She - Haunted Arrival

20081217 : This material was originally intended for an earlier version of Morgan, combining elements of Avonlea and Morgan Erin Wildmuir.

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Morgan stood at the edge of the cliff and stared out over the ocean. The Emerald Coast stretched its wing from far beyond the northern horizon out into the warm, tropical waters before her. The majestic coastal mountains carried on in chains of archipelagoes where the land sank sedately into the water's embrace. Cold arctic air, flowing along the feathered highlands, endlessly combed the tropical winds, bathing the rain forests from which the coast got its name.

The forests had adapted an age ago, blending away climate borders. Dangerous, because it gave one no way to distinguish where one was along most of the coast and deep into the interior. Only far to the east did the tropics become a dominating blanket over ancient slopes. Neither people, nor beasts were ever entirely sure of the perimeter of their habitats.

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 in a rip tide’s grip.

"*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 staircases, 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.

“Dai, there is a messenger.”

“Well, let him in, Amanda.”

“What a strange boy.”

“Don't just stand in the doorway, boy, come in. What is the matter with you? You act like you've never seen the inside of a house before.”

“Oh, I have. A couple of times now. I’m sorry. Oh, yeah. Here, I think this is for you.”

“You think? Don't you imagine that someone in your position ought to know if he is delivering his message to the right person or not? ... Whatever then. Give it over. Well, you're in luck. It has my name on it. That's a good start. My thanks boy, Amanda will pay you at the door.”

“That's it then?”

“What, did you expect more? Well, from the look of you, I imagine you were hoping for a bite to eat or some such.”

“Not really. Still...”

“Well?”

“A’nae nu didn't really tell me what to do if you sent me away.”

“A’nae nu? My gods, it is her handwriting! I really didn't think she would answer... But then, that makes you inuna, my grandson.”

“Uhn. Not really.”

“Well, you called my daughter 'mother', no?”

“And my mother calls me her daughter.”

“I see. I thought you looked a bit frail. My apologies, but you do wear those clothes very well. ... Never mind. Amanda! Go with Amanda, inuna, and get cleaned up. I’m sure you've been on the road for a while.”

“Thank you. A bath sounds very nice. Ninu.”

“Good. When you're done come back here and we'll talk about what to do with you.”

“As you wish.“

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."

>

"*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…*"

“I guess the clothes really do make the man, eh?”

“I’m sorry. I tried to tell you. It was not my intention to mislead you.”

“You wear these and you say you weren't trying?”

“Why not? They're more comfortable, they're easier to move in; I think they are better suited to life on the road.”

“Oh, I can understand why you would dress like this to travel alone. To be honest, it was not the clothes, as much as the way you wore them, that deceived me. You are used to presenting yourself as a boy.”

“I do have a knack, it seems, but it’s not something I do a lot.”

“Uhn. What about the, uh...?”

“Hmn? I’m too old for dancing in the nude. Besides, there's nothing wrong with a girl wearing a sheath.”

“Oh. Well, sure; you can wear one under a skirt, but under pants?”

“What's so strange about that? If I have to, I can change pants on the road, or something, without totally exposing myself.”

“What do you do when you have to go? ... Sorry, bad question. Here, I'll do your back for you. "

"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.

…

“Hm. How long have you been studying the anim?”

“All my life. I was born in the jentempas.”

“Ne. You're body is hard as a boy's. I guess you're not a toy, neh?”

“Mna? Me?”

“Ne, relax. Nobody is going to take advantage of you here. Especially if you keep them guessing. There, that's good enough. The water should be hot enough now.”

“Oh, that's so nice. Mmm. Thank you, Amanda.”

“You're welcome, unae. ... Grew up in the junim, eh? That's a hard life, especially in a jenju. All that wandering around. ... I heard you call ara’dai ninu. This must be the first time you've ever been home.”

“Literally.”

“So. Is your training over?”

“No. I’m still just nao. Naoma, actually.”

“Oh. You do gymnastics then. I guess that explains the tights...”

“I do dueling.”

“I thought that was naio?”

“I would have been. I was studying naio. I was out of my path, but I had the aptitude to challenge. A qunaio told me I’m probably the best the school has ever seen. Aet’idiamas refused me the examination and instead advanced me to naomna! Please, please don’t tell any one that though!”

“Isn't that part of the requirement to complete nao?”

“Yes. ...

“‘The devotion of body touches every action, and every reaction.

“‘It deals with interaction and intercourse.

“‘It trains the senses and the attention.

“‘It opens us to truths of our sensuality.

“‘It openly confronts our sexuality.

“‘Sex is as much a part of my devotion as it is a part of my body.’

“... But it is not the purpose of my devotion. I never cared for that presumption.”

“It's not all presumption. Imagine if boys weren't taken in hand by mnai and trained? We'd be stuck having to please ourselves to get any joy out of it.”

“Yeah? Do you know that less than one in a score of female mnai ever progress to nai? The responsibilities of mnai being what they are, just guess how they end their study of nao? Pregnant. So what does the mnai get for her efforts then?”

“If she's smart, she gets the pick of the lot, neh?”

“No good, he's off limits. The only chance a woman has of legal equality with a man is to complete nai. By making mnai a prerequisite of nai, they are keeping us barred from autonomy and authority. ...”

“Well, you know, it has to do with what you want. Mnai has the best chance of getting and keeping a man, as long as she is first. If you hadn’t missed your chance I think you would be less bitter about this part of your path. You can keep from getting pregnant if you are careful. Even I know that much. ... So. You already know the finest man born?”

“Top of the running so far. ...”

“You plan to miss the next one? Neh?”

“I guess I could stand it if I thought I might meet his equal. Someone closer to my age, perhaps.”

“Well, you may be able to pass yourself off as a boy, but at least you think like a healthy girl.”

“Thanks, I think.”

Night. In myth and legends, it was a time for unearthly visitations and dark omens. For Morgan, night had always been a close friend and ally. Sleep, however, had long been an unrelenting enemy. Moonlight streamed down upon the Colorado Rockies. A cliff house, on a remote edge of the Morgan estate, gleamed under the silken light. Within that glass walled house, the estate’s sole heir slumbered fretfully.

Caressed by the moon, her body writhed and arched; her arm rising as if to fend off attack. This night’s ghosts were different from her usual nightmares. Her simple presence had aroused demons long buried and forgotten on this land.

A friend of hers once pointed out that silence was the mother of all sound. No matter what one was hearing, no matter the pitch, or volume, silence always overwhelmed it. Most people just ignored it, but none ever escaped it. She supposed she could say she heard her, but in her self interested little heart, she was more interested in airing her own notions of the profound. She tilted her head to the side, she paused just long enough to suggest that she had weighed her point carefully—and then she argued right past it. She could say now that she missed the point entirely on that day. The idea lodged itself in her mind however, and gave her a framework to recognize something she had intimately understood all her life but could never grasp.

In the intervening time she had refined a blunt version of the same idea. It might be easier to follow. For every thought that stood out clear, there was a blank page supporting and holding it together. As far as Zen went, its a hammer, but it still was one of those indirect references that lead to an understanding which was seated in the abstract rather than to the comprehension of someone’s interpretation of it.

The blank page might as well have been anything, but the blank page she knew best was always the part of her mind that operated on the fringes of consciousness. Everyone was intimately acquainted with this part of the mind because it was essentially the glue that held reality together. It was the strange gap of oblivion that discriminated between waking and dreaming, and defined the eternal moment.

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

You are not alone.

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

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

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

Does it matter why? The voice probed.

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

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

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

Like a drowning victim, her throat struggled to give voice to inarticulate pleas for help. In her dream she was a child again—her vocal chords frozen with terror and confusion. Her mind—embracing the past—revisited an eternal moment, where memories tore at her heart and tried to rend her soul the way they could not have done in the instant they had first seared her. Her mouth framed the strongest word of denial known to a child—over and over—as her spirit toured a hell within.

Her body wrenched itself around the desperate need to scream and break the spell, but only a faint rasp in her throat escaped. A part of her danced under the surface of sleep’s paralysis, desperately aware of how near the haven of waking lay. Her mind stabbed desperately at the barriers between consciousness and sleep. Only a simple shift of mental state and her wounded soul would be rescued from memories painful enough to override a lifetime’s worth of self control and training; harsh enough to crack the discipline of a mind strong enough to pry between dimensions...

Her eyes flew open.

Pain. She resisted the urge to moan. The edge of danger remained in the air as she struggled vainly to assert here and now over the chaos in her mind. So much pain, she thought, and I haven’t even come near the scene of... the truth she had fled eleven years ago. Even now, she could not make herself complete the thought. She sat up hesitantly in bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. What she saw was as natural to her as sweat tears and bleeding, but rationally, it had nothing to do with reality. She lifted her hands before her and appraised the state of her body. To herself she groaned, “This is a bad sign.”

She closed her eyes and focused on the wings of her mind. A simple way to explain it, would be to say that part of her had woken up in bed, and another had woken up somewhere in the remote wilderness of earth and sky. Ever since her entire extended family—with only one exception—had been slaughtered, her reality had refused to obey the rules of everyone else’s. She did not know which version was closer to the truth, because it seemed that everyone’s reality had a few exceptions, all the worse for that they were ignored. Pulling her attention back together she closed the most dangerous door her desperate mind had opened.

When she was satisfied that her reality was once again safely conforming, she opened her eyes and glanced over at the clock glowing on her dresser. “Almost three. God,” she exhaled. She slid off of the bed, wrestling her nightshirt back down for the sake of modesty. The sheets and comforter had all been thrown off the bed in her convulsions. She bent over to grab them but when she stood up, she simply tossed them down again, shaking her head.

Not worth it. I’ll never get back to sleep. Morgan ran her hands through her disheveled hair, sorting out her thoughts in a still awakening mind. Richmond—that parasite—won’t get up to aspen for another nine hours... she realized. With a grimace, she dropped her hands to her hips. She looked upon the bed and its invitation to renewed dreaming. I’d rather wait it out. She toed the comforter, but she was hot enough from her fit to forgo the added insulation. Approaching the door, she reflected, I expected to find some painful memories waiting for me—coming home. I didn’t expect them to nail me at the cliff house though... or, for that matter, before I’d gone back ... home. Her throat clenched, because for all the evil that had happened to there in one night, it remained, in her heart, just that.

Home.

In the hall, a back lit silhouette of her, she turned and punched the wall. The shock passed through her, but the impulse to rage and destroy was harder to ground out. “Damn!” feeling no pain, and not bothering to examine the result of her impact on the wall, she glared inwardly at herself. I can’t believe I lost control like that, she frowned. A flash of memory from her awakening followed. Or like that either. She composed herself against further outbursts. They would only reverse and end up hurting her. Like everything else it seemed, this property had been held in trust her entire life, only rarely to be visited by her. By her father’s express wishes, the buildings on this property had been meticulously maintained and provisioned, in spite of the fact that she and only she could permanently reside there, and that only when she inherited at twenty-one. It belonged to her, but that did not mean she could afford to knock holes in the walls.

She continued on through the connecting hallway and came out on the balcony overlooking the common room below and the majesty of the aspen slopes beyond the glass walls. She slunk through the dark, gliding down the stairs into room that was once the heart of a hunting and skiing lodge. I wonder what other omens of ill fate are lurking in wait for me...

...Here. The thought twisted, and she glanced down reflexively. A thick, leather bound book lay on the mahogany table before the couch. She could not just walk away from it, she found. Dropping softly into the couch, she laid a hand lightly on the cover. God... she breathed projecting to the absent author, you knew I would have to come—after seeing this.

She picked it up warily, and as she flipped open the cover, her fears, her nightmares, her impatience were all blown away by the magnitude of what came into focus before her eyes. The words were written in her father’s elegant longhand, and they spoke with an immediacy that brought an ache to her heart. But what they said was like a blast of storm winds to her mind.

All that we can ever truly know we know only in the mind. The world we exist in is a field of raw information that our perceptions are somehow able to make sense of... but the world we are aware of is an image, created and interpreted by our minds from that information. What that information really is or what it represents we are unable to know, because it can only be observed indirectly and solely through interaction. Psychology is not engineered to explore this prospect, which is more consonant with the study of physics. The study of the mind as a component of reality falls under the science of psionics.

Despite efforts made—even by Morgan Eden Morgan, your great-grandmother—to establish this field, it remains barely acceptable as merely a venue of fiction. Admittedly, the topic of psionic ability is a murky one at best. There has really been no serious investigation into the very basis of mental ability, as there has never been a coherent recognition of the mind's role in the very expression of existence. For this reason, much of the work related to the field has been disorganized and incoherent. There are fundamental constants that unite the many profound phenomena found in fiction with the natural process of psychic existence in which we all are grounded. Understanding the state dependent nature of psionics, and the effects of basic interpretation on freeing these abilities is a prerequisite to even beginning an inquiry into the subject.

I am sorry to say, my daughter, I never had the time to find all the answers you will need to deal with what you will experience. I have collected my insights here for you sort of as a framework within which you might find a way to search for the answers yourself. You might as well know that my own experience with the secrets of the mind have been provocative and while you may feel that you are reading predictions of your life, I can only tell you that the powers of perception are little understood and falsely limited. I am watching you and I am only sorry I can do no more to aid you with what is to come. Perhaps someday, you will understand, and you will be able to look my way and realize that you were never alone.

“Those of us that exist within our own minds—that should be most of us that move about volitionally—experience everything in our lives during a point in time we call ‘now’. However, each minute, detail occurs independently and, hopefully logically, in its own time and place. There’s no reason to believe that time really exists in a rigid, linear expurgation, but it’s reasonable enough to admit that we get through it by following the thread that makes sense to us. We trace a line through events that allows us to deal with the prospect of living with a degree of sanity. By focusing on continuity, whether that’s a method we follow by design, or an objective quality of nature, everything we experience evaporates from existence in the same instant we touch it. It’s only that part of our mind which has no regard for time that allows us to make connections with what we experience now and what ever we have experienced whenever.”

I feel like I’ve opened Pandora’s box, she realized to her own amazement. But this was her father’s last gift to her and it had waited until she had dared to probe the tragic legacy of her loss. This is the most unnerving inheritance, dad. Why did you do it? How did you ever know I would need this? It’s like confronting an abyss—and here I am poised on the edge.

In the morning light, the rich dark wood of the coffee table gleamed identically with the lustrous radiance of her hair. Morgan sat curled up on cushions with her feet tucked under her, the heavy book in her lap. She glanced up as she felt a cat’s weight land on the cushions beside her. “Hey, Bozwell,” she greeted the black tom, smiling. “You hungry kitty?” she asked him. Bozwell squinted his eyes and meowed assertively. She suddenly noticed the daylight streaming in the vast picture windows, realizing that she had not moved an inch since sitting down. The enchantment of reading broken, she arched—stretching languorously to relieve the cramping that had set into her muscles. “Jeez, how long have I been reading?” she wondered aloud, absently setting the book aside.

Bozwell slid into her lap just as she was about to move. Curling an arm to support him, she stood up and started off for the kitchen. “Well,” she said to her cat, “let’s see what they’ve got here for us to eat.” in its time, the cliff house had been an innovation, and it had been maintained and refitted over the years to compensate for the weaknesses an open and airy mountain house could suffer. The glass walls that overlooked the north, south and east were all double paned insulated glass. The floors were all fine wood parquet with plush islands of carpeting in most of the rooms. The interior was staggered in three levels, but was at most only two stories at any particular point.

It was once a manor house, and for an entire extended family and supporting staff, it would be very cozy, but for her alone it was elegantly spacious. The suite she occupied upstairs was a loft, containing a master bedroom, two bedrooms on either side, overlooking a sitting room — all sharing the same view as the common room and the elaborate balcony and double staircase. The kitchen and a small dining room dominated the northern corner of the house, and the common room spread through out the rest. Nestled under the loft, the westward corner of the house protected the entry, a small sitting room and a workroom off of the garage. Morgan had toured every square inch upon her arrival the previous day.

Crossing into the kitchen, she rubbed Bozwell behind the ears, assuring him, “don’t worry Boz, I brought some tuna and a carton of milk, just in case, but maybe there’s—ooouchh!!!” she exclaimed, dropping the poor cat in a sudden stab of pain. “What the...?” she glanced down, lifting up her foot reflexively. The kitchen floor was sprinkled with splintered shards of silvered glass. “Glass... did you break something Boz?” she asked turning a stern eye on her familiar.

As she reached out to snatch up the broom and dustpan from the nook by the refrigerator, she glanced at the clock on the stove. It read ‘11:11’. When all is one, her mind fished up the old saying. Then she had to grab the cat. “No, Boz, let me sweep this up first.” the cat glared at her a moment, then hopped up to the counter to lick at his paws. Morgan quickly attacked the mess, but she couldn’t help wondering where the glass had come from. Upon closer inspection the silver fragments obviously came from a mirror. Setting the full dustpan on the counter she frowned. ...But there aren’t any mirrors in here... directly in front of her the clock changed to eleven twelve and it finally clicked. “Oh shit!!! The time! I’m going to miss my appointment!” she exclaimed in sudden alarm. In a flash, she was bolting down the hallway. The cat stared after her emitting a plaintive, “Mew???”

A door popped open under her hand and then slammed shut. Morgan continued on past the linen closet with a towel in her hand.

Entering the utility bathroom, across the hall from the workroom, she stopped short to look at the mirror. At first, she was absorbed by her own reflection. Green eyes shone under the dark arch of eyebrows in a dark frame of lashes, peering through long sheer bangs. Her face, fair skinned and framed by a rich mahogany mane, had even, regular features. A little stronger than she liked, but androgyny was attractive now anyway. She cocked her head, and regarded herself for a moment.

Her focus shifted to the surface of the glass and she bent closer to examine a faint crack in the mirror, catching the reflection of the shower behind her in the edges of her vision. For a moment her mind flashed back to the mystery of the mirror shards. Not finding the answer here, she shrugged and turned to start the water. Behind her, the cat appeared in the doorway. Her towel remained on the counter where she set it down. She was still upset with herself for having lost track of the time so completely. With my luck the shower will blow up on me next! How did I ever manage to read for so long, without realizing it!? She fondled that thought for a moment.

The book, like the experience of the night before, had tipped her reality on edge. It had posed a possibility that was at once tempting and horrible. On one hand a vindication of her sanity, but on the other, a vexing quagmire of paradoxes. Reading it had been like pawing through a catalogue of answers. Unfortunately, even if she knew what the right questions to ask were, she had no idea how to justify them with what normally passed for reality. A line from the book flashed out of recent memory. One has to draw the line between what is and what is not. The words formed unbidden in her mind. It was less than the current of a thought, but as she undressed, a sense of it nagged at her. She slipped easily out of the nightshirt as the impression evolved.

Coming at her like that it was as if her father had spoken to her from beyond the grave. She couldn’t help directing an uncertain response to him as he was in her memory. What is... what? And what is not... what did you mean by that?

She did not know the answer, and the moment left her dwelling on the loss of her family—when do you draw the line between ‘might have been’ and what is? Another line resolved itself. Were you trying to help me deal with your loss? She asked her father’s memory. Did you know what was going to happen? The way the whole book was written it was easy to believe it had been written for that purpose. Another line manifested from the book, and she wasn’t sure whom it made more sense coming from, herself or her father. When do you draw the line between chance and intent?

She could accept that possibility about as well as she could accept her own experiences, but that still did not tell her how to make either fit into reality. Morgan shook her head, realizing that even though she had put it down it still consumed her attention, allowing time to run away from her. Thinking about her fixation on the book, the truth of her distraction came clear. I let myself lose track... behind her, in the misting mirror, the reflection seemed to stir, clipping the edge of her awareness. She turned to gaze at it full on but whatever it was, it must have been her imagination. Leaning back into the bath stall to test the temperature of the water, the voice intruded on her again, when do you draw the line between here and there...?

Shaking her head, she stepped down into the sunken basin of the steaming shower. She tried to pin down the direction of her thoughts with an uneasy feeling. The water was raining down on her back, letting her get used to the heat. As she bent back to let the water run over her face and chest, she kept thinking about dreaming. About her nightmares. That made her pause. She flipped back in the stream of thought and picked up the thread. Drawing a line... is that it? She slid her hands down her body to spread the water’s warmth over her. Trying to draw a line... between dreaming and reality... between here and there... her skin tingled as the direction became clear, and I don’t want to make it to the meeting, which means I don’t want to face the memories... she opened her eyes and wiped the water off her face.

Turning to face the showerhead and grab the soap, it suddenly clicked together. The limits of her reality suddenly rose up. The opening passage from the book suddenly connected with her reality. Her reality, her experience with the safety of the normal world, only existed in her mind. Whatever was really out there, it had to get through her mind to reach her, and in that regard, reality was no different from dreaming. But... what does that that have to do with the line...? All of a sudden it was right before her.

At that instant, the power went out. In the workshop bathroom, everything was flooded in darkness. Her concentration was snapped. “Sonovabitch! I knew it! If it isn’t one thing...” hurrying, she quickly soaped her body and washed her hair. She rinsed herself down; trying to slough off the unease her thoughts had left her with. Finally, she reached through the darkened mist and traced over the glass door, “where’s the bloody towel...?” sliding the shower door open, she glimpsed what appeared to be eyes looming deep within the mirror. She hesitated for a second, shaken by the image but when she cleared her eyes again, the misted mirror was only a darkened fog. The thread of her broken thoughts suddenly returned.

The line, she realized, was between sanity and something else. Reality and something too big to face. Something stirred in her. What happens when you reach that line, and something pushes you over it? A strange dread darted into her head.

Morgan stepped carefully out of the sunken tub and slinked over to the counter, dripping a sheen of steaming moisture. Her hand reached out for her towel, but her eyes were drawn to the mirror. The misting made it impossible to make out a clear image, but darkening currents writhed in the distorted glass. Suddenly, the cat hissed, drawing her attention away. “Bozwell...?” she queried as the cat leapt past her through the shadows. Her eye tried to follow the streak of midnight. The black tom arched in a bristle of charged fur. “Damn, cat, you scared me!” she breathed in relief as her mind painted the feline into her overactive imagination.

Grinning at herself, she turned back to the counter mocking her thoughts. How strong is the boundary between here and nowhere...? A remembered line challenged. Casually she picked up the towel, and before wiping herself down, she gave in to the temptation. Balling up the towel in her hand, she swabbed over the glass to clear the fog. Behind the mist a dark form reared back. A shocked gasp escaped her throat. The demonic image, a horror from her chaotic memories, immediately burst forward. Morgan reeled back as the figure hit the inside of the glass and the mirror exploded into fine fragments of slivered glass. She passed through the open door of the shower and wracked her head against the tiles. A sharp crack, and a blinding flash in her head preceded her down into darkness. Her inner voice murmured tonelessly, strong enough, as she landed in a warm, wet oblivion.

Her numb body came to rest over the drain, blocking the water.

Alex Morgan let himself into the cliff house with his own key. He reached for the light switch inside the door, and frowned, as the entry remained dim. Then he heard the distinct sound of shattering glass. A solid thump vibrated through the walls immediately after. The former soldier froze into listening silence. Because of the house’s acoustics, he could not pinpoint the origin of the sound. Dropping his coat and his bag inside the door, he soft stepped toward the kitchen taking the small back hall between the front of the house and the dining room.

As he moved down the hall, he heard a shower running.

He realized that Morgan must still be in the house. He had expected her to be gone for her meeting with the family lawyer, Richmond bale. Still careful, he did a quick circuit of the house before going to the utility bathroom door. Finding nothing amiss, he knocked on the door to advise her that he had shown up early. He knocked harder when he didn’t get a response. He listened again for a pause. “Mew? You taking a nap in there?” he asked loudly, using her childhood nickname. He began to get a little worried and the quality of the sound of flowing water penetrated just as the first of the flood leaked from under the door. Without a second thought he slammed his shoulder to the door, easily splintering the oak framing. He burst into the bathroom, almost choking on the steam.

He whipped around and saw her lying submerged in the sunken tub. The cat was sitting grimly on top of the toilet. “Mew?!?” Bozwell cried plaintively. Alex plunged into the tub and wrenched his niece out of the water. He doubled her over his shoulder to drain her lungs and when the flow stopped he dropped her to the streaming floor, too pressed for time to be gentle. CPR was a built in reflex and he didn’t even give himself time to reflect on the intimate contact the motions demanded.

For an uncle he was not that far from her in age, only ten years—and in the absence of her father, he had become the focus for about eight years worth of Electra complex. This was the first time he had ever seen her naked. And if she weren’t dying, he would be having a heart attack over it. Constantly telling a pretty young girl no did not make a man serene, even with the specter of incest. As soon as she could manage a choking imitation of normal breathing, he grabbed for the sodden towel lying on the floor beside her and flung it over her nude form, his face glowing deep red.

Morgan rolled over, moaning, and he quietly reassured her until she could limply respond to his questions. Confident that she would survive, he went to the linen closet for a dry towel. When he came back in, he had his own distress under control. Morgan was sitting there examining the floor of the bathroom with piercing scrutiny. When he asked what she was looking for she said, “There’s no glass... I guess I must have dreamed it all...” he didn’t follow the comment at all, and just as he was about to ask what she thought she had dreamed, she looked up and saw the broken mirror. He followed her gaze but he didn’t know what to make of it.

Morgan, awakened by a terrifying nightmare—and the accompanying and unnoticed fit—slipped out into the night. Prowling about, she happened to overhear a private interview between the ara’dai and a man named teyn. Finding that they were discussing her mother, she could not pry herself away. What she heard disturbed her and cast a shadow on her coming mnao.

Caressed by the moon, her body writhed and arched; her arm rising as if to fend off attack. This night’s ghosts were different from her usual nightmares. This was what she had expected. This was what she had feared. Her presence in this place had aroused demons long buried and forgotten on this northwest coast.

In her dream she was a child again—her vocal chords frozen with terror and confusion.

Her throat struggled to give voice to inarticulate pleas for help. Her body wrenched itself around the desperate need to scream and break the spell, but only a faint rasp in her throat escaped.

A part of her danced under the surface of sleep’s paralysis, desperately aware of how near the haven of waking lay.

Her mind—in embracing sleep—revisited an eternal moment, where memories tore at her heart and tried to rend her soul as they had in the instant the experience first seared her.

Her mouth framed the strongest word of denial known to a child—over and over—as her spirit toured a hell within.

Her mind stabbed desperately at the barriers between consciousness and sleep.

Only a simple shift of mental state and her wounded soul would be safe.

Rescued, from memories painful enough to override a lifetime’s worth of self-control and training.

Salvation, from horrors harsh enough to crack the discipline of a mind strong enough to pry between dimensions, articulate enough to embody a thought—and damaged enough to attempt to do both.

Her eyes flew open.

She regretted it instantly. Her sight was assailed by an impossible vision of two heres; two nows and her brain struggled to superimpose them on each other. With a tearing mental effort, she focused on the image she had reason to expect. The image of the room etched in moonlight slowly resolved before her eyes in response to the shift in her attention. She sat up hesitantly in bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her sanity wanted to abdicate. It was all that was holding her nightmares at bay. Somehow, she retained consciousness. Taking a deep breath, she tried to understand what she was seeing. An image in the mirror, human in outline, but an open window to somewhere—or maybe somewhen?—else in substance. Though she had not seen it, she suddenly remembered that it had happened once before.

It was fantastic. She lifted her hands before her and appraised the state of her body. To herself she groaned, “this is a bad sign.” her hands felt like they ought to, and yet if she let her concentration slip, she could feel, as well as see, that her body touched the world twice at once. It was as if her... no. Not as if. Her body had become a gate. As with any other gate, light primed the passage, that was why she could see—through her own hand!—a distant curve of shore, with rocky headlands, and night lit rain forest.

Risking the fragile calm that wonder had brought her, she allowed her attention to shift to the opposite end of the link.

It was as if her mind plummeted through an abyss. A violent, eternal instant with her very flesh twisting through her thoughts. Her wits returned—badly frayed—what she hoped was only an instant later. And then the panic hit. After the spasm of animal terror passed, she realized that she sat, as surely as if she were still in bed, suspended high over the northwest coast.

Looking around her, she unconsciously got to her feet and pivoted around for a better view. Noticing, she took a couple experimental steps. I’m walking on air! She thought with delight. She whirled about in a mad dance and suddenly swallowed her heart as she fell!

Precisely one meter, she found, as she painfully crashed in a heap on the floor. She could see it through her hands. As quick as that she realized how little she understood of her present state of being. Only an instinct saved her from making an even worse mistake. Her thought had been to undo this strange miracle, and close the gate before she did something irrevocably stupid. She grabbed the notion and smothered it at once. There was no reason to believe it, but she knew, by whatever that excruciating sensation had been, she had shifted herself, not just her attention, here. If she closed the gate, she would end up on the unsupported side and plummet to her death.

She closed her eyes and focused on the wings of her mind. Step by step. Turning her focus back to the haven of her room, she embraced the dismembering sensation of thought that had marked her previous transition. It struck her that she could see, and understand what was happening as though every intricacy, every mechanism, made its function obvious, but the only words she could think of to harness this passing revelation were pathetic and solipsistic. It reminded her of the dangerous times during her recovery. From the moment she had seen...

Pain.

A child—a friend—hacked to pieces by some invisible storm of blades.

An aunt, peeled apart as she tried to flee, every part of her delicately and yet swiftly dismembered. A split second anatomy lesson.

Somehow more frightening, a dark gaze piercing her soul. And blood. Everywhere the gore.

Her body, still twisting in her thoughts, spasmed. Brief and brutal, the vision might have been the closest her mind could come to finding a word to express...

Again, the dream opened its mouth to swallow her, and she had to cut the thought short. She resisted the urge to moan. The edge of danger remained in the air as she struggled vainly to assert here and now over the chaos in her mind. So much pain, she thought, and I haven’t even come near the scene of...

She flinched yet again. There seemed no way around it. Like fingers, fearfully probing the extent of a terrible wound, she opened her mind to the facts. Just the naked truth behind what she had avoided contemplating for eleven years. She struggled to complete the thought. Strained to remember how she had become damaged. Sweated to accept that from the moment she had seen the better part of her mother’s extended family slaughtered, parts of her reality had refused to obey the same rules as everyone else’s. Mad times when she did not know that the carnage had ended. Terrifying times when she struggled to wake up from the nightmare only to discover that she was already awake. Lucid times, when her mind stepped beyond the boundaries, as it was doing now. Learning how to function in other people’s reality had been frightening and frustrating. They had explained that her mind had been damaged, but it had taken her a long time to understand how that fact had impaired her grasp of reality. The reality she had lived in seemed whole and sound, but it did not mesh perfectly with the common dynamic. She did not know which parts of her reality were closer to the truth. Then again, if she really thought about it, it seemed that most individuals’ realities had a few exceptions. Deviations. She had paid attention to it, suffering from an odd tilt herself; she had noticed the eccentricities in other people’s orbits. For all those differences, though, they were the same as she, fiercely ignoring the exceptions to the pattern they strove to imitate.

What was the question? She wondered, as the answer continued to unravel in profound complexity. What was reality, anyway? She mused. How did one honestly know that what they experienced was real? From where she was, it all just looked like patterns. She could not se any reason why she simply could not choose the one she wanted.

Something pulled at her scattered wits, forcing her to collect her thoughts and remember herself. She had not even noticed going over the edge. With all the energy she could summon she focused on where she was supposed to be, and even more fiercely, who she was supposed to be.

Morgan.

The endless moment ended with a violent clarity. “...Goddess!!!” she gasped, her body trembling with fear. After one quick check, a vision of land and sea far below, through her hands, and the floor properly under her body, av closed her eyes and began pulling her attention back together. Not bothering to think about the fact that she had not a clue how, she closed the door her desperate mind had opened.

When she was satisfied that her reality once again safely conformed to the proper guidelines, she collapsed in a heap and panted from an exertion she did not even know how to define. When her heart stopped crashing around within her chest, av opened her eyes and glanced around for the clock. Tracking up the wall, she focused on the inset display glowing through the darkness. “Almost third of one. Goddess,” she exhaled.

She pushed herself up from the floor, where she had ended up after sliding off of the bed. Wrestling her nightshirt back down, for the sake of modesty, she stood up and took stock. The sheets and comforter had all been thrown off the bed in her convulsions. She bent over to grab them but when she returned upright, she simply tossed them down again, shaking her head.

Not worth it. I’ll never get back to sleep. She ran her hands through her disheveled hair, sorting out her thoughts in a still awakening mind. Kev and the others won’t arrive until fifth of four... she realized. With a grimace, she dropped her hands to her hips. She looked upon the bed and its invitation to renewed dreaming. I’d rather wait it out. She toed the comforter, but she was hot enough from her fit to forgo the added insulation. Approaching the door, she reflected, I expected to find some painful memories waiting for me. I didn’t expect them to nail me at teal ni hayr though... or, for that matter, before I’d gone back... her throat clenched, because for all the evil that had happened there in one night, it remained, in her heart, just that.

Home.

In the hall, a back lit silhouette of herself, av turned and punched the wall. The shock passed through her, but the impulse to rage and destroy was harder to ground out. “Damn!” feeling no pain, and not bothering to examine the result of her impact on the wall, she glared inwardly at herself. With an effort, she forced herself to take account of herself and reimpose discipline. I can’t believe I lost control like that, she frowned. Or like that either, she added as the ramifications of waking episode started to come clear. She composed herself against further outbursts and smoothed her hair back. It did not serve to loose her temper, it would only reverse and end up hurting her. Like everything else it seemed,

She continued on through the connecting hallway and came out on the balcony overlooking the common room below, and the majesty of the coastal highlands beyond the glass walls. She slunk through the dark, gliding down the stairs into room that was once the heart of a home.

It seemed strange to be here alone. An apartment like this should belong to a family, but there was not enough of the house of ara left to occupy the many accommodations reserved for the extended kin of the dai. It was not like her father’s house where the families of his brothers and sisters, his aunts and uncles, and even his cousins all lived together like a town community. She would be more comfortable with this space once her own siblings joined her here. But for now, it was too much. Turning from the room, she went to the washroom adjoining the workshop and dressed to go walking.

Slithering out of her nightshirt, she squirmed into a body sleeve, tunic and leggings. She found her tall boots and overcoat in the entry and with economic haste soon found herself sealing the door behind her, safely out in the night. She was mildly surprised to note that the evening storm had made its advance during her brief distraction, and the moonlight had become diffuse and weak. She toyed with the notion going back in for her travel cloak, but resigned herself to the whim of the weather.

Morgan was mildly afraid that she would retreat back to the lonely comfort of her apartment if she opened the door. She was afraid that if she gave it a chance, sleep would trap her again. So, setting her teeth, she stalked out into the darkened estate.

She did not have anywhere to go really. Her only thought was the need for action. She did not want to dwell on the nightmares—both sleeping and waking—that she had struggled with. She wanted to feed her ever-hungry senses. She needed to fix on the moment.

There was a music in the motion. The fast beat of her heart and the slower rhythm of her echoing footsteps set a complex tempo. The wind whistled and moaned along the broad arcades, underscored by the rattling hiss of the rain. The crack and grumble of thunder dominated, reaching inside her chest and abdomen to caress her vulnerable parts. In the silences between, she heard even the endless passion of the sea, stroking the beaches, and thrusting among crevices and fissures of the rocks.

The sharp bite of ozone, and the spice of new rain, laced by the primal life-scent of the ocean, were taunting and arousing. Her nostrils flared as she drank in the heady mix. It sharpened her perceptions, opening her mind to her body, transforming flesh into some sensual flame. Her muscles moved beneath her skin like tongues of heat and light. Every motion created friction, her own clothes gripping and sliding around her in a binding caress. It was maddening. It was wonderful. It was unbearable. Her senses were overloaded and her whole being craved for release.

She wondered if making love would be as wonderful as opening herself to the sensuousness of the world as she moved through it. In spite of herself, she also wondered if that was just part of her madness. Maybe she had experienced so much pain in her short life, that any moment without pain was pure pleasure.

If that was true, she smiled to herself, than true pleasure would probably be overwhelming!

Moving as she did, with her senses expanded to their utmost, she was able to check herself—when she noticed the voices—before she herself was noticed by the ones who spoke. Midnight wandering was natural enough to her, but she was aware that it was odd behavior in others. With care, she investigated, careful to remain unnoticed. Trusting to a child’s memories of exploration, she was able to stalk them down. They were in an abandoned part of the palatial estate, in an upper room. She wriggled up an airshaft and found a perch where she could hear their voices clear and undistorted. She recognized one of their voices at once and was resolved to leave them their privacy. But before she moved, the unfamiliar voice—the man—spoke and caught her attention.

“Ane’yn is dying.” she stopped and caught her breath. Ane’yn was her uncle. Her mother’s older brother. He was also her grandmother’s heir. Carefully, she levered herself a little closer, straining to peer through a crack in the shutter. The light fell on her face like a lash. Janathnae, the ara’dai, stood in the middle of the room, her back mostly to av. av could not even see the other. Ja’nae looked like the polished version of av and her mother. Tall, proud. Her hair, though red, was more full of gold than her daughter’s. Like fire, whereas av’s own locks spilled from her scalp like blood. Morgan flinched when ja’nae turned toward her and finally spoke.

“I know,” she said tightly. Everything about her was tight, her lips, her stance, even the glare in her eyes hinted that fury, and not grief wanted to respond to the man. Morgan held her breath, watching her grandmother’s eyes, realizing that he, whoever he was, stood right there by the window.

“You have to get her back here, ja’nae.” he moved suddenly, from the left of her vision, eclipsing the light that was thrown out by the lamp on the desk. He moved toward the ara’dai, to rest one haunch on the edge before her. Ja’nae’s eyes shifted with him.

“I haven't seen or heard from her in eleven years,” she said crisply. Eleven years. The significance of that number pricked up av’s ears. Were they talking about her? Ja’nae shifted her weight and crossed her arms. “Do you really think that if I call, she'll come running home? Don’t be a fool, teyn.” she turned her back again and slowly paced away from them. Morgan’s brows creased, they were talking about someone else then, there was no need for her to be summoned. Morgan struggled to recall ever having heard mention of a man called teyn, but she came up dry. When ja’nae reached the far wall, she turned back and continued speaking. “Do you think if I tell her her brother is dying—that she has to take his place—she’ll simply forget?” she raised a hand inquisitively. Morgan raised her eyebrows. They were talking about her mother. Morgan returned her eye to the shutter and saw her grandmother cocking her head to the left. Morgan wished she could see teyn’s face. Ja’nae smiled sarcastically and took a few steps back into the center of the room. “There is nothing between us but pain. She won't come back. She couldn't forgive me as a child, I doubt it is in her heart to forgive me now.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Maybe not, but it is not up to me, now is it?” she countered.

“No, it is not. But not the way you think,” he said with an added edge to his voice. Morgan glared in the darkness, who did this man think he was to speak that way to the ara’dai? But he was not done. “How old are you, ja’nae? How much longer do you think you have before people start wondering? It’s time for you to join you ancestors, ja’nae.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow almost in synch with her grandmother. “Oh, yes. This again. We can't afford to compromise our secrets. Damn this, teyn, the purge ended a long time ago.”

“It never ended,” he retorted, getting up and stepping into the center of the room. “It just became too hard to find targets. They already suspect us of more than we let on. What do you think will happen when your peers bend to their age and see you, as young and healthy as a bride?”

“I don't believe you, teyn!” she cried, brushing away his hands as they tried to caress her face. Morgan’s eyes were peeled wide. She had heard of the purge. Naturally, everyone did while they were growing up. What she had never known, precisely, was what was being purged. Perhaps a few hundred generations ago, a child would have been told that, but since humans had come secrets had not been trusted to innocent minds. Her thoughts were so distracting; she almost missed ja’nae’s soft amendment. “Were you ever my friend, or is riding herd on those of us still on the inside the only thing you have room for in your soul?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

The softness vanished from her voice and look. The ara’dai turned her shoulder to him, “get to the point, teyn or get out of my house. I haven't the patience for your paranoia today.”

He turned his golden maned head slightly, giving av a faint glimpse of his profile. “I am not being paranoid, ara’dai. I have put this off for too long as it is. Do I have to remind you?” he asked plaintively, “they grow old, ja’nae. We do not. They will hate us for that alone far more than the fact that we exist.”

“But we do exist. Why deny that?”

He sighed. “People have died, since creation, for the simple crime of being different. Do you have any idea what the cost in blood is for being better?” he challenged. “Look at your own house. This was once the greatest house of the exiled worlds. Look how far they have brought you down. The pride of ara’dsai is its curse, ja’nae. You simply cannot rub anything more into their eyes or they will take you down and the entire (phoenix) court with you. All they need is an excuse.”

“We can’t hide forever, teyn.”

“We don’t have to. Only until the rift is healed. Only until the end of exile.” av’s mind churned rapidly during the next pause. What were they talking about? Worlds in exile? What exile? Did that mean that what avonai had told humans had been a lie? Were there other civilizations in the universe? She couldn’t pursue the thought, because he was speaking again. “All of us leave when our peers become grey. You will too. Even if your daughter will not come and take your place.”

Her grandmother’s voice was ice; “this house has been in my family since the purge, teyn. I won't let it fall into ateph's lap. Not while the bloodline is still alive.”

“Ateph is failing almost faster than ane’yn,” he said with venom. “If you had such fear of having your house fall to the avon’dai, perhaps you should have thought of that before you drove anathnae into the embrace of the avon’dai’s heirs, neh?” av’s brow furrowed in concentration. She could tell that the pieces were important, but she could not figure out what the binding thread of this conversation was.

“Damn you, teyn,” ja’nae accused, “that was more your fault than mine. She was mnao, by the gods, but you demanded the abortion.” av shook her head. Whatever this was about, she had no chance of figuring it out right now. She could only listen and think on it later.

“Ja’nae, she was mnao to a (dragon),” he protested.

“He was as half-blooded as she.” she retorted unsympathetically. “Anathnae knew the risks. It was likely enough to happen.”

“You shouldn't have let it happen.”

“I wasn't in a position to do anything about it, if you recall.”

“As I recall I told you, strictly, to forbid her that choice.” av almost spoke out at that. Her own mnao was coming soon, and she knew keenly that no outside voice could dictate the course of the mnao. That was in the code of obligation. But his own rebuttal cut her short and saved her from the consequences of her eavesdropping. “I know the code, but there are ways you could have kept them apart.”

“They were in love,” ja’nae countered incredulously.

“They were in heat!” he accused mercilessly.

“You have an unromantic soul, teyn. And a murderous heart.”

“Girls miscarry all the time. I should have taken care of it myself.” he sounded so matter of fact that it forced av to realize that this man had more power than her grandmother. This man was xai.

Ja’nae’s response, however, held very little awe for the deadly artist. “If you had touched her, teyn, do you think you would be here now? I was tempted...” av found she was holding her breath again. Who was her grandmother that she could speak this way to a xai? “I could have killed you for what you demanded. How could you even suggest a course of action that would leave the daughter of daughters neutered? And you knew it too—you kept invoking the immunity of the court while out of the other side of your mouth you ordered me to have my daughter kill her babies. Knowing full well the price she paid for her first abortion. Is it any wonder I lost my daughter?”

“I only did what I had to do.”

“You disgust me. It was an excuse to tear at my house, nothing more. Why did you force me to dismiss her from my house? Why did you forbid me even shelter her when she came with her daughter? For that matter, what do you know about what happened at the aes’dsai at tegal ni’hayr?” av almost lost her perch. Goddess, they’re not going to talk about that!

“Are you accusing me of conspiracy to that massacre?” his voice dripped with acid.

“One wonders, neh?” the ara’dai responded. She turned away from the xai, and shrugged. “There were whole families present. Mothers, fathers, children. Some of us survived. I survived, and I still don’t know what attacked us. You are the shadow dancer, you explain it to me. Or don’t. If you have an answer, I am not sure I want to know it,” she shuddered and then looked at him, with pain in her eyes. “Only one child survived that night, and you dared deny my claim to name her my own child and raise her in anathnae’s stead. No excuses, I was within my rights. But, you could not permit it, could you?”

“There were other reasons...” he began, but she cut him off.

“Have you always thought I was so stupid? You weren't trying to protect us all from discovery; you were trying to destroy a possible alliance between my heir and the avon’dsai heir. You wanted this. You deliberately drove her away from the court, away from her house, and most especially away from aeph. You want this house to fall as much as that bastard, ateph, does.” av cringed. It hurt to hear the ara’dai attack the avon’dai, to know that her grandmother had such hatred for her grandfather.

“I don't have to listen to this nonsense,” the xai snarled. “This house is nowhere near as important as you think it is. Thanks to your mother this house is nothing more than a title and a useless legend. The only possible interest anyone could have in it is getting rid of a family of troublemakers. So, if you intend to go on making trouble, I will put you down, as I am supposed to. If your house goes down with you, its your own fault.”

“Be careful, teyn. Both of us will go down before this house does, I can promise you that,” ja’nae pronounced severely. There was nothing threatening in her voice as she said it, but av could hear the truth in it. It had been said with such resignation. Her expression had such complexity to it; she could almost feel that once there had been very strong emotions between the two of them. An almost tragic love. Morgan had heard more than she could bear and was already slithering away, down the airshaft, when ja’nae broke the silence that had fallen between them. “We may not be friends anymore, but we're still kindred. I’ll try finding her. I’ll try to bring her back. That wasn't the question anyway. We’ll see if she will listen to either of us. Just remember, I will not walk away from this house without a legitimate heir in place.”

The last thing av heard as she silently fled from them was the xai, speaking with equal resignation, “we'll see.

This property had been held in trust her entire life, only rarely to be visited by her. By her father’s express wishes, the buildings on this property had been meticulously maintained and provisioned, in spite of the fact that she and only she could permanently reside there, and that only when she inherited at twenty-one. It belonged to her, but that did not mean she could afford to knock holes in the walls.

As natural to her as sweat tears and bleeding. But rationally, it had nothing to do with reality.

I wonder what other omens of ill fate are lurking in wait for me... ...here. The thought twisted, and she glanced down reflexively. A thick, leather bound book lay on the mahogany table before the couch. She could not just walk away from it, she found. Dropping softly into the couch, she laid a hand lightly on the cover. Goddess... she breathed projecting to the absent author, you knew I would have to have this. You knew I wouldn’t be able to face this alone.

She picked it up warily, and as she flipped open the cover, her fears, her nightmares, her impatience were all blown away by the magnitude of what came into focus before her eyes. The words were written in her father’s elegant longhand, and they spoke with an immediacy that brought an ache to her heart. But what they said was like a blast of storm winds to her mind.

“It is the nightmares that makes us afraid to test the boundaries of our minds. Still, when nightmare becomes reality, the way our minds can redefine reality show us that the boundaries are more flexible than would normally find comfortable to contemplate. Your scars have forced you into a position that most humans endure. You have the instinctive knowledge that there is more to reality than meets the eye, but you have never been able to grasp it and realize it....

\A lock, written aonatneh, the mind of the reader is the key

“All that we can ever truly know we know only in the mind. The world we exist in is a field of raw information, which our perceptions are somehow able to make sense of... but the world we are aware of is an image, created and interpreted by our minds from that information. What that information really is or what it represents we are unable to know, because it can only be observed indirectly and solely through interaction. Psychology is not engineered to explore this prospect, which is more consonant with the study of physics. The study of the mind as a component of reality falls under the science of psionics.

“Despite efforts made—even by Morgan Eden Sinclair, your great-to-the-whatever-grandmother—to establish this field, it remains barely acceptable as merely a venue of fiction. Admittedly, the topic of psionic ability is a murky one at best. There has really been no serious investigation into the very basis of mental ability, as there has never been a coherent recognition of the mind's role in the very expression of existence. For this reason, much of the work related to the field has been disorganized and incoherent. There are fundamental constants that unite the many profound phenomena found in fiction with the natural process of psychic existence in which we all are grounded. Understanding the state dependent nature of psionics, and the effects of basic interpretation on freeing these abilities is a prerequisite to even beginning an inquiry into the subject.

“I am sorry to say, my daughter, I never had the time to find all the answers you will need to deal with what you will experience. I have collected my insights here for you sort of as a framework within which you might find a way to search for the answers yourself. You might as well know that my own experience with the secrets of the mind have been provocative and while you may feel that you are reading predictions of your life, I can only tell you that the powers of perception are little understood and falsely limited. If it brings you comfort to think I am watching you, then please, indulge yourself. I am only sorry I can do no more to aid you with what is to come. Perhaps someday, you will understand, and you will be able to look my way and realize that you were never alone.

I feel like I’ve opened Pandora’s box, she realized to her own amazement. But this was her father’s gift to her and it had waited until she had dared to probe the tragic legacy of her loss. This is the most unnerving thing, dad. When did you do it? Why did you do it? How did you ever know I would need this? It’s like confronting an abyss—and here I am poised on the edge.

[Revision note : the intimate friendship of these three must be an issue from the start or it must wait for a later scene. intimations of psionic ability must also be developed from the beginning, which may be the only justification for a sexual thread in the opening chapter. consider the best emphasis on (av), a first person narrative.]

“What’s wrong with her?

She’s in heat.”