Threshold - Mother Posssessed

Revision Note: This details an early version of the girl’s nightmare, in which she is confronted by a demon possessing her mother.

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On any other night, the storm would have lulled her to sleep. The restless rattle of rain tapping on the window, drumming on the windward walls and roof of the manor, came in soothing waves between reports of thunder and the steady pounding of an unsecured storm shutter. She could have slept through worse, if she had not been too anxious to sleep.

The apprehension had passed to her from her mother, hours earlier, when she had been tucked into bed.

In spite of her normal tendency to fall asleep the instant her head hit the pillow, her mind would not rest. That formless dread had grown each time she closed her eyes and tried to slip into dreams. As soon as she did relax, her eyes popped open again.

For hours, she had gazed at the images painted with moonlight and rainwater on the wall across from the window. The endless, shifting patterns drew her eyes but did not really hold her attention. It was only when she tried one more time to shut her eyes and sleep that she understood what was feeding her apprehension.

Under the noise of the storm, she had been listening to voices filled with disturbing notes. Sitting up in bed, she concentrated on the drowned out sound.

“Morgan? Are you still awake?” a weary voice inquired from the corner, eager for conversation. “I don’t know how anyone can sleep during a storm like this.”

“Hush,” Morgan hissed, straining to hear.

“Don’t worry. We won’t wake anyone who can sleep though a storm like this,” the other girl insisted, propping herself up.

“I’m trying to hear something,” she snapped, cocking her head to pinpoint where the voices were coming from. Once the other girl fell silent, Morgan discovered that the echoes of adult conversation were coming from the vent in the floor. She crawled out of bed, pulling her mother’s shirt tight around her, and crouched down next to the heating vent. The voices overlapped too much for her to make out what anyone was saying.

The other girl sighed, and sat up to watch.

Morgan ignored her and focused on listening. After a moment, the girl flopped back and burrowed deep under the covers, pulling her pillow over her head. Morgan decided that the voices she was hearing came from a score of different rooms, but there was too much tension in the voices for a party. Then, in the midst of the confusion, she picked out one special voice. Her mother was back! The world spun and danced as she hurtled from the room, with the blind, effortless grace of childhood excitement.

In a flash she was perched on the balcony, watching a gathering of adults greeting each other as more of them came in out of the rain. She resisted the urge to run to her mother. All that would get her was a warm hug and an escort back to bed. Instead, she peered through the railing that ringed the vaulted hall until the gathering moved deeper into the manor.

She crept after them on bare feet, as silent as a shadow. As the adults gathered in the lounge area below, she entered the upper level of the library, flitting through the stacks to another balcony. Her mother, Ember, seemed to be the center of attention. Morgan watched her, not really paying any attention to what was being said. She did not notice when she dozed off, and was startled awake by a sudden commotion. While she blinked and tried to get her bearings the men and women below were jumping to their feet and drawing their swords. The terrible, chilling sound that woke her was instantly familiar, the piercing screams of children.

Morgan had never heard them ring with such terror before.

Note by note, those shrieking cries choked and fell silent, before anyone could reach them. Her mother had leapt across the tables in the lounge, launching herself over the heads of men and women standing between her and the doors. Closed and barred though they were, the doors exploded open under her mother’s glare as she led the charge back to the main hall. Upstairs, Morgan ran after them, stopping only when she crashed into the railing of the grand balcony. Standing there, she could see the soldiers returning from the children’s rooms, blood dripping from their weapons and clothes. They rushed into the hall and took up guard positions against the lords and ladies of their own house. Those nobles looked on in horror, paralyzed by shock, as more soldiers filed into the hall, dragging the bodies of children they had been charged in the utmost to preserve.

While Morgan stared in shock, struggling to comprehend what she was seeing, the garrison started cutting down the stunned nobles, forcing them to defend themselves. Though the nobles moved at once to protect Ember, she charged forward recklessly to strike the traitors down, her eyes darting from one child’s corpse to another, searching for her daughter. From above, Morgan began to scream as grief overcame disbelief. Ember snapped around, eyes drawn instantly to the sight of Morgan running for the stairs towards her slain friends. Ember lurched to intercept her, narrowly avoiding a decapitating stroke.

The nobles closed ranks as Ember ran back toward Morgan. Catching her at the bottom of the stairs, Ember picked her daughter up and hugged her close. In the same motion she whipped back around, her eyes glued to the fight. One of the traitors went down and a cold, dark shadow rippled from his dead form. It rushed across the gap and engulfed one of the lords. The man shuddered, then turned and attacked the lord next to him.

“Demons!” Ember shouted. “They’re possessed by demons!”

This started a retreat into the depths of the mansion. They encountered more soldiers, part of the garrison stationed in the ruins where the manor resided, who blanched in shock when the nobles brandished their weapons at them. After a quick exchange it was determined that these guards had not been relieved. They had remained at their posts out back until drawn by the commotion in the manor. The news that the garrison had been infiltrated by demons made them blanch again.

“They must have been summoned in the barracks, where the men were sleeping,” Ember suggested, after hearing the soldiers’ reports.

“Goddess. How do you fight an enemy who attacks you through your own men?” cried one of the lords.

Another lord, the oldest, glared at him and shook his head, “This must be how our armies were taken at the border. Guard your thoughts, people, and don’t look them in the eye. Killing our men, as much as we are forced to, won’t stop these things. It just drives them in search of new hosts.”

“Now how do we know who is possessed and who isn’t”

“You’re going to have to trust your instincts,” Ember shouted as the fighting surged forward and they became too busy to argue. As opportunity allowed, they called upon the arts they had mastered, fighting back with sorcery as well as swords. Morgan’s flesh started to itch and sing as the presence of magic around her ripped across the surface of her mind. Time started to come unglued, unraveling into a moment of incomprehensible flux. Morgan buried her face in her mother’s bosom as Ember called upon the powers she had mastered, as a priestess of the goddess, to bind and banish the demons as fast as she could. The possessed redoubled their efforts to get to Ember and Morgan with each of her mother’s triumphs. At some point it became clear that new demons were being released into the fray. Whoever had started this massacre was still active, adding fuel to the fire.

One of the lords, a general who had been courting Morgan’s mother, as well as serving as her right hand man, spotted the author of the conflict, striding forth under the protection of his minions. He had the black hair of the merchant class, which marked him equally as a potential assassin or lord of the underworld. For the first time, the nobles of the Phoenix House were able to take the offensive. They concentrated their forces on the demonologist and his ring of protectors, and quickly overwhelmed them. As soon as the man dropped lifeless to the floor, the surviving phoenixes retreated and secured an area for Ember to continue her work. The general stood watch beside her, holding onto Morgan.

She was exhausted, but wide-awake with shock. Her eyes stared wide and unseeing until they fixed on a shadow limping toward them from a darkened corridor. There was something wrong about the way he moved, something mesmerizing in his presence. To her mind, raw from the constant abrasion of combative sorcery, he seemed to resonate to a dark, beautifully eerie song. Something inside her told her he was dead. He had been dead for a long time. The song was holding him together, but the music was unraveling. He stared past her, as if intentionally ignoring her.

Ember noticed Morgan’s fixation on the shadows and peered in the direction her daughter was staring. Her gaze fell into the stare the dead man had locked on her during his approach. Her mind was drained by the hours of chanting to the goddess, and weaving sorcerous attacks and defenses. Too late, she realized that the demonologist had been undead, and that he had carried a demon within him. That demon leapt from his mind to hers, crushing the pitiful resistance her exhausted mind tried to erect.

Morgan did not notice as Ember froze behind her, then twitched once in aborted convulsion. Still staring at the thing she was perfectly convinced was a monster, she felt a moment of relief when it suddenly slouched and crumpled. The haunting music she imagined, to interpret the forces that had animated it, faded, and the heavy, pulsing beat that had driven it to destruction was all that remained. Her attention was finally drawn to her mother when Ember stepped up to the general and laid her hand on his arm. Morgan snapped out of her daze when she realized that they were the only three left standing. The hall was littered with the dead and dying and the last assailant lay kicking at the general’s feet.

“It’s over,” her mother said softly, taking the sword from her lover’s hand. He blinked and scanned the room, unable to believe the scope of the devastation. He turned back to Ember in time to see her draw the sword back for a lightening strike. “You never stood a chance,” she sneered, after striking his head from his shoulders. She watched his body topple with a faintly interested expression, then tossed the sword to the side and faced Morgan. “For a moment there, I was almost worried,” she said conversationally.

“You killed him!” Morgan blurted, completely dumbfounded.

“Well of course I killed him. I killed everyone. Didn’t you notice?”

“You loved him!” Morgan argued, gasping for breath and struggling to achieve coherent thought. Shock had pushed her well beyond the limits of sanity, and thought came with great difficulty. It all seemed absurd. Dream like. All of the details she had witnessed, and the snatches of conversation she had overheard started to sort themselves out. Her concentration was taxed by the deep, throbbing beat that now emanated from her mother. Her mind struggled against the obvious.

“I loved him?” her mother frowned. “What a ridiculous notion. I don’t even know him.” Ember bent over and studied her. Straightening and putting her hands on her hips, she announced, “I suspect you don’t understand what just happened here. I think that must be funny. I’ll have to mention it to the master. I am sure he can tell me.”

Morgan recoiled, struck by a sudden comprehension. “You’re a demon.”

“Correct.” The demon sighed and examined Ember’s hands, “This is a nice vessel. I wonder if the master will let me keep it.” Without warning, the demon reached out and caught Morgan by the arm, just as she was about to dart away. “Hold on. You said this is your mother’s body. That makes you the offshoot. If what they say about you is true, I should examine you before I kill you. No point wasting a spare body, if it comes as part of the package, right?” At the words “spare body” Morgan gasped and clenched her eyes shut. The only advice she had heard about fighting demons had been not to look them in the eye. She intended to follow it. “Smart. But not effective. I only need eye contact to take you in the heat of combat. Since I don’t even need to possess you for this…”

Morgan screamed as something cut into her mind and disrupted her thoughts. There was nothing surreal about this brutal invasion of her psyche. It entered her like a white hot nail driven directly through her skull. Her thoughts and feelings twisted away from this searing intrusion, baring layers of information she did not even know existed within her. A second nail followed the first. Then a third, in time with the menacing pulse that emanated from her mother. The first nail withdrew, having drunk its fill of secrets, as the fourth punched into her. The horrible, alien presence thrust mercilessly into the folds of her mind. A terrible cadence that promised never to stop, probing deeper and deeper, while Morgan writhed in her mother’s grip.

“Well! This is interesting,” the demon chirped, as the rhythm paused.

One of the lances in her mind twisted, and something like a flash of lightening arced across her nerves. Morgan’s eyes snapped open, burning with a terrified and dangerous light. “Get out!” she growled suddenly, as something powerful flooded through her. “GetoutgetoutgetOUT!” Her thoughts coiled and then ignited with a passion that made her tremble. The air around her stirred, pulling at the garments of the slain and whipping their hair as it picked up force. The hairs on Ember’s arms suddenly stood on end, as the atmosphere around her thinned and became hard to breathe. A strange rupture seemed to be forming around Ember’s body, as if she stood at the mouth of an abyss. Unable to push the demon out of her mind, it seemed Morgan was somehow warping space trying to push it out of her world.

“This is very interesting,” it added, with growing excitement.

The breeze turned into a wind, as the aperture continued to open, and the demon narrowed Ember’s eyes against it. The demon ignored the blast, as air rushed to fill the peculiar void engulfing Ember, exerting enough effort to anchor her vessel in normal space while concentrating on what it had found in Morgan’s mind. Among the wounded, heads turned to observe, commanded by demons curious to see what was happening. Distracted from their efforts to repair the bodies they had stolen, they began to pick themselves up and shamble over toward Ember and Morgan.

Morgan stared at Ember in growing fury. With each twist and perversion of that alien presence in her mind, she became more desperate. Her consciousness recoiled from every thrust, retreating deeper and deeper into her own mind. As she descended, she tripped over and grasped at the threads of her potential. Whatever her psyche could provide as a weapon, she tried to turn against her assailant. Most of it danced past the demon’s invading consciousness, spiraling out to feed the fury that engulfed Morgan. Dust and debris lifted from ground, to become deadly shrapnel in the growing tempest.

The possessed surrounding them suddenly sensed the threat to their leader, and stumbled forward to disrupt this unholy communion. The leader, finally grasping the kind of power the child was tapping into, launched a direct attack, hoping to shut her down. Morgan wailed in agony, curling into a tight ball in her mind. A thousand times worse than the pain of the probing, Morgan reeled, losing touch with reality for a moment. She balled herself up even tighter, pulling in everything she had been throwing out. The tempest suddenly died as Morgan collected herself. Thinking itself on the verge of success, the demon in Ember focused everything into one last attack. The ball of untamed potential suddenly compressed to a point as Morgan recognized the possibility of her death, and welcomed it.

In the moment of clarity, Morgan noticed the possessed all around her, hands and arms cruelly locked around her and Ember as they tried to pull them apart. She refocused her eyes on Ember’s face. The humanity that made it her mother’s was gone. All that remained was the monster who took her mother’s place. “Go away,” she said. An irresistible force seized Ember’s body and flung it away from Morgan. Ember was ripped out of the clutches of the those around her, and smashed through the wall at the far end of the hall.

Once Ember was out of her sight, Morgan turned to look at the possessed clinging to her. It did not occur to her that they had tried to separate Ember and Morgan, or that they inhabited the bodies of people she knew. All Morgan could see was that they hurt her. She decided to hurt them back. Holding nothing in reserve, she lashed out at them with the only thing she had. Her mind. The delicate patterns of art and nature she had interpreted as music now appeared as tangible and clear to her as crystal. In each entity rang a single note that kept the whole design tuned and coherent. It was simplicity itself to reach out, silence that key note, and watch as the pattern shattered and unraveled. The physical consequence was shocking. Her enemies fell, quite literally, apart. Dismembered by the dissonance in the forces that defined them.

With calm, cool deliberation, Morgan struck them down in turn. The demon, forcing Ember’s body to rise from the rubble, paused at the sight. It watched this awesome demonstration of destructive potential with fascination. Impressed, but conscious of its own peril, it shifted its attention from what Morgan was doing to the girl herself. The damage Ember’s body had sustained, smashing through a stone wall, was sufficient to ensure that it could no longer serve as a vessel. There was no reason to be destroyed along with it. Since it had already established contact with the child’s mind, it simply had to flow from one vessel to the next. Morgan could sense this, as the demon’s thoughts spilled through that connection, and waited. Death being much preferable to possession, she was already studying her own key note.

The demon forced Ember’s body to its feet. “Take a good look at your future, child.” The demon smiled. “I have already won.” The demon closed the distance on trembling legs, grinning as she coughed up blood from ruptured organs. “Strong bones, but weak guts. I’ll have to remember that. It probably runs in the family.”

With each step, Ember was racing toward death. Some small corner of Morgan’s mind rejoiced that she would not have to destroy her mother to force the demon’s hand. Only herself. Their eyes remained locked as the demon advanced.

A few steps away from Morgan, Ember’s legs gave out, her body falling to its knees. “Tell me something,” the demon began, panting for breath. Morgan, paying more attention to the demon’s presence in her mind than in her mother, was not really listening. “All of these people,” she coughed up another gout of blood, and struggled to fill her lungs. “All of these people… died… to protect… you. And you…” the demon choked a laugh, “plan to destroy your self.” It forced Ember’s body to crawl forward. For a while, it could not make Ember speak. When it reached Morgan, it looked up, gasping, and forced the question out, “Is that funny?”

The light was fading in Ember’s eyes, and tears streamed silently down her face. Similar tears blurred Morgan’s vision, but her attention was on the presence that was rushing in on her mind. Poised to self-destruct, her instincts screamed that timing was absolutely critical. The demon poured into her, and Morgan reached to snuff out her own light. To her astonishment, the presence, washing over her like a shadow, twisted through a corner of her mind and vanished. Before reflex could cause her to suicide, a voice rang in her mind, so loud it was nearly audible.

*No!*

Morgan went rigid. “What was that?” she gasped aloud, eyes searching.

*Sleep.*

“Who is…” She slumped to the ground unconscious.

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