Morgan - 0 - Threshold

This section is appropriate for insertion at 3.1

pages ∙ words

A month of residence had not diminished the awe inspired by the vast architecture of the sanctuary city. The scene about her seemed to have been sculpted as much out of light and shadow as from glass and stone. Green things strained to clamber over gray, as trees, vines and bushes swelled to drink in the sun. The wind that gave the plants their apparent vigor played through her hair, until her face itched and tickled under the caress of delicate, crimson strands. If not for her honor, the coastal breeze that plagued the capital of art and learning would have driven her to shave her head, and spare herself the frustration of trying to manage that unruly mane. With a wry grin, she offered a silent prayer of thanks that she had not, since now she was leaving.

“Are you certain you wish to proceed alone?”

She turned to the woman who walked beside her and nodded. She knew her mentor was looking for more of a response, but morning had brought an end to their old relationship. “It is not,” she struggled to explain, “that I am in such a hurry to leave you. You are much more to me than a guardian. You’ve been the closest thing to a parent I have known.” The woman smiled and waited for the girl to continue. “The regent is well aware of my affection for you, and I can’t afford to meet her still clinging to your skirt. As much as it must have pained her, she dispatched her message as one adult to another, and I must endeavor to convince her that I am an adult or fall prey to her schemes.”

“Morgan, you speak of her as if she conspires against you.”

“Oh, it’s much worse than that. She believes that she conspires *for* me. If I were inclined to see the world as she does, I could ask for no one better to dictate the course of my life for me.” Morgan scowled for a moment behind wind-blown bangs, then sighed. “I think it best to announce the completion of my training by taking my own affairs in hand, and respond to this summons alone.”

“If you wish. I certainly do not have the right to say otherwise, but I must remind you that, though you have completed your training, you have not faced your final test.”

“Amber,” she addressed her mentor, “isn’t it more appropriate to say my ‘first’ test? To say otherwise casts a shadow on what I have accomplished.”

Amber stopped and turned toward her former charge. “Those of us who trained you are well aware of what you have done,” she said by way of apology, “but the rest of the world waits to see if you are equal to the challenge before you. Your past is certain, but your future is not. Do not think that future cannot be taken away from you by the coming test. No. Do not protest. I accept your decision, and will not argue more. It is just that, if I cannot go with you, I would offer this last piece of advice in my stead. Before the goddess, this morning, you have become a maiden. This requires you to be a strong individual, but it also demands that you do not forsake help and guidance.”

Morgan considered that for a moment. Finally she bowed to her mentor, “I hope, if I understand your meaning, I did not seem arrogant. My intention is simply to deny my regent a weapon to use against me. She never approved of my appointment, and would try to prevent me from taking that first test if she could not guarantee my failure. This you warned me, and this I honestly believe. I will remember, in striving to assert my independence, not to isolate myself from those who can help me to succeed.”

“Which is all I ask. I look forward to seeing you when it is time to select your first task. Until then, we have arrived at the portal to Dragon’s Gate.”

Morgan nodded as they entered the portal’s courtyard, where a faint glimmering atop the raised dais advertised the presence of one of the strangest of mankind’s constructions. It was an object less tangible than a flame, perceived more in its effects than in substance. Being linked to a place roughly north of the Seat, it neither shed nor leeched light, as portals opening to the east or west were prone to do. If there was little more than that to see, there was far more to feel, for its very presence raised the small hairs on her arms, and teased the back of her neck like a lover. Or at least as a lover might, she imagined. The greatest impression, however, was that upon her mind. As keenly tuned to the skein of nature she had become, the portal struck her as a twisting impossibility of infinite proportions amidst which only two points were certain, and both vied for the same position.

Her mentor placed a hand on Morgan’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly.

“I will contact you when I have arrived home. I look forward to your visit next month. Give my love to the others, and keep a healthy measure for yourself,” Morgan hugged Amber and gathered the twin to the pack slung over her shoulder. “I am sorry I could not stay for the celebration. I am sure it would have been grand.”

“It will be, and there will be celebration enough where you are going.”

“True,” Morgan slipped from the embrace pausing at the last to clasp hands with her friend and surrogate mother. “Farewell.” Amber nodded and bit her lip, blinking away tears. As she turned away, the girl in her curled up in the heart of the young woman she had finally become. With a deep breath, she took the few steps necessary to deliver her to the shattered continent.

The first time Morgan had traveled by way of portal, she had been an energetic ball of curiosity. The sensitivity that ten years of initiation had honed and trained had been naked and unbound, allowing her to glimpse something of the portal’s nature. It had taken much of her training to translate that experience into words she could use to question her elders about it. Even now, the answers she had received provoked much thought. It was far simpler to experience than to explain. On stepping into the portal, it appeared as if a fine, luminous mist suddenly surrounded her, while at the same time her body went numb and her mind pounded with the hammer of exhausted sleep. As when she fell asleep upright in her chair, she lurched back to wakefulness and stumbled forward out of the mist. Her heart raced as she remembered hanging, for an instant that seemed to last forever, over a terrible abyss. In her gut she sensed that she had literally gone nowhere, from which it seemed plausible enough that she might go anywhere her momentum might carry her. As near as she could tell the entire secret to the gates, apart from going nowhere, was to impart the momentum necessary for an object to resurface at the proper somewhere.

Not for the first time she hoped fervently that the trick of going nowhere was as difficult to accomplish as it was to comprehend. Otherwise she might fear slipping out of reality at every turn.

If nothing else, her experience with portals over the years had taught her how to traverse them without outwardly losing her composure. No one needed to sluice the dais upon her arrival, for which the portal sentries could hardly contain their gratitude. Stepping from the damp stone, over the grating that ringed it, she left the round courtyard and entered the city of Dragon’s Gate.

Adjusting the sword at her belt, displaced there by the two packs on her back, she crossed the portal circle and headed down the Avenue of Spears. She recited some instructions in her head as she went. By coming of age, she had lost the privilege of staying at a hostel for initiates and must find an inn for the night. As she feared, the streets were crowded to overflowing as people flocked to the city for the annual rites of fertility. After half a league she had seen enough overwhelmed inns to despair of finding any lodgings. For once she regretted not knowing her day of birth, and having to celebrate her annual passage on Midsummer’s Day. Rather than dwell on why no one living could name a proper day, she chided herself for allowing a minor inconvenience dampen the excitement of turning seventeen.

Reminding herself that, if necessary, she could seek out of a temple of the goddess, where they would have to take her in, she persisted in following the directions given to her by one of her instructors. Thinking of him, she remembered that, having successfully mentored her, Amber would now be promoted to that instructor’s level, while he would ascend to the rank of teacher. Because of the ceremony to invest her as a maiden, she had forgotten to congratulate either of them. On that thought, she turned and approached a door she had just passed. The sign had caught her eye, advertising the services of a professional scribe. She entered and stepped to the side, allowing her eyes to adjust to the dark interior.

When she could see more clearly, she confirmed that she had entered the taproom of a public house, though from the din there was little else it could be. She allowed herself a small smile as she pressed through the crowded room to approach the host. Unlike an inn, this establishment did not boast rooms to let or anything that would qualify as meals to eat. The men around her cared only to occupy the rooms above by the hour, and bided their time loosening their wits and their tongues. Which, she thought, some present truly needed before loosening their breeches. House of ill repute or no, having entered she dared not retreat before conducting her business. It would not be a good idea to suggest that she had entered such a place in error, among men who valued women for their lack of wits.

The host rose from his stool as she approached, a silent question in his eye.

“Two cups, Goodman,” she ordered, “Mead in one.”

“And the other?”

“That depends on your good scribe’s thirst,” she replied as he reached for the cups. “Assuming of course that he is not currently indisposed.” The burly man sneered half a smile and indicated, with a shrug that almost managed to point out, a table in the corner. Taking this cue, Morgan made her way to the table, where a young man appeared to slumber, leaning into the corner. The host followed in her wake, carrying the drinks. As she sat, she noticed a blind, behind which must have been a window. She reached over and pulled it aside. The light, and the thump of two wooden goblets served to rouse the man.

“Wake up, Meager,” grumbled the host, stepping close to tie back the blind. “You have a client, and this one ought to brighten your lights!”

Meager blinked and rubbed at his eyes as he struggled to orient himself. After straightening in his seat and smoothing down his clothes, he looked up at Morgan and blinked again. Morgan pushed his cup toward him, urging him to drink. The host hovered for a moment, as the young man took a couple of gulps. Morgan laid a couple silver pieces on the table, which the older man picked up, and waited for him to depart.

“Sorry to have woken you,” she began, and laughed, “Though, I don’t know how you can sleep amid this commotion.”

“This is nothing,” he sighed, his eyes indicating the floor above. “These nights there is no peace in my bed. Not with walls so thin.” As his gaze returned to her, he flushed and reconsidered his next words. Composing himself, he inquired, “What can I do for you?”

Morgan explained her need for letters of congratulation. He quickly digested her request, collecting his supplies from under his seat. Morgan tried not to notice as he lingered long enough to study her legs from that position, and note the presence of her sword. That last she guessed by the respect on his face as he came once more upright. After a few technical questions he urged her to begin dictation and commenced to write.

“From the look of you,” he paused to comment, “I would think you as well lettered as I. That is, by your sword you must be noble, and so saying equally equipped with a pen.”

“From the look of you, I would think you might practice your trade in a cloister, rather than a brothel.”

“Ah, well, it’s kind of funny about that.”

“How so?”

“Cloisters tend to be set apart from the world of men, which deprives them of much custom. As it happens, indulgence tends to inspire contrition, which often is best expressed in written form. So, you can see I am of more service to my fellow man here than in a tower.”

Morgan laughed. “A fair answer; so let me answer in turn. I can in fact determine if you are conveying my thoughts with accuracy. To be honest, however, I can barely claim the same of my own penmanship. As I intend for others to know my thoughts, I think it best they be set down by a professional.” Meager stared at her for a moment, his face carefully still, before bending to his work with his full concentration. As he did, Morgan allowed her attention to wander. It amused her that what took place in this building was branded with a taint of guilt and corruption, but in essence was no different from a service provided by priestesses for the benefit of men and the goddess. A service her goddess could demand of her, as well, once that aspect of her training was consummated.

She flushed and tried to distract herself from that line of thought, idly scanning the crowded room. Of their own will, her eyes snapped back to focus on a detail she had almost overlooked. Rising and turning a bit to perfect her gaze, she looked full upon a familiar face. The eyes within it snapped up to meet hers as she stared in disbelief. Too late she looked away, heat rising to her cheeks, for the man she had spied rose from his seat and began to approach her. Quick darting glimpses confirmed that his movement had attracted attention and many eyes followed his progress to her. These witnesses quickly calculated the equation before them and began hooting and shouting their encouragement.

Morgan leaned back in her chair and sighed.