to look inland at the hills and trees once intended to hide the installation from hostile forces at sea. Tristan watched quietly while she carefully composed her face and reflected on some hidden thought. She ran her slender fingers through her wild hair, effectively concealing her profile from Tristan’ view. Somehow, Tristan sensed that she was through talking for a while. “I’m gonna go get Drake then. See if he has any ideas before we decide what we’ll do, okay?”

She turned around and smiled uneasily. “Um, okay. I’ll ... ah, be right down in a few minutes,” she responded, then went back to her thoughts.

“I tell you, something’s bothering her, Drake. She’s ... I don’t know ... *sulking* up there right now,” Tristan reported as he helped Drake move their gear inside bunker. “She doesn’t like the idea of staying in this place for the night,” he deduced, accurately enough, though he had no idea why.

“Come on, don’t worry about Morgan. She’s a tough one. Maybe she’s just tired. Y’know?” replied Drake in his ‘practical’ voice. He shrugged, tossing one of their backpacks across to Tristan to join another inside at Tristan’s foot. “Hell, maybe it’s just her time of month.”

“God you’re crass. You know, if she heard that you might as well bend over now and kiss your sweet ass good-bye,” Tristan scolded his friend.

Drake just glanced up the stairway and grinned. “No stress, she’s cool. She always says that to me when she’s in a mood.”

Tristan shook his head. They were all close friends, and it was expected that occasionally they would rub each other the wrong way, but he suspected Drake could be a bit more insensitive than even friends would forgive. Morgan was normally very easy going, but her temperament had extremes. No one who had seen her exact revenge on Mark Kingston—a senior who’d slandered her name on campus last fall—wanted to cross her. Eleven years of dance and gymnastics—and an uncle who ran the only martial arts dojo in town—had taught her exactly what her body could do. It gave her quite an edge in a fight.

He looked up as Drake broke the silence, losing his train of thought.

”You know, she’d better move it quick, it’s really starting to piss out there,” Drake observed almost casually. Tristan looked out through the entrance just as the shower became a punishing down pour. Native Washingtonians though they were, they stood in awe of the gale force rain for a full five minutes before a sodden Morgan flew in out of the open.

“I am absolutely soaked!” she despaired laughing as water ran off her nose and chin. “I think that’s a genuine flash flood!” she exclaimed, smiling ruefully. She shivered as she wiped the sheen of water off her face and flipped her hair back out of her way. The boys quickly moved the gear deeper into the tunnel to keep what they had dry—the wind flung as much moisture into the opening as Morgan was splashing around shaking off.

“D’you want a pop?” Drake asked pulling out a can of Coke.

“I’d prefer to dry off first,” she stalled him, with a gesture to set it out for her while peeling her plastered shirt away from her skin. Tristan reached into his backpack and pulled out a towel. He tossed that to her and as she began to attack her hair with it she murmured, “Thanks.”

“Jeez, Tristan, you packed a towel?” Drake quipped, laughing.

“Hey, we’re on an island. With all that water available, I knew *someone* was going to end up wet,” Tristan returned evenly with a grin. Then he caught Drake’s savoring gaze and followed it to Morgan. Nothing they hadn’t seen before, but damn it had developed since... “You really ought to change out of those,” Tristan commented as she tried to wring out a corner of her shirt.

She snapped a look at him. “In here?” she asked archly, “You’d just like that, wouldn’t you?” she challenged, half embarrassed by the fact that she was not wearing anything under her disturbingly white wet blouse and pants.

“You don’t want to catch a cold,” Tristan shrugged in self-defense.

“There are rooms in here you can change in, if it bothers you that much,” Drake suggested innocently. Morgan looked past them into the abysmal darkness.

“I don’t have much of a choice do I?” she observed with a shiver. Tristan looked between her, Drake and the dark tunnel and then gestured at her pack. She nodded for him to dig out a change of clothes. “Turn around guys,” she ordered. Tristan and Drake exchanged sighs and turned to face into the bunker. “If you two want to be able to walk in the morning you’d better behave,” she warned as Tristan passed back what he found. As soon as she had her back turned, their eyes wandered back toward the light.

Morgan kicked off her shoes, amazed to discover how sodden even her socks were from the relatively short exposure. She could not hike her jeans up enough to strip off her socks, so she straightened and began to work at the buttons of her fly. As Morgan began to pull at the clinging material, she could almost feel the heat of their eyes on her. I *wish we could go back too,* she thought at them, *I wish we were mature enough to have that and still be friends.* She mentally shook her head, doing anything else would only make the situation worse, *one of us has to be strong enough to say no.*

Drenched denim clung to her slender body making it a struggle to peel her jeans away from her hips and thighs. The muscles of her back and legs played under her skin as she kicked off her pants and stripped off the blouse. Tristan and Drake marveled at her physique, because it was as lean as it was well defined. As she moved, hard tone muscles broke the smooth contours they normally hid in. It was her height, the length of her limbs and even the slender column of her neck, that disguised her build. Even seeing it before them it was hard to believe that a frame so graceful and feminine could hide such strength and power. In many ways she was still too much the tom boy who befriended them in grade school. Neither boy could fathom why she tried so hard to hide her beauty, not realizing that she did it solely for them. Better to hide what she had discovered must be withheld.

Having enough decency to feel guilty about staring, they wordlessly withdrew their attention as she began to rub down with the towel. It was amazing how she could make them forget she was really a girl until they were confronted with the naked reality. A few minutes later she announced it was safe to look, dressed in an emerald over-shirt over her black work out tights. Kneeling down, she tied her sneakers and then cracked open her drink. The boys sauntered back over to their packs and the three of them extracted and passed around trail mix, sandwich rolls and other tidbits left over from their hike through the woods. Just as they were getting more comfortable though, a gust of wind threw a sudden shower over them.

They were up instantly snatching their gear and retreating even further down the tunnel. “Okay, that’s enough of that,” Drake announced. “Come on guys, there are rooms further in where we won’t have to worry about water seeping in under us,” he explained. The last of the light faded out into the distance. Within the remaining darkness, no one could see the glaze of fear evolving in Morgan’s eyes as the invisible walls closed in around them. She heard Drake head off, and right after him, Tristan’ footsteps began to shuffle away. She clamped her free hand to Tristan’ pack and gritted her teeth to follow.

“Guys?” Morgans voice broke the silence, “Stop for a minute, I have to find a flashlight. I need to be able to see where we’re going.” When she was ignored, she snapped, “Hey, come on,” tugging hard on Tristan’ pack. It seemed to her that they had been walking for an eternity in the absolute dark.

“I know where we’re going, Morgan,” Drake replied confidently. “It’s not that far now, its not like there’s anything to run into except us. Besides, don’t you think we ought to save the batteries for an emergency,” he counseled reasonably.

“This just might be an emergency,” she growled less reasonably under her breath. Neither indicated that they had heard her though, and did not stop. “I could just use one... mine. Your two will be enough for an emergency,” she argued to the blackness ahead of her. Suddenly, she collided with Tristan, as he stopped just short of crashing into Drake.

She heard Drake sigh and say, “Come on, Morgan, don’t be a stain. There’s a room just up ahead where we can stay for the night in safety. No flashlight is going to hold out all night and if you turn on one now it’ll only be that much harder for your eyes to adapt.” That said, he turned and stalked ahead once more. Tristan caught her arm in his hand and squeezed reassuringly, before starting after him. Covered by the dark, he shook his head. He had been watching Drake like a hawk since morning because for once in his life the practical joker had not caused a problem on their trip. *Yet,* he thought. That had to mean something big was laying in wait. He felt Morgan shudder under his light touch, as if she had caught that thought.

“I thought you said the room was right ahead, Drake,” Tristan demanded softly, a short while later as he stopped to get his bearings. Morgan sank to the floor as soon as she realized he had stopped. When nothing but silence replied, he knew at once what had happened. He immediately dropped his pack and, with care to make no revealing sound, started rummaging around in it for his flashlight. Uncannily Morgan picked up on it at once.

“What are you looking for, Tristan?” she asked sharply, an unnatural panic edging her voice.

“Flashlight,” he said simply, “I think Drake ditched us.”

“What?!” Immediately, frantic pawing sounded behind him. He found his flashlight, but swore under his breath as he pulled it free of the backpack. It felt unnaturally light. Then a shrill, “God damn him!” escaped from Morgan, “he took out the batteries!” Morgan dashed her flashlight against the wall in a rare display of temper.

In a quiet voice he confessed, “Mine too. Morgan...” he tried to find her in the dark with his hand, “come on, calm down. It’s not that bad...”

“I can’t breathe!” she interrupted in a full-blown panic. Just as his fingers brushed her shoulder, she gave a startled shriek. “I’ve got to get out of here...” she breathed in a rattled voice immediately after the echoes faded. In a flash she was on her feet running blindly back down the passageway. Tristan cursed and took off vainly after her. There was little he could do, he had too much of his sanity to be able to run through the darkness. Naturally, they forgot about their packs.

She ran with all her strength and speed. Soon she was far beyond him forcing him to strain desperately to distinguish the sound of her steps from the booming echoes, almost losing her more than once. Finally, as she began to tire, he caught up to her. He grabbed her, having to pin her arms to her sides and pick her up to keep her from breaking loose. She struggled blindly, with no awareness of who held her.

“Easy, easy. You’re all right. I’m here. No one’s going to hurt you. Just relax, shhhh...” he comforted. He had to repeat his litany of reassurance for a while before the violence of her reaction began to ebb. Once she had settled down to a lingering shudder, he set her back on her feet. Her head slumped onto his shoulder and she clasped her arms around him tightly. He was still startled that he had man-handled her so easily. She was about the same height as he, and he guessed, in better condition.

After what seemed an eternity, she finally let go and began to control her sobs. He stroked her hair gently, scared by the whole event. It had not really sunk in yet, somehow seeming disconnected with reality. Never in all of the time he had known her had she ever lost her composure before anyone. As her body shivered against his, he realized that there had been signs to warn him, but like Drake he had been blind to them. Sure, she was a strong girl, he thought, but a phobia is a phobia. Whatever it was that set her off, the dark, the enclosure, whatever, neither he nor Drake had any right to have compelled her to confront it. It shamed him that Morgan had not felt she could tell them, and worse, that as their friend she had not dared to openly avoid it.

In a quiet voice, he asked, “Why didn’t you say something?”

Morgan shook her head before speaking. “I didn’t realize...” she whispered, “it was so long ago I just forgot. I have never been comfortable about going under ground since...” she cut that thought off sharp. “I... I didn’t know it would hit me this hard. I never tried to face it down before. I never knew how bad it was.” Her voice was heavy with shame and tears. “I thought I could face it after all this time. Tristan,” he could feel her look up, “please, I need to get out of here.”

Tristan realized that whatever she was feeling, it had not gone away simply because she had regained a measure of control. He apologized and let her go, just holding her hand, as she started for the entrance again. By this time his eyes were as wide as they could get, trying for so long to see in the dark. Up ahead, around a bend he could make out a grey area in the black. As they came closer it grew into an outline edging the corridor. His heart sunk. It was a door.

He released Morgan and moved ahead to get a closer look. He ran his hand over the face of the door, realizing that this was indeed where they had come in. Morgan caught up to him and laid her hand against the metal. In spite of the fact that a hint light was trickling in through the cracks, it was really nothing more than a grey chaos. He heard her palm sliding over the surface looking for a handle or something. A second later the door squeaked and groaned as she tried to budge it. He heard her grunt as the complaints of the door suddenly grew faster and more violent. He was already trying to grab her again when he heard the thump of her shoulder against the door.

“Damn it!” she exploded, giving a resounding kick, “They locked us in!” His hands missed her as she sank down to the floor in despair. Tristan figured out her position as her head began to pound against the reinforced portal. Alarm flashed through him as he deduced the cause of the sound. Dropping in a crouch in front of her he gathered her head in his hands.

“Morgan,” he said forcefully, “please stop. You’re not in any danger, but if you keep this up you’re gonna end up seriously hurt. No one knew they locked this place up for the night. There’s nothing we can do about it now, but wait it out until morning.” He grabbed her hands and pulled her back to her feet. “Come on, let’s go back for our things and find someplace to settle down for the night,” he said.

She jerked away, slamming her back against the door. “No, Tristan! I can’t go back in there,” she pleaded.

He squeezed her hands and argued, “Morgan, we are already *in* here, and it doesn’t make any difference where we *are* in here, its for just as long. If we stay here we’ll be miserable. Please,” he urged luring her away from the door. Before she relented she kicked it again both hopefully and resentfully. It did not budge. Resigning herself to her fate, she slipped her arm in his she allowed him to lead her back into the darkness.

When they finally reached their backpacks, they found Tristan’ flashlight switched on and aimed at an open doorway a little further down the passage. Drake was standing in the doorway.

“I forgot to tell you, they lock the place up at night,” he announced carelessly, the punch line of his little practical joke. Tristan stepped up to the tall athlete and slugged him in the jaw. He didn’t even think about it. But as he watched his friend stagger back in shock, he was suddenly glad that Morgan hadn’t beaten him to the punch. He half expected Drake to get up and kill him, but Drake was too astonished. Tristan was not one who lost his temper or threw the first punch. Drake finished reeling back and flopped down on his rump still within the beam of light.

Before either of them moved again, Morgan spoke, “I forgot to tell *you* that I’m severely claustrophobic.”

Drake froze. He looked too shocked for words. He looked up at Morgan who was wild eyed and damp with nervous sweat and tears of terror. She was shivering perceptibly and her lip was bleeding from being chewed upon.

“Oh Jesus, Morgan,” Drake breathed, guilt beginning to follow the shock. “I didn’t know... I didn’t mean for you...” Tristan interrupted him.

“She just about killed herself trying to find a way to get out of here,” he said accusingly. “I hope you’re real proud of your self.”

“Oh God! I had no idea,” he looked from her to Tristan. Tristan’ fear for Morgan had turned to anger at *him*. He looked back at Morgan, and murmured, “You were the one who always laughed off my pranks. I never expected this...” His face was a portrait of contrition as he begged, “Can you... ever forgive me?”

“If I manage to survive this night, it might be possible,” she said in a low deadly tone. From the look on her face, it did not seem likely.

“I thought it would be Tristan who’d take it seriously...” he began, trying to deflect her anger. “That’s why I had him go talk to you outside, earlier; so I could get the batteries,” he confessed in a small voice. He was shaking his head, “You were supposed to stay where you were so I could scare you.” He looked up, “but you were gone when I popped out...” Morgan stared at him like a pronouncement of doom. She said nothing for several minutes. With an act of will she stilled her trembling and slowly wiped the blood from her chin before speaking. Drake put his hands over his face for a moment then dragged them back over his head pulling his hair tight across his scalp.

“When are you going to grow up?” she demanded quietly. “Do you think life is all just a game? Do you ever take anything seriously?” He looked down and his shoulders slumped. He pulled his feet under him and stretched his arms out over his knees, shaking his head slowly. “I thought you were becoming more dependable on this trip. That’s why I followed you in here in spite of my fear,” she continued. “I trusted you Drake. I thought ‘hey, its okay, Drake knows his way around here... he won’t let me get trapped in the dark, cold, damp.’ I trusted you,” she repeated, pausing to wipe a tear, ”and you tricked me!”

He took it as far as he could bear it then he shouted back, “How the fuck was I supposed to know!?” His eyes gleamed in the direct light of the torch.

Morgan’s control cracked and she screamed at the top of her lungs, “You *knew* my brother, you fucker!!!” Tristan staggered back as the concrete walls amplified her voice. Morgan’s face crumpled in a sick knot of rage and grief. She snatched up her bag and the flashlight and stormed past both of them. She shoved past Drake and made her way to the center of the vast room he had hidden in. At the center she sat down and braced the flashlight so its light shone up to reflect throughout the room. She sat there and shivered by her self for several minutes before either of them moved.

“What was she talking about?” Tristan leaned close and asked in a whisper.

Drake didn’t look at him. “I don’t know,” he answered, “her brother died a long time ago, she was just a little girl. I barely even remember him,” he looked over toward his oldest friend in the world and silently wished he was dead. He got up stiffly and moved over to her. The look on his face told Tristan to keep his distance. When he had come up beside her he knelt down and gently brushed at the hair on her shoulder.

She leaned away just enough to evade the contact and looked up at him with eyes of pain.

“I never *ever* meant to do anything like this to you. I’d *never* deliberately hurt you,” he protested. She looked at him with a hint of surprise. “You’re not like other people to me. You were always so fearless. I’ve always admired and respected you more than any other,” he smiled humbly, “I’ve often wished I could be more like you. And now...” he trailed off guiltily.

“I never knew that,” she said quietly. “When I would watch you play sports, I would always wish I could be just like you,” she laughed a melancholy laugh. She curled her arms around her knees and buried her face in her lap. “We’ve been friends for a long time. I guess we just never learned how to really talk to each other.”

Tristan slipped up and nudged Drake. “Drake... about punching you. I was just so upset...” he began remorsefully. They were all in a bad situation and it could have been much worse if they had gotten carried away with violence. He shook his head and met his friend’s eye, explaining, “I’ve always felt this secret need to protect Morganna. Tonight I got to, and it scared the hell out of me to watch her come undone. But I had no business taking out my reaction on you.”

Drake shrugged. “I deserved worse, buddy. I feel like I’ve just done the worst thing in my life,” he admitted. The three of them sat in silence for a few minutes, and Drake was greatly disturbed by what Morgan had screamed at him. He finally couldn’t stand it and he spoke up. “When you said that... about knowing your brother, what were you talking about, Morgan?” he asked cautiously.

She turned and stared at him. There was anguish but she seemed to swallow it down. “You really don’t remember do you?” she said softly. He shook his head slightly and both boys fixed their eyes on her as she frowned in pain. She stared off into the shadows for a few minutes before nodding to herself. When she began to explain, her voice was so light they had to strain to hear it. “When I was a girl... when I was five, I followed my brother off into the back woods,” she began, “It was the end of summer and I was going to be starting school in a few weeks. Alex had been in school for a year already and he was sort of impatient about getting back so he could to see all of his friends every day. I didn’t know it then, but his hiking was just a way to kill the time. I thought it was great to go exploring and since I worshipped him it was a lot of fun to sneak around after him. He didn’t like playing with me anymore because his friends at school called him a sissy if he let me join in.

“I didn’t understand it and so I guess I was a little mad at him. He didn’t dislike me any more than he ever did, but he didn’t like to be laughed at,” she shrugged. “So, I had started riding him. Pushing him. On that day, I was getting tired of being left out so I decided to get back at him for ignoring me. When he stopped on the trail to rest, I snuck up and stole his lunch and started running. Naturally he chased me, which was just what I wanted—to have him paying attention to me again. We used to always run races together so it wasn’t easy for him to catch me.

“When he finally did begin to catch up to me, I wanted to *keep* his attention. I went off the trail and cut through the trees. I scrambled over a log and found myself at the edge of a drop off. It was only about one story or so, and the ground looked soft with pine needles, so I jumped down. I heard the hollow thump as I landed and that’s when I realized I had gone too far. Just then Alex appeared above me and before I could warn him he vaulted over the log. He heard it too when he landed, followed by loud cracking as the ancient timbers gave way.

“He grabbed me and tried to scramble for the edge when it collapsed under us. It had been some sort of cover over an abandoned mine shaft, or something, and we fell a long way down,” she paused and swallowed a few times to combat the tears that were forming. “He was trying to protect me as we fell, and he took all of the impact when we reached the bottom.”

Tristan and Drake held their breath as she winced at the remembered sound. “His back broke on a support timber that lay under us. He was instantly paralyzed, but he managed to hold on for a couple of days. It took them a week to find us. I talked to him almost constantly when I wasn’t screaming for help, unable to climb out. I felt him *die* in that dark hole,” she stopped, trying vainly to hold back her tears.

Tristan reached out to her, and she shook her head violently. “I lost my mind after that. They had to put me in a hospital after my sister brought them to find me.” She almost stopped there, but there was more they had to know, ”I didn’t start school that year, and they wouldn’t let my sister stay back waiting for me. I spent most of that time in psychiatric care,” she explained in answer to one question she had never responded to in the past. “My sister did everything she could to help me get over it, but she was also a little afraid of me. The doctors called it some by kind of fancy name but it was like I had absorbed a part of my brother’s personality. I aped a lot of his habits and mannerisms, I slept in his room and played with his friends. I even did all the little things around the house he’d always done, so with me around it was like my brother never left, but had just become invisible. It hurt everyone in my family, and so no one ever talked about it or him. It was like he had never existed.”

Drake was struck, because now he did remember it. He had played with Alex ever since they were babies. One day he simply didn’t show up to play. He remembered that everyone had been very sad, but all they told him was that Alex had gone away. Eventually he had met Morganna and he forgot all about her older brother.

“Oh my god,” he said feeling sick. What she said was true. She had been so much like Alex that she had taken her brother’s place in his memory. He hadn’t really met her until they were about seven, but he had remembered it as if they had learned to walk together. If he hadn’t flunked the first grade twice, he wouldn’t even have met her. Not as likely, anyway.

“I wish I’d known,” said Tristan softly. He had met her in the first grade too, and he’d always thought it neat that she could be one of the guys. He looked around as it all began to sink in. How much willpower had it taken for her to go with them into these dark passageways? He looked into her eyes, this time with new understanding.

Because it was cold, they all scooted closer together, leaning on each other, and gradually began to talk about growing up together. Tristan and Drake shared some of their own fears with Morgan, mostly talking to keep her distracted. They kept it up for hours, since she didn’t seem able to relax enough to fall asleep. Eventually, Tristan noticed that Morgan wasn’t the only one shivering. Quickly he grabbed up the blankets and started to pull off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” Drake asked.

“Take your clothes off, both of you. We’re gonna get hypothermia in here. We need to gang up under the blankets and our clothes are only going to suck up body heat we should be sharing,” Tristan explained as he slipped off his jeans. “Sorry Morganna, but this is serious.”

She thought for a second, but she remembered her long stay in the hospital so she wasn’t about to argue. After she had shed her clothes and nestled between them under the blankets she laughed weakly, “God, just don’t tell Craig about this, he’ll kill us all.”

They all laughed weakly. Drake grinned in the dim light. “Yeah, I’ll bet he’d wish he bothered to come with us if he knew...” he said running his hand over Morgan’s thigh. Morgan sighed. She didn’t mind the touch, because in spite of Drake’s horrible practical joke, she trusted him. Actually, of all the boys she had grown up with, he and Tristan were the only ones she had trusted when it came to taking risks. She leaned her head on Tristan’ shoulder and caressed Drake’s hand on her thigh. Like many things they had explored together, they had discovered their sexuality together.

Tristan sighed. “Why are you seeing that jerk anyway?” he asked plaintively.

She snorted, “You mean, why am I sleeping with that jerk,” she chuckled, knowing him better. Tristan and Drake exchanged a look and then they both nodded severely in agreement with her. She sighed. This was another of those things she had not been brave enough to talk with them about before. She had learned her lesson about silence though. She pulled the two of them into a closer embrace, and took down the one promise she had bound them too when she had stopped sleeping with them.

“Outside of you two,” she began, caressing their backs under the blanket, “he’s the only guy I’ve met who I respect.” They both raised eyebrows at that, but then they were biased. She grinned sadly, “Unlike you two, I can stand to hurt him if I have to; to cut him off from the group, because he was never as close as we are.” She looked carefully at them. “If I thought you two could honestly share me, I would never have pushed you off. But I didn’t want to come between you and I couldn’t pick just one of you. Do you understand?” she asked with great concern.

They looked at each other and the same thoughts passed in their eyes. They had always been just ‘the guys’ even though one of them had been ‘fortunate’ enough to have been female. They had learned about making love, and about fucking, not as boys and girls but as friends. Nothing would change the fact that physically, hormonally, they were boys and she was a girl, however. It was simple biology, and the fact was, as they had almost proved tonight, they *would* fight over her; it only needed a perceived reason. They nodded their heads unhappily.

It was hard to admit, because it was harder to submit to the consequence that they did not have the hope of her as long as they had respect for their friendship. They had not been able to accept it when she had drawn the line and ended it. *I’m sorry guys, I didn’t mean to hurt you either,* she thought, realizing that she had. Morgan slid a hand up each young man’s body and stopped gently to caress a face. *If only you cared for each other as much as you care for me.* She spoke to both at once, “I can never be your girl, but I will always be your friend and that’s...” she paused. I *hope we’ve grown enough to deal with this,* she reflected once, knowing where she was going, “...what makes lovers.” Her head ducked down, and with great difficulty, she spoke. ”I don’t want to use you, but I *need* something... to occupy my mind... or I won’t make it through this,” she pleaded quietly. Not to their manhood, but to their honor. It was not an easy thing to do, for any of them, because they did feel love for each other, and they lived in a world where what she proposed would only cheapen her and confuse them.

Maybe even humiliate them.

She looked into their eyes, and they saw that she had already thought of that. Silently she urged them to grow past what other’s might think and realize that this was just between them and had nothing to do with the rest of the universe. She could deal with it her self in those terms—that in the private reality the three of them had shared, intimacy between them was nothing to be ashamed of, but a point on which they deserved to be proud. She only wished she had been able to face it herself without something like this to prompt it. She watched them struggle with it for a while, and felt it with them as they realized that this was about being equals, and that it had nothing to do with gender.

Tristan and Drake exchanged a look, searching each other for trust, because what she hadn’t said had still come through. She was not opening herself back up to them but asking them to open up to each other.

“This isn’t...” Drake began carefully.

“...I know,” Tristan responded, managing to keep eye contact.

Drake sat still for a moment, then gave his hand to his old friend and grinned impishly, “Hey, I’ll still respect you in the morning.” They all laughed to ease the tension.

She had to admit to herself that she had doubted they would be able to deal with what she’d implied, but her pride in them soared as they looked past sexuality and embraced naked sensuality. It might have made her uncomfortable to consider it in the clear light of day, but locked in a barracks in a hole in the ground on the verge of losing her mind, it made perfect sense.

In 1st person

Standing in the ruins perched on top of the cliffs, I could hear the restless pounding of the surf making its eternal assault on the beaches below. Normally, there would be hundreds of initiates climbing among the rocks and frolicking among the waves. Now, only a few of us remained, enjoying the beach or exploring the ancient fortifications one last time. Our days at the academy had come to an end.

As I stood contemplating the beginning of my adult life, the sun kissed the horizon. I could feel the presence of Morgan and Drake below me, returning to the mouth of the tunnels they had been exploring. I had felt them wandering the labyrinth of underground corridors carved deep into the coastal rock, from my perch on the outer wall. In a moment, they would emerge at the foot of the stairs I had followed up, when they chose to go down into the darkness. I still had not figured out why I had not gone with them. I could not explain the fear that had gripped me as I stared into that dark maw.

A faint boot-scuff from the foot of the stairs confirmed their emergence. Knowing that they were safe, outside the reinforced steel doors, I relaxed with a soft sigh. I had worried that my fear had been a premonition of danger, and tortured myself for not voicing my concern before they went in. I want to say that fear had rendered me mute, but the truth is that I was only afraid they would laugh at me.

I strained to hear their voices, but the wind had picked up as the sun began to set. The shifting air currents mixed the earthy forest scents with the salty tang of the sea. The view was majestic, truly spectacular, and for a few moments I lost myself in it. Light stabbed through my hair as the wind whipped it about her like a miniature inferno, the blood red strands, glowing orange and gold as they filled with illumination. The restless air also teased the fabric of my blouse, a loose fitting, oversized shirt, hanging to the tips of my fingers and brushing at my knees.

As I watched, the water lost its glimmer beneath a towering thunderhead that rode the wind in from the sea. In almost no time the mounting clouds had blotted out the sun. It made for a brilliant sunset, but it promised to be a stormy night.

A glance at sky was enough to tell me that we should have left over an hour ago. It would take at least that long to reach the dorms for our final night’s rest. I frowned and stifled a curse, not looking forward to hiking back in the dark, though the rain.

Behind me, one of the boys appeared. I should have sensed his approach and kicked myself, mentally, for dropping my guard. As he climbed up beside me I looked at him. He was a slender youth, graced with an elegance of form many girls envied. His short, red hair was almost identical to mine in color, and we also had the same moody ocean eyes. At the moment, his eyes were watching the storm clouds warily. I resisted the urge to smile and voiced what I had just been thinking. “Any chance we’ll get home before it starts?”

His face took on a measuring look as the clouds rolled menacingly closer. In spite of the hour, the wind was warm and charged with electricity. He shrugged, knowing as well as I where our plans had gone amiss. “Even if our guide had showed on time, I doubt we would have beaten the rain home. Honestly, I expected we would get back after dark. But that’s not what you’re really asking.” He shrugged. “I hate to say it, Dawn, but I think we are going to have a long and unpleasant walk home,” he observed grimly.

I glared at him. “You know I don’t like you calling me that.”

He frowned his eyebrows at her, “Since when?”

I ground my teeth and tried not to blush. “Since everyone else started calling me that. Since it stopped being your name for me. Since the night—” I cut myself off; we never talked about that night. We were not ready to face it.

He stared at me for a moment and then looked away. “Oh.” He caught on quick. That was one of the reasons I liked him so much. His eyes returned to mine as he apologized, “I’m sorry, Morgan. I should have figured it out when you stopped calling me Dusk.”

I sighed. “Our House names are too formal and impersonal. I just want you to address me like a friend,” she countered calmly. “I don’t care if it is confusing for us, to go by the same name. When it’s you talking to me, it isn’t. Even when you’re talking to someone about me, it isn’t really a problem,” I pointed out with a sharp grin.

He winced, and smiled at me. “I get the message, Morgan,” he said ruefully. “Still, I guess... it’s just that I really liked calling you ‘Dawn’. It’s short, simple and elegant,” he trailed off when I turned to stare at him as though he’d suddenly been possessed. “Morgan it is, then,” he corrected, holding his hands up to ward me off.

“Oh,” she responded flatly. “Well, I guess I don’t mind you using it so much as some others,” she warmed. She decided not to remind him that, as the only person alive with her House name, it was a constant reminder of her loss. Her gaze was drawn back over the water. The sun shone vainly through the clouds, conspiring to make an ugly prospect disturbingly beautiful. After a short silence, she returned to the subject. “Anyway, since we can’t possibly get home intact,” she grinned, “what do you think we should do?”

He glanced up and smiled devilishly, “Maybe we should run,” he got out before the first wet drop slapped the concrete between them. The smell of rain had been seeping up on them and Morgan suddenly realized how strong it had become. A second drop struck nearby as Tristan continued, “Lets go find Drake, he knows his way around here a lot better than we do.”

Morgan considered the suggestion, as she looked up at the cumulostratus looming over them. “Why don’t you go ahead?” she prompted, casually gesturing to the real thunderhead, the cumulonimbus, “*One* of us should start picking his brain for ideas—*I* want to watch *that* come in,” she trailed off into a sigh. She didn’t particularly relish getting drenched, but then again she was not in the least inclined to delve into any dark tunnels in a hurry, either. “He’s still in the bunker, isn’t he?” she asked with a slight shudder, knowing full well the answer.

Tristan considered that as he regained his feet. He was picking up some of her uneasiness but attributed it to the storm. “You know,” he offered, voicing the logical evolution of his thought, “we could wait out the storm right here in the bunker. We have plenty of food, some blankets... why, we could stay for the whole night comfortably enough if we had to,” he pointed out.

Morgan clasped her arms around herself to mask the sudden quaking in her hands. Eyeing the storm nervously, she asked, “Do we have a choice?”

“Not really,” he shrugged, noticing the tension in her voice. A sharp chill thrilled its way through her, darting down her spine. She turned away from Tristan to look inland at the hills and trees once intended to hide the installation from hostile forces at sea. Tristan watched quietly while she carefully composed her face and reflected on some hidden thought. She ran her slender fingers through her wild hair, effectively concealing her profile from Tristan’ view. Somehow, Tristan sensed that she was through talking for a while. “I’m gonna go get Drake then. See if he has any ideas before we decide what we’ll do, okay?”

She turned around and smiled uneasily. “Um, okay. I’ll ... ah, be right down in a few minutes,” she responded, then went back to her thoughts.

“I tell you, something’s bothering her, Drake. She’s ... I don’t know ... *sulking* up there right now,” Tristan reported to Drake as he helped him move their gear inside bunker. “She doesn’t like the idea of staying in this place for the night,” he deduced, accurately enough, though he had no idea why.

“Come on, don’t worry about Morgan. She’s a tough one. Maybe she’s just tired. Y’know?” replied Drake in his ‘practical’ voice. He shrugged, tossing one of their backpacks across to Tristan to join another inside at Tristan’ foot. “Hell, maybe it’s just her time of month.”

“God you’re crass. You know, if she heard that you might as well bend over now and kiss your sweet ass good-bye,” Tristan scolded his friend.

Drake just glanced up the stairway and grinned. “No stress, she’s cool. She always says that to me when she’s in a mood.”

Tristan shook his head. They were all close friends, and it was expected that occasionally they would rub each other the wrong way, but he suspected Drake could be a bit more insensitive than even friends would forgive. Morgan was normally very easy going, but her temperament had extremes. No one who had seen her exact revenge on Mark Kingston—a senior who’d slandered her name on campus last fall—wanted to cross her. Eleven years of dance and gymnastics—and an uncle who ran the only martial arts dojo in town—had taught her exactly what her body could do. It gave her quite an edge in a fight.

He looked up as Drake broke the silence, losing his train of thought.

”You know, she’d better move it quick, it’s really starting to piss out there,” Drake observed almost casually. Tristan looked out through the entrance just as the shower became a punishing down pour. Native Washingtonians though they were, they stood in awe of the gale force rain for a full five minutes before a sodden Morgan flew in out of the open.

“I am absolutely soaked!” she despaired laughing as water ran off her nose and chin. “I think that’s a genuine flash flood!” she exclaimed, smiling ruefully. She shivered as she wiped the sheen of water off her face and flipped her hair back out of her way. The boys quickly moved the gear deeper into the tunnel to keep what they had dry—the wind flung as much moisture into the opening as Morgan was splashing around shaking off.

“D’you want a pop?” Drake asked pulling out a can of Coke.

“I’d prefer to dry off first,” she stalled him, with a gesture to set it out for her while peeling her plastered shirt away from her skin. Tristan reached into his backpack and pulled out a towel. He tossed that to her and as she began to attack her hair with it she murmured, “Thanks.”

“Jeez, Tristan, you packed a towel?” Drake quipped, laughing.

“Hey, we’re on an island. With all that water available, I knew *someone* was going to end up wet,” Tristan returned evenly with a grin. Then he caught Drake’s savoring gaze and followed it to Morgan. Nothing they hadn’t seen before, but damn it had developed since... “You really ought to change out of those,” Tristan commented as she tried to wring out a corner of her shirt.

She snapped a look at him. “In here?” she asked archly, “You’d just like that, wouldn’t you?” she challenged, half embarrassed by the fact that she was not wearing anything under her disturbingly white wet blouse and pants.

“You don’t want to catch a cold,” Tristan shrugged in self-defense.

“There are rooms in here you can change in, if it bothers you that much,” Drake suggested innocently. Morgan looked past them into the abysmal darkness.

“I don’t have much of a choice do I?” she observed with a shiver. Tristan looked between her, Drake and the dark tunnel and then gestured at her pack. She nodded for him to dig out a change of clothes. “Turn around guys,” she ordered. Tristan and Drake exchanged sighs and turned to face into the bunker. “If you two want to be able to walk in the morning you’d better behave,” she warned as Tristan passed back what he found. As soon as she had her back turned, their eyes wandered back toward the light.

Morgan kicked off her shoes, amazed to discover how sodden even her socks were from the relatively short exposure. She could not hike her jeans up enough to strip off her socks, so she straightened and began to work at the buttons of her fly. As Morgan began to pull at the clinging material, she could almost feel the heat of their eyes on her. I *wish we could go back too,* she thought at them, *I wish we were mature enough to have that and still be friends.* She mentally shook her head, doing anything else would only make the situation worse, *one of us has to be strong enough to say no.*

Drenched denim clung to her slender body making it a struggle to peel her jeans away from her hips and thighs. The muscles of her back and legs played under her skin as she kicked off her pants and stripped off the blouse. Tristan and Drake marveled at her physique, because it was as lean as it was well defined. As she moved, hard tone muscles broke the smooth contours they normally hid in. It was her height, the length of her limbs and even the slender column of her neck, that disguised her build. Even seeing it before them it was hard to believe that a frame so graceful and feminine could hide such strength and power. In many ways she was still too much the tom boy who befriended them in grade school. Neither boy could fathom why she tried so hard to hide her beauty, not realizing that she did it solely for them. Better to hide what she had discovered must be withheld.

Having enough decency to feel guilty about staring, they wordlessly withdrew their attention as she began to rub down with the towel. It was amazing how she could make them forget she was really a girl until they were confronted with the naked reality. A few minutes later she announced it was safe to look, dressed in an emerald over-shirt over her black work out tights. Kneeling down, she tied her sneakers and then cracked open her drink. The boys sauntered back over to their packs and the three of them extracted and passed around trail mix, sandwich rolls and other tidbits left over from their hike through the woods. Just as they were getting more comfortable though, a gust of wind threw a sudden shower over them.

They were up instantly snatching their gear and retreating even further down the tunnel. “Okay, that’s enough of that,” Drake announced. “Come on guys, there are rooms further in where we won’t have to worry about water seeping in under us,” he explained. The last of the light faded out into the distance. Within the remaining darkness, no one could see the glaze of fear evolving in Morgan’s eyes as the invisible walls closed in around them. She heard Drake head off, and right after him, Tristan’ footsteps began to shuffle away. She clamped her free hand to Tristan’ pack and gritted her teeth to follow.

“Guys?” Morgans voice broke the silence, “Stop for a minute, I have to find a flashlight. I need to be able to see where we’re going.” When she was ignored, she snapped, “Hey, come on,” tugging hard on Tristan’ pack. It seemed to her that they had been walking for an eternity in the absolute dark.

“I know where we’re going, Morgan,” Drake replied confidently. “It’s not that far now, its not like there’s anything to run into except us. Besides, don’t you think we ought to save the batteries for an emergency,” he counseled reasonably.

“This just might be an emergency,” she growled less reasonably under her breath. Neither indicated that they had heard her though, and did not stop. “I could just use one... mine. Your two will be enough for an emergency,” she argued to the blackness ahead of her. Suddenly, she collided with Tristan, as he stopped just short of crashing into Drake.

She heard Drake sigh and say, “Come on, Morgan, don’t be a stain. There’s a room just up ahead where we can stay for the night in safety. No flashlight is going to hold out all night and if you turn on one now it’ll only be that much harder for your eyes to adapt.” That said, he turned and stalked ahead once more. Tristan caught her arm in his hand and squeezed reassuringly, before starting after him. Covered by the dark, he shook his head. He had been watching Drake like a hawk since morning because for once in his life the practical joker had not caused a problem on their trip. *Yet,* he thought. That had to mean something big was laying in wait. He felt Morgan shudder under his light touch, as if she had caught that thought.

“I thought you said the room was right ahead, Drake,” Tristan demanded softly, a short while later as he stopped to get his bearings. Morgan sank to the floor as soon as she realized he had stopped. When nothing but silence replied, he knew at once what had happened. He immediately dropped his pack and, with care to make no revealing sound, started rummaging around in it for his flashlight. Uncannily Morgan picked up on it at once.

“What are you looking for, Tristan?” she asked sharply, an unnatural panic edging her voice.

“Flashlight,” he said simply, “I think Drake ditched us.”

“What?!” Immediately, frantic pawing sounded behind him. He found his flashlight, but swore under his breath as he pulled it free of the backpack. It felt unnaturally light. Then a shrill, “God damn him!” escaped from Morgan, “he took out the batteries!” Morgan dashed her flashlight against the wall in a rare display of temper.

In a quiet voice he confessed, “Mine too. Morgan...” he tried to find her in the dark with his hand, “come on, calm down. It’s not that bad...”

“I can’t breathe!” she interrupted in a full-blown panic. Just as his fingers brushed her shoulder, she gave a startled shriek. “I’ve got to get out of here...” she breathed in a rattled voice immediately after the echoes faded. In a flash she was on her feet running blindly back down the passageway. Tristan cursed and took off vainly after her. There was little he could do, he had too much of his sanity to be able to run through the darkness. Naturally, they forgot about their packs.

She ran with all her strength and speed. Soon she was far beyond him forcing him to strain desperately to distinguish the sound of her steps from the booming echoes, almost losing her more than once. Finally, as she began to tire, he caught up to her. He grabbed her, having to pin her arms to her sides and pick her up to keep her from breaking loose. She struggled blindly, with no awareness of who held her.

“Easy, easy. You’re all right. I’m here. No one’s going to hurt you. Just relax, shhhh...” he comforted. He had to repeat his litany of reassurance for a while before the violence of her reaction began to ebb. Once she had settled down to a lingering shudder, he set her back on her feet. Her head slumped onto his shoulder and she clasped her arms around him tightly. He was still startled that he had man-handled her so easily. She was about the same height as he, and he guessed, in better condition.

After what seemed an eternity, she finally let go and began to control her sobs. He stroked her hair gently, scared by the whole event. It had not really sunk in yet, somehow seeming disconnected with reality. Never in all of the time he had known her had she ever lost her composure before anyone. As her body shivered against his, he realized that there had been signs to warn him, but like Drake he had been blind to them. Sure, she was a strong girl, he thought, but a phobia is a phobia. Whatever it was that set her off, the dark, the enclosure, whatever, neither he nor Drake had any right to have compelled her to confront it. It shamed him that Morgan had not felt she could tell them, and worse, that as their friend she had not dared to openly avoid it.

In a quiet voice, he asked, “Why didn’t you say something?”

Morgan shook her head before speaking. “I didn’t realize...” she whispered, “it was so long ago I just forgot. I have never been comfortable about going under ground since...” she cut that thought off sharp. “I... I didn’t know it would hit me this hard. I never tried to face it down before. I never knew how bad it was.” Her voice was heavy with shame and tears. “I thought I could face it after all this time. Tristan,” he could feel her look up, “please, I need to get out of here.”

Tristan realized that whatever she was feeling, it had not gone away simply because she had regained a measure of control. He apologized and let her go, just holding her hand, as she started for the entrance again. By this time his eyes were as wide as they could get, trying for so long to see in the dark. Up ahead, around a bend he could make out a grey area in the black. As they came closer it grew into an outline edging the corridor. His heart sunk. It was a door.

He released Morgan and moved ahead to get a closer look. He ran his hand over the face of the door, realizing that this was indeed where they had come in. Morgan caught up to him and laid her hand against the metal. In spite of the fact that a hint light was trickling in through the cracks, it was really nothing more than a grey chaos. He heard her palm sliding over the surface looking for a handle or something. A second later the door squeaked and groaned as she tried to budge it. He heard her grunt as the complaints of the door suddenly grew faster and more violent. He was already trying to grab her again when he heard the thump of her shoulder against the door.

“Damn it!” she exploded, giving a resounding kick, “They locked us in!” His hands missed her as she sank down to the floor in despair. Tristan figured out her position as her head began to pound against the reinforced portal. Alarm flashed through him as he deduced the cause of the sound. Dropping in a crouch in front of her he gathered her head in his hands.

“Morgan,” he said forcefully, “please stop. You’re not in any danger, but if you keep this up you’re gonna end up seriously hurt. No one knew they locked this place up for the night. There’s nothing we can do about it now, but wait it out until morning.” He grabbed her hands and pulled her back to her feet. “Come on, let’s go back for our things and find someplace to settle down for the night,” he said.

She jerked away, slamming her back against the door. “No, Tristan, I can’t go back in there,” she pleaded.

He squeezed her hands and argued, “Morgan, we are already *in* here, and it doesn’t make any difference where we *are* in here, its for just as long. If we stay here we’ll be miserable. Please,” he urged luring her away from the door. Before she relented she kicked it again both hopefully and resentfully. It did not budge. Resigning herself to her fate, she slipped her arm in his she allowed him to lead her back into the darkness.

When they finally reached their backpacks, they found Tristan’ flashlight switched on and aimed at an open doorway a little further down the passage. Drake was standing in the doorway.

“I forgot to tell you, they lock the place up at night,” he announced carelessly, the punch line of his little practical joke. Tristan stepped up to the tall athlete and slugged him in the jaw. He didn’t even think about it. But as he watched his friend stagger back in shock, he was suddenly glad that Morgan hadn’t beaten him to the punch. He half expected Drake to get up and kill him, but Drake was too astonished. Tristan was not one who lost his temper or threw the first punch. Drake finished reeling back and flopped down on his rump still within the beam of light.

Before either of them moved again, Morgan spoke, “I forgot to tell *you* that I’m severely claustrophobic.”

Drake froze. He looked too shocked for words. He looked up at Morgan who was wild eyed and damp with nervous sweat and tears of terror. She was shivering perceptibly and her lip was bleeding from being chewed upon.

“Oh Jesus, Morgan,” Drake breathed, guilt beginning to follow the shock. “I didn’t know... I didn’t mean for you...” Tristan interrupted him.

“She just about killed herself trying to find a way to get out of here,” he said accusingly. “I hope you’re real proud of your self.”

“Oh God! I had no idea,” he looked from her to Tristan. Tristan’ fear for Morgan had turned to anger at *him*. He looked back at Morgan, and murmured, “You were the one who always laughed off my pranks. I never expected this...” His face was a portrait of contrition as he begged, “Can you... ever forgive me?”

“If I manage to survive this night, it might be possible,” she said in a low deadly tone. From the look on her face, it did not seem likely.

“I thought it would be Tristan who’d take it seriously...” he began, trying to deflect her anger. “That’s why I had him go talk to you outside, earlier; so I could get the batteries,” he confessed in a small voice. He was shaking his head, “You were supposed to stay where you were so I could scare you.” He looked up, “but you were gone when I popped out...” Morgan stared at him like a pronouncement of doom. She said nothing for several minutes. With an act of will she stilled her trembling and slowly wiped the blood from her chin before speaking. Drake put his hands over his face for a moment then dragged them back over his head pulling his hair tight across his scalp.

“When are you going to grow up?” she demanded quietly. “Do you think life is all just a game? Do you ever take anything seriously?” He looked down and his shoulders slumped. He pulled his feet under him and stretched his arms out over his knees, shaking his head slowly. “I thought you were becoming more dependable on this trip. That’s why I followed you in here in spite of my fear,” she continued. “I trusted you Drake. I thought ‘hey, its okay, Drake knows his way around here... he won’t let me get trapped in the dark, cold, damp.’ I trusted you,” she repeated, pausing to wipe a tear, ”and you tricked me!”

He took it as far as he could bear it then he shouted back, “How the fuck was I supposed to know!?” His eyes gleamed in the direct light of the torch.

Morgan’s control cracked and she screamed at the top of her lungs, “You knew my brother you fucker!!!” Tristan staggered back as the concrete walls amplified her voice. Morgan’s face crumpled in a sick knot of rage and grief. She snatched up her bag and the flashlight and stormed past both of them. She shoved past Drake and made her way to the center of the vast room he had hidden in. At the center she sat down and braced the flashlight so its light shone up to reflect throughout the room. She sat there and shivered by her self for several minutes before either of them moved.

“What was she talking about?” Tristan leaned close and asked in a whisper.

Drake didn’t look at him. “I don’t know,” he answered, “her brother died a long time ago, she was just a little girl. I barely even remember him,” he looked over toward his oldest friend in the world and silently wished he was dead. He got up stiffly and moved over to her. The look on his face told Tristan to keep his distance. When he had come up beside her he knelt down and gently brushed at the hair on her shoulder.

She leaned away just enough to evade the contact and looked up at him with eyes of pain.

“I never *ever* meant to do anything like this to you. I’d *never* deliberately hurt you,” he protested. She looked at him with a hint of surprise. “You’re not like other people to me. You were always so fearless. I’ve always admired and respected you more than any other,” he smiled humbly, “I’ve often wished I could be more like you. And now...” he trailed off guiltily.

“I never knew that,” she said quietly. “When I would watch you play sports, I would always wish I could be just like you,” she laughed a melancholy laugh. She curled her arms around her knees and buried her face in her lap. “We’ve been friends for a long time. I guess we just never learned how to really talk to each other.”

Tristan slipped up and nudged Drake. “Drake... about punching you. I was just so upset...” he began remorsefully. They were all in a bad situation and it could have been much worse if they had gotten carried away with violence. He shook his head and met his friend’s eye, explaining, “I’ve always felt this secret need to protect Morganna. Tonight I got to, and it scared the hell out of me to watch her come undone. But I had no business taking out my reaction on you.”

Drake shrugged. “I deserved worse, buddy. I feel like I’ve just done the worst thing in my life,” he admitted. The three of them sat in silence for a few minutes, and Drake was greatly disturbed by what Morgan had screamed at him. He finally couldn’t stand it and he spoke up. “When you said that... about knowing your brother, what were you talking about, Morgan?” he asked cautiously.

She turned and stared at him. There was anguish but she seemed to swallow it down. “You really don’t remember do you?” she said softly. He shook his head slightly and both boys fixed their eyes on her as she frowned in pain. She stared off into the shadows for a few minutes before nodding to herself. When she began to explain, her voice was so light they had to strain to hear it. “When I was a girl... when I was five, I followed my brother off into the back woods,” she began, “It was the end of summer and I was going to be starting school in a few weeks. Alex had been in school for a year already and he was sort of impatient about getting back so he could to see all of his friends every day. I didn’t know it then, but his hiking was just a way to kill the time. I thought it was great to go exploring and since I worshipped him it was a lot of fun to sneak around after him. He didn’t like playing with me anymore because his friends at school called him a sissy if he let me join in.

“I didn’t understand it and so I guess I was a little mad at him. He didn’t dislike me any more than he ever did, but he didn’t like to be laughed at,” she shrugged. “So, I had started riding him. Pushing him. On that day, I was getting tired of being left out so I decided to get back at him for ignoring me. When he stopped on the trail to rest, I snuck up and stole his lunch and started running. Naturally he chased me, which was just what I wanted—to have him paying attention to me again. We used to always run races together so it wasn’t easy for him to catch me.

“When he finally did begin to catch up to me, I wanted to *keep* his attention. I went off the trail and cut through the trees. I scrambled over a log and found myself at the edge of a drop off. It was only about one story or so, and the ground looked soft with pine needles, so I jumped down. I heard the hollow thump as I landed and that’s when I realized I had gone too far. Just then Alex appeared above me and before I could warn him he vaulted over the log. He heard it too when he landed, followed by loud cracking as the ancient timbers gave way.

“He grabbed me and tried to scramble for the edge when it collapsed under us. It had been some sort of cover over an abandoned mine shaft, or something, and we fell a long way down,” she paused and swallowed a few times to combat the tears that were forming. “He was trying to protect me as we fell, and he took all of the impact when we reached the bottom.”

Tristan and Drake held their breath as she winced at the remembered sound. “His back broke on a support timber that lay under us. He was instantly paralyzed, but he managed to hold on for a couple of days. It took them a week to find us. I talked to him almost constantly when I wasn’t screaming for help, unable to climb out. I felt him *die* in that dark hole,” she stopped, trying vainly to hold back her tears.

Tristan reached out to her, and she shook her head violently. “I lost my mind after that. They had to put me in a hospital after my sister brought them to find me.” She almost stopped there, but there was more they had to know, ”I didn’t start school that year, and they wouldn’t let my sister stay back waiting for me. I spent most of that time in psychiatric care,” she explained in answer to one question she had never responded to in the past. “My sister did everything she could to help me get over it, but she was also a little afraid of me. The doctors called it some by kind of fancy name but it was like I had absorbed a part of my brother’s personality. I aped a lot of his habits and mannerisms, I slept in his room and played with his friends. I even did all the little things around the house he’d always done, so with me around it was like my brother never left, but had just become invisible. It hurt everyone in my family, and so no one ever talked about it or him. It was like he had never existed.”

Drake was struck, because now he did remember it. He had played with Alex ever since they were babies. One day he simply didn’t show up to play. He remembered that everyone had been very sad, but all they told him was that Alex had gone away. Eventually he had met Morganna and he forgot all about her older brother.

“Oh my god,” he said feeling sick. What she said was true. She had been so much like Alex that she had taken her brother’s place in his memory. He hadn’t really met her until they were about seven, but he had remembered it as if they had learned to walk together. If he hadn’t flunked the first grade twice, he wouldn’t even have met her. Not as likely, anyway.

“I wish I’d known,” said Tristan softly. He had met her in the first grade too, and he’d always thought it neat that she could be one of the guys. He looked around as it all began to sink in. How much willpower had it taken for her to go with them into these dark passageways? He looked into her eyes, this time with new understanding.

Because it was cold, they all scooted closer together, leaning on each other, and gradually began to talk about growing up together. Tristan and Drake shared some of their own fears with Morgan, mostly talking to keep her distracted. They kept it up for hours, since she didn’t seem able to relax enough to fall asleep. Eventually, Tristan noticed that Morgan wasn’t the only one shivering. Quickly he grabbed up the blankets and started to pull off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” Drake asked.

“Take your clothes off, both of you. We’re gonna get hypothermia in here. We need to gang up under the blankets and our clothes are only going to suck up body heat we should be sharing,” Tristan explained as he slipped off his jeans. “Sorry Morganna, but this is serious.”

She thought for a second, but she remembered her long stay in the hospital so she wasn’t about to argue. After she had shed her clothes and nestled between them under the blankets she laughed weakly, “God, just don’t tell Craig about this, he’ll kill us all.”

They all laughed weakly. Drake grinned in the dim light. “Yeah, I’ll bet he’d wish he bothered to come with us if he knew...” he said running his hand over Morgan’s thigh. Morgan sighed. She didn’t mind the touch, because in spite of Drake’s horrible practical joke, she trusted him. Actually, of all the boys she had grown up with, he and Tristan were the only ones she had trusted when it came to taking risks. She leaned her head on Tristan’ shoulder and caressed Drake’s hand on her thigh. Like many things they had explored together, they had discovered their sexuality together.

Tristan sighed. “Why are you seeing that jerk anyway?” he asked plaintively.

She snorted, “You mean, why am I sleeping with that jerk,” she chuckled, knowing him better. Tristan and Drake exchanged a look and then they both nodded severely in agreement with her. She sighed. This was another of those things she had not been brave enough to talk with them about before. She had learned her lesson about silence though. She pulled the two of them into a closer embrace, and took down the one promise she had bound them too when she had stopped sleeping with them.

“Outside of you two,” she began, caressing their backs under the blanket, “he’s the only guy I’ve met who I respect.” They both raised eyebrows at that, but then they were biased. She grinned sadly, “Unlike you two, I can stand to hurt him if I have to; to cut him off from the group, because he was never as close as we are.” She looked carefully at them. “If I thought you two could honestly share me, I would never have pushed you off. But I didn’t want to come between you and I couldn’t pick just one of you. Do you understand?” she asked with great concern.

They looked at each other and the same thoughts passed in their eyes. They had always been just ‘the guys’ even though one of them had been ‘fortunate’ enough to have been female. They had learned about making love, and about fucking, not as boys and girls but as friends. Nothing would change the fact that physically, hormonally, they were boys and she was a girl, however. It was simple biology, and the fact was, as they had almost proved tonight, they *would* fight over her; it only needed a perceived reason. They nodded their heads unhappily.

It was hard to admit, because it was harder to submit to the consequence that they did not have the hope of her as long as they had respect for their friendship. They had not been able to accept it when she had drawn the line and ended it. *I’m sorry guys, I didn’t mean to hurt you either,* she thought, realizing that she had. Morgan slid a hand up each young man’s body and stopped gently to caress a face. *If only you cared for each other as much as you care for me.* She spoke to both at once, “I can never be your girl, but I will always be your friend and that’s...” she paused. I *hope we’ve grown enough to deal with this,* she reflected once, knowing where she was going, “...what makes lovers.” Her head ducked down, and with great difficulty, she spoke. ”I don’t want to use you, but I *need* something... to occupy my mind... or I won’t make it through this,” she pleaded quietly. Not to their manhood, but to their honor. It was not an easy thing to do, for any of them, because they did feel love for each other, and they lived in a world where what she proposed would only cheapen her and confuse them.

Maybe even humiliate them.

She looked into their eyes, and they saw that she had already thought of that. Silently she urged them to grow past what other’s might think and realize that this was just between them and had nothing to do with the rest of the universe. She could deal with it her self in those terms—that in the private reality the three of them had shared, intimacy between them was nothing to be ashamed of, but a point on which they deserved to be proud. She only wished she had been able to face it herself without something like this to prompt it. She watched them struggle with it for a while, and felt it with them as they realized that this was about being equals, and that it had nothing to do with gender.

Tristan and Drake exchanged a look, searching each other for trust, because what she hadn’t said had still come through. She was not opening herself back up to them but asking them to open up to each other.

“This isn’t...” Drake began carefully.

“...I know,” Tristan responded, managing to keep eye contact.

Drake sat still for a moment, then gave his hand to his old friend and grinned impishly, “Hey, I’ll still respect you in the morning.” They all laughed to ease the tension.

She had to admit to herself that she had doubted they would be able to deal with what she’d implied, but her pride in them soared as they looked past sexuality and embraced naked sensuality. It might have made her uncomfortable to consider it in the clear light of day, but locked in a barracks in a hole in the ground on the verge of losing her mind, it made perfect sense.