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Logan stared at Morgan for a moment, confused. His face went blank, as he searched through his memory to find an explanation for her sudden fury. This was far from the first time he had tripped on a detail he should have known. The product of living life too fast, he warned himself. Morgan remained on her feet fuming. As he reacquainted himself with precisely who she was, and what sort of history they had, he felt an urge to bang his head on the table. Finally he shook himself out of his daze. “I am sorry, Morgan. I didn’t mean… I just… It slipped my mind. I was addressing the whole group. I wasn’t thinking about what I was saying,” he apologized, his face wrenched between shock, horror, embarrassment and pity. “Or, what you had said. You asked a legitimate question. My fault for treating it as skepticism.”

Morgan looked down for a moment. She took a deep breath and returned to her seat, studying Logan. He still had not answered her first question, but she could guess what it was not. His strange obsession no longer struck her as a touch romantic, inspired by his compassion for her trauma. “So, what you mean is, this whole crusade isn’t for me?”

Logan considered the question and sighed. “Honestly, no.”

Morgan suppressed a sigh and looked away.

One of his companions leaned over and whispered. “Way to go. Idiot.”

Logan pushed him away and studied Morgan silently while the conversation moved on to new topics. It occurred to him, now that he had reviewed his history, that he would need her. He reached out and touched her hand. She turned to look at him, anger still seething behind her eyes. “Look. I am sorry,” he said, pausing as eyes turned to them. “Maybe we should step outside. I need to explain myself, and this bunch of jokers will probably mess it up. Please?”

She looked ready to say no, or at least kick him in the shin.

“If you really want to beat me up, we should definitely step outside.” He grinned, and a moment later she relaxed. With a nod, she stood up, slipping her hand from under his as carefully as one might back out of a dragon’s lair. He clambered to his feet, warned his companions not to follow, and led the way out of the inn. They continued up the street a bit until they found some shade and a bench under a tree. Neither of them felt like sitting down. “I know I acted like I completely forgot you existed,” he began.

“Again,” she interrupted.

“Again. I imagine this will be a hell of a beating.” He shrugged. “I know it’s been a couple of months, and I know things got a little… odd… between us. But I didn’t forget you. I just got absorbed in something else.”

“Logan. You don’t have to explain.” She crossed her arms and turned slightly away from him. “You’re the only person I know who can get lost in a closet. You walk around in a daze, and the world only becomes real to you when you are solving some problem or fighting some battle. Maybe it’s because you’re so gifted, I don’t really know. I forgive you and I forgive you, and in the long run I am not doing you any favors. You keep wandering through life like it’s some sort of game, and one of these days it’s going to get you killed. Why should I go on encouraging it?”

“Morgan,” he stopped. What she just said sent a cold chill through him. Made him think. He shook it off and tried to focus on his excuse. “You’re right. I can’t argue with any of that, but there is more to it. A few months ago I learned some things about demon nature that were very disturbing. By themselves they are completely harmless. In fact they are necessary, but the arcane arts use them, pervert them, to pervert the natural order. They have abilities no mortal in this world possesses, and which no mortal should have access to. You know how deadly they can be, but, I am sorry, you don’t really know how dangerous they can be. There is no way you could know.”

“If I can’t possibly know this, how is that you can?”

It was a good point. Technically she had the same training he had. Arguably, he couldn’t know as much as she did. Of the three initiates in the past five hundred years, including himself, who received instruction directly under the Magus, she had been the other two. Better not to think about that. “I don’t know if I can explain it. All I can say is I was in a unique position to learn it and there is no question in my mind that everything I know about it is true. The point is, I got so absorbed in it that it overwhelmed everything else.”

Morgan considered that for a moment in silence. “Maybe you should tell me something about what you learned then, if it’s that important.”

“It is. There are some things I can’t explain, because they would not make any sense to you, but what I can say is, if the demon threat is not eliminated, this entire world could cease to exist.”

“How can that be possible?”

“That’s the part I would have a hard time explaining. Let me just say that there are powers that protect and nurture this world, and there are powers that are completely indifferent to it. If the nature of this world is exploited in a way that threatens the security of those other powers, this entire world can be wiped out with a single command and the powers that protect this world would be helpless to prevent it.”

“What are you talking about? The old gods?”

“Morgan, the old gods were toddlers compared to the powers I am talking about. The only reason this world still exists is because it is beneath their notice.” Logan could not help glancing around to make sure no one was in ear shot. “I can not convince anyone of this, and I won’t try. What I can do is point out the obvious threat, and encourage people to deal with it.”

“No kidding. I am not sure I believe it, but, setting that aside, how? How are we supposed to eliminate the threat of demons. They’ve been loosed on this world over thousands of years, ever since the Cataclysm. I doubt anyone even knows how many have been unleashed.”

“That’s what I need to make people start thinking about. The question is, will you be one of them?”

“I will need to think about it. I am still wondering what will happen the next time I confront one.”

Logan sensed that there was more of a confession in that than she had been comfortable making. She looked uneasy and pale. “Fine. You think about it. I won’t mention it again until you have an answer.” He reached out and offered his hand. “In the mean time, let’s sit down, chat with our peers, and bolster our courage for the trials ahead.” Morgan took his hand and let him lead her back to the inn. As they approached the entrance, some of the initiates were coming out. Most of them were from the group he had recruited, but one was a stranger. His friends were giving the stranger directions, when they looked up and spotted Logan and Morgan.

They pointed at Logan and approached as a group.

Logan stopped, Morgan at his side, as the man stepped forward to present a letter. “What’s this?” he asked, holding out his hand and studying the stranger.

“Message for The Dragon. These boys say that is you.”

Logan examined the seal and said, without looking away, “Morgan, go on in. I’ll join you as soon as I take care of this. If I can.” Morgan opened her mouth to question, and he added. “If you want time to make up your mind, you had best not get involved in this. I am sorry.” Morgan studied the messenger, and the rest of Logan’s companions before nodding and excusing herself. Logan waited until she was out of earshot then broke the seal and read the message. After he had memorized the contents he tossed the parchment aside. As it burst into flames and settled to the ground in ashes, he looked at the messenger and asked, “You’re supposed to lead me to this informant?”

“That is correct.”

“Did he say why we need to meet on the Threshold?”

“I believe he said it was a security precaution.”

This reply disturbed Logan. A few of his friends turned to each other, muttering in disbelief. “Quiet. All of you.” They stared at him, but fell silent. “Martin. You and Quail go to the hostel and find my mentor. Tell him I was called away on house business. Cougar, go inside and give Morgan my apologies for leaving. Then join the rest of us at the Sanctuary. You have ten minutes before we depart from there.” Those three bowed and departed. He returned his attention to the messenger. “We’ll escort you to the Annex. Once we’re on the Threshold you can take the lead. The message did not say anything about an escort, so if you don’t mind, my friends will be coming along. Just in case.”

“As you wish.” The man bowed and gestured, “Shall we go?”

“Follow me,” Logan took the lead, flanked by his remaining companions and trailed by the messenger. They proceeded in this fashion through the city, following the winding road as it scaled the terraced valley. Cougar caught up to them as they were entering the Sanctuary. Logan waved him over and bent close to ask, “How did she take it?” If at all possible he wanted to avoid offending his best asset twice in one morning.

“She rolled her eyes and muttered, but that was all.”

Logan sighed and led the group into the temple. They turned from the main hall down a corridor, past meditation chambers and classrooms. The temple was many buildings, and gardens, united under a common roof. They followed a route common for those interested in touring the gardens at a pace which disguised their haste. Logan, the most familiar with the Sanctuary, played the role of guide, as he pointed out and commented on various features and their history for the stranger among them. They exited the gardens through the dormitory wing, housing for transients and petitioners, met Martin and Quail, and continued through a door at the end of a side passage. They found themselves in a gallery no one ever seemed to visit. Logan checked the room and headed to a curtained alcove. He walked into the curtain and vanished.

The others followed suit.

Morgan leaned against the wall, her mind open to pick up the presence of other minds. Following Cougar had been simplicity itself. Once again, while hardly proud to admit it, her unofficial apprenticeship in cat burglary had paid off. Of course few second story men had the advantage of senses trained as hers were. Combined, they had allowed her to pursue Logan closely and remain undetected. Unfortunately, he had some tricks up his sleeve too. One by one, the minds she was tracking had blinked out of existence. She did not believe they had all just jumped off the face of creation, and it was equally unlikely they just dropped dead without a peep of distress.

She itched to find out what had happened, but did not want to rush into the room and find them all conspiring together, under some cloak of psychic invisibility. She had to approach with caution. Since she had witnessed the obfuscation, she did her best to replicate it. Pulling in her thoughts and emotions, willing herself to total inner silence, she struggled to make her presence non-existent. Like a ghost, she crept around the corner and along the passage to the last door. If she had not sensed the group of people walking through it, she might have overlooked it. The door, like her, seemed to be doing its best at pretending to not be there. She glared at it as if to say, “Yes you are!” while struggling not to think it.

Or laugh.

Remarkably, her insistence seemed to convince it, and she no longer had to concentrate on it to make it appear. Carefully, she released the catch and cracked the door. Peering, bobbing to the left and right to scan the room through the hairline opening, she confirmed that there was no one in there. Easing the door wide, grateful of well oiled hinges, she floated into the room. From what she could make out, it was a historical gallery, featuring mostly paintings and small artifacts on pedestals. The only other exit seemed to be an alcove at the back. She drifted down to it and pulled the curtain back. It concealed a small alcove where two people, if they were very intimate, might sit together.

She stood back, allowing the curtain to fall and her mind relax. She had not been joking when she said Logan could get lost in a closet, but she doubted even he could lose a whole group of people in there. She would have turned and started a search of the other rooms she had passed if she had not noticed a peculiar sensation from her hand. It tingled from contact with the curtain. With much trepidation, she reached out to touch the cloth again. For a second nothing happened, then her hand started tingling again and she realized it had passed, somehow, into the fabric. She straightened her arm, and it sank through the material up to her elbow, as though she had stuck her arm into a water fall.

“What the rotting wreck!?” she pulled her hand back.

Apart from the tingling, there seemed to be no damage or disruption. She stared at the curtain warily for a moment, then walked over to a pedestal. Carefully removing the artifact, some sort of helmet, she picked the pedestal up and brought it over to the curtain. Holding it like a battering ram she advanced. The curtain buckled like any normal cloth would, but nothing else happened. She stretched a hand to touch the fabric, and a moment later the cloth flowed around the pedestal, until it hung as normal. Finally, she focused her mind on the impossible object. The pedestal dropped from her numb hands and she reeled back. Instead of detecting fibers woven into threads, her mind had touched an artifact of pure art, the likes of which she had only sensed once. During one of her sessions with the Magus, he had produced an artifact from the age of gods to illustrate the nature of the first embodiment of magic.

Morgan stared at the curtain and realized that it was in fact a camouflaged portal. In theory, none had survived the Cataclysm, and most had been disrupted before that, during the war against the gods.

Suddenly, she was completely convinced about Logan’s claims. His unerring and cautious route directly to this portal advertised how familiar he was with it, and lent substance to his claim of having learned things pertaining to the affairs of gods, and even creation itself. She was torn between revealing this discovery to the Magus and finding out precisely what Logan knew about the greater threat to reality. Ultimately, her curiosity forced her to grit her teeth and step into the portal.

For a moment, her vision danced and her flesh itched from the passage, then she recovered her senses and looked around. She found herself in a strange, tall chamber similar to the gallery she had just left. The walls and floor appeared to be made out of glass filled with churning clouds. The vaulted ceiling was obscured by a haze of light. Around her were free-floating portraits depicting various human attributes clearly identified by inscribed placards that hovered beside them. At first she could not make out the inscriptions, but as she looked the script blurred and reformed in standard academic text.

“Language module confirmed,” announced a booming voice.

Morgan whipped around and stared. “Who is that?”

“Help mode activated.”

“Greetings, and welcome to the Annex.” Morgan twisted back, homing in on the second voice, and jumped at the sight of a man who had not been there an instant before. “How can I be of assistance, Morgan?”

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” she babbled, taking a few steps back. “How do you know my name?”

“I am the Annex Guide. This is where I reside. Ergo, I came from nowhere because I am always here.” The strange man smiled and continued, “Your profile is registered in the Avatar Codex: Phoenix Morgan, Initiate of the Tenth Rank, Heir to the Phoenix House and Legacy, and Chosen of the Goddess.”

Morgan stared at him. With an effort, she collected her wits. She ran the exchange through her mind a couple of times, until the information made sense. Questions formed faster than she could follow them, but she reminded herself what brought her here, and that every second she delayed she came closer to losing Logan’s trail. Studying the guide she ventured to ask, “You’re here to answer questions?”

“That is correct. What do you wish to know?”

“I am looking for someone. His name is Logan. Dragon House. Can you tell me where he went?”

“Logan has transferred from the Annex to the Threshold.”

“How do I follow him?”

“Threshold access is at the far end of the Annex.”

“Thank you,” Morgan bowed and ran to the end of the chamber. The chamber opened onto a balcony that seemed to hang out into an abyss. She swallowed and looked around. The only thing on the balcony besides herself was a large device unlike any coat of arms she had ever seen. On a hunch, she concluded that it was some kind of artifact, like the portal. Frowning, she looked back at the guide. “How does this thing work?”

“With your interface online, use your sprite to access the node. Select ‘Exit’ from the menu and confirm execution.”

“Enter face on line? Sprite?” she repeated, puzzled by the unusual terms.

“Interface online. Sprite activated,” the thunderous voice announced.

“Goddess,” Morgan winced, then flinched as she noticed a bird of flames circling lazily around her head. As she reflexively waved it away, the bird veered off in a wider circuit. When she waved at it some more, nothing happened, but when she looked at the guide to ask a question, the bird darted over and began circling him. At the same time, a halo of flames appeared around him. “What is going on?”

“You have selected me with your sprite,” the guide responded laconically. He seemed impervious to the flames. Morgan considered this and then shifted her attention to one of the portraits. Dutifully, the phoenix darted over and perched on the top of the frame, setting it alight.”

“Strength,” the booming voice announced. “This attribute determines the physical power you possess.”

“It’s true. The gods are crazy,” Morgan shook her head and forced herself to focus on the task at hand. This place, whatever it was, operated by strange rules. If she stood around gaping every time she tripped over one, she would never find Logan. On the off chance she had not tripped and knocked herself out, entering some bizarre dream, she needed to pick up his trail. The phoenix had followed her gaze back to the “access node” and lit it up by perching on it. Like the portraits, this device had placards associated with it. As she read each one, the inscription blazed. When the one reading “Exit” lit up, she shrugged and nodded.

“Confirmed,” the voice boomed. Numbers started flashing in the corner of her vision, counting down from ten. She was about to ask what that meant when the count reached zero and the world turned inside out.

She had been trained, when pursuing a target through unfamiliar territory, to pause and search out landmarks the instant her pursuit became disorienting. So, it was habit for her to turn around and study the spot where she emerged before moving on. It was a balcony similar to the one she had just left, with a slowly spinning orb hovering in the center. It took her a moment to realize that it was a representation of her own world, an irregular sphere with land and oceans conforming to the few maps she had seen depicting the whole of Aeirn, wreathed in a tattered cloak of clouds.

She tried not to dwell on it and followed the corridor leading away from the abyss. She immediately passed a couple headed toward the balcony, and could not help gawking at their strange appearance. Their clothing was scandalously cut from some alien material, producing an outfit more sensual and revealing than unabashed nudity. Combined with a physical beauty no mortal could possess, they seemed the very embodiment of lust. Her mind strained to distinguish the male from the female, and she walked on still wondering. The corridor spilled out into a grand mall that stretched from horizon to horizon.

Spotting a group of individuals loitering at the intersection, she steeled her nerve and asked if they had seen Logan, and his entourage, pass by. After giving a brief description of the group, one of them nodded and pointed out which way they had gone. She could hear them talking about her, referring to her as “the Phoenix” in excited tones, as she ran off. She could not help taking in the sights as she searched for an elevated perch from which to spot Logan. It was not hard to imagine herself in the home of the gods. Everything was built on an overwhelming scale, the architecture summoned straight out of dreams. The phoenix attending her darted inexhaustibly from point to point illuminating incredible wonders and flooding her with a sea of information about each.

She felt as if she was walking through a marketplace that dealt in satisfying every whim, curiosity and perversity of the human mind, as well as a host of inhuman interests she had never even imagined. Unlike any market she had ever wandered, there seemed to be nothing to cater to the basic needs. With the exception of sex. In the sea of taunting lures to a legion of incomprehensible activities, there were no food sellers, no water bearers or directions to where a person might relieve herself. There were no hostelries or inns. The only commodity in great supply was someone, something, or somewhere to fornicate. How, she wondered, in a place where sexuality was so out in the open, did sex become embroidered with such obviously lurid, gross and guilty trappings as she was seeing? Did the gods, in their immense spirituality, focus on sex for it’s sheer carnality? The only thing that competed with sex, for sheer volume of interest, was a thousand variations of raw, unadulterated carnage and death.

She was relieved that the object of her search forced her to tune out the importunances of both. She continued on, clambering up and down any obstacle which offered a place to perch and scan the top of the crowd.

Finally, she spotted her quarry. He was still in the middle of the group that had accompanied him, following the strange messenger. Dropping down from the statue she had climbed, she sprinted after them, dancing through the mass of strange beings thronging the avenue. When she finally broke into the clear, Logan and his friends were nowhere in sight. She found herself in a huge plaza where people milled about in groups preoccupied with their own business. When she approached one group to ask if anyone had seen Logan pass by, most of them just shrugged.

“You’re wasting you time describing this guy,” a stranger said from beside her. “Appearances mean nothing here. You should know that. You’re the Phoenix. What’s with the noob attitude?”

“Noob attitude?” Morgan bit her lip. A voice in her head cut in. *Noob. Abbreviated slang: Noobie, newbie. New person, novice.*

“What’s the matter?” he asked, studying her appearance. “Did you get stuck in character? Have you been playing the game so long you lost touch with reality?” He looked at the bird circling her head. “Never mind. Your AI obviously loves you and takes care of you, or you would have lost your handle already. This guy you’re looking for, does he have a handle?”

Morgan waited for the voice in her head to explain the terms, and then thought hard. The messenger had asked for… “The Dragon.”

“The Dragon?” he studied her, thinking. “You come out of the game, stuck in character, and you’re looking for the Dragon. He must have put a serious whammy on you. I probably don’t want to get involved, but... I’ll help you on the condition that you tell me, when you have your head straightened out, what this is all about. I am sure it will be a great story.”

“Whatever. Can you help me?”

“I’ll see what I can do. The Dragon covers his tracks real well. In the mean time, go over there and do something to help yourself. Go to Information, Tutorial, and try to catch up on things. Your head’s way messed up.” He directed her to kiosk where ghostly voices and text emerged in response to inquiries. Like the guide, they instructed her in bizarre incantations that caused more words and images to flash before her eyes, which she struggled to comprehend and use. She almost lost her water when selecting “Information, Tutorial” summoned a demon that started pouring ideas into her head like a fountain. After a moment she realized there was no trauma involved in the process, just some queasy disorientation. When it was over, she suddenly understood exactly what Logan had meant when he called demons harmless in their natural place, and how he had had information he could not explain about the powers outside of their world.

Once they cleared the Annex, Logan had allowed the messenger to take the lead. Under other circumstances, he would have enjoyed a visit to the Threshold. Ever since he had been “recruited” to do security work for the government, he had been banned from unsecured public access nodes, leaving the game he had just left as his only outlet. He remembered the confrontation with Morgan, with a smile. She was a perfect example of just how sophisticated the game had become. It had been disturbing to hear one of the constructs of the game criticizing him for not taking it more seriously. The truth was, he took it far more seriously than anyone else. Although he was ultimately responsible for creating it, it was really a product of the Threshold. The more he worked with it, and the tool he had used to create it, the more he understood the awesome potential of the Threshold itself.

Until his generation, and the coming of hackers like himself, the Threshold had simply been a communications network. It had been created, by absolute luck and pure genius, to serve as a real time communications link for interstellar civilization. It was that and more. In addition to being a faster-than-light point-to-point interface, it had possessed other, more valuable properties. In addition to transmitting information from one node, or mote, to another, each node had the capacity to store and process information. These properties had not been fully understood when political pressure, and available technology, forced the creation of the interstellar communications network.

Even though communications traffic was completely unsecured using the network, general ignorance about the technology and how it worked initially kept this from becoming a problem. The agencies responsible for implementing the technology believed that standard quarantine and encryption practices were sufficient to guarantee the integrity of any systems utilizing to the network. Unfortunately, the key to the mystery had been given, at a moderate retail price, to everyone. It did not take long for a community of hackers to form, dedicated to probing the untapped potential of the motes. Establishing that the motes possessed the properties of memory and processing capacity, and discovering that those processors were every bit as instantaneous as the point-to-point transmissions, or that the motes seemed to have almost infinite storage capacity, the first entirely virtual computers were designed.

Initially, the only security those systems had was proprietary code and architecture. Building the virtual machines involved the creation of customized maps to harnessed resources. Custom machines meant custom programming and that led to a host of platforms that were totally incompatible. Inevitably, modules were written to improve connectivity and share resources. Soon enough, the computers were sophisticated enough to normalize code through smart modules offering adaptive, reverse-engineering code interpreters.

The Threshold had evolved as the master construct incorporating all these exposed systems. Basically, the network became *the* computer. That computer became the sole property of those who knew how to exploit it best. At one point, that had been him. Like most people who used the Threshold, he had relied on the sheer immensity of the system to protect his own programs and data. Having grown up with the Threshold, he had lived with it’s strengths and weaknesses. Until the game, his pride and joy, fell prey to freakers and tweakers. Either he found a way to create a secure environment on the Threshold, or he allowed the game to dissolve into mindless chaos. Exploiting a property he discovered in the motes, and his own brand of genius, he succeeded in creating both a secure environment and a secure interface to preserve the integrity of the game.

This accomplishment brought with it its own kind of fame. The government, desperate for a safe, reliable way to exploit the resources of the Threshold, was quick to seek him out. The government was not the only organization who prized his talent. As much as these other organizations desired to acquire him for their own schemes, they were even more concerned with preventing the government from acquiring him. By rebuffing the advances of these organizations he became the target of abduction and assassination, and so did his friends and family. The government eventually secured his services by providing protection for him, his friends and family. He in turn provided the government with secure systems.

Unfortunately, one aspect of that security had a flaw. That flaw only existed, and could be exploited from, within the game. He had discovered it a few months ago and taken steps to deal with it. He had believed no one else knew about it. Until the messenger arrived. The threat he had hinted about to Morgan was very real. The government, if it discovered the flaw, and its specific nature, had sufficient leverage to force him to dissolve the game. That was the last thing he wanted. If the person he was going to meet knew what he feared, the situation would become more complicated.

The only thing he could do about it at the moment, was follow the messenger and find out. When they reached their destination, he discovered that he was not the only one, after all, who had figured out how to secure access and resources. He was also surprised to discover that the informant was someone he knew. In an environment where everything was an illusion, people made their names, and reputations, by creating and keeping a handle. The first thing to look at was his or her sprite. No other appearances mattered. He hardly glanced at the grave looking, little-boy, focusing on the black snake coiled around his wrist, and greeted his old friend in familiar fashion.

“Asp. You bastard. What’s with all the cloak and dagger?”

“Dragon. So, this is the character you’re playing now? Kind of young.”

“You’re one to talk. Your message said this was urgent, so if you don’t mind, we can trade insults later.”

“No problem.” Asp dismissed the messenger with a glance, and led the way through a door. Logan told his escort to wait and followed. As the door closed behind Logan, Asp gestured for him to take a seat. “Here’s the skinny.

“As you know, I am a member of the Assassins Guild.” Logan nodded. The Assassins Guild was a group of hackers who tended to play exclusively “evil” characters in the game. Not a great deviation from what they were in the real world. “A couple of months ago a rumor started circling through the underworld. Something about a demon getting lose on the Threshold and returning with, shall we say, proprietary government information. Now, most players read the boards, and so talk was kept entirely in house. A few weeks ago, some noob sold the story to some special interest group. They started shopping around for a contractor willing to test this rumor, and exploit it.”

“Shit. How do you know this?”

“Guess which group took the job?”

“The Assassins?”

“Yup. Some of us, anyway. I did not know about the leak or the contract at first. What I knew was that this noob, Mortis, recently joined the ranks and started his own little cell. You know these punks. Everyone is out to make a name for himself. Anyway, I got fed up with this little prick a couple of days ago and decided to teach him a lesson. I dropped a worm on him that picked up his maps, then cleaned out his resources. In the process I got his logs, bank accounts, and personal records. That’s when I figured out the plot.” Asp picked up a book from the table beside him. “This was in his archives.”

“What is it?”

“That’s the larval form of the worm they released in the game.”

“You’re shitting me!” he examined the book. In this form it was entirely harmless. He called up a diagnostic program to parse the encapsulated code, but, with a simple language module from the game he could practically read it off the pages. It was not hard to see why Asp insisted on meeting him outside of the game. His famous security had truly been compromised now. “Well, this should make it easy to kill. How much do you want for it.”

“I am tempted to take you for all your worth, but honestly it’s worthless. According to his logs, they took the program to the demonologist the rumors started with, and employed him to incorporate the code in a demon. He scanned the text and then lectured them on what a piece of crap it was. I swear, the characters in that game are so damn sharp it’s a wonder they don’t actually know what they are. I would bet he does. I wish I could tell you who the demonologist is, because that cat knows too much about how the game works, and more than he should about our world.”

“I agree, that is not good for the game, but it is not beyond the capabilities of an AI. All they need is access to information and resources and they can do some really impressive stuff. The game itself is more the creation of my AI than me.” Logan shook his head. “So, I assume the capsule for the actual worm was delivered, and probably destroyed in the process of being incorporated in a demon.”

“Correct. I’ll give you a copy of the logs, but that’s essentially it. Since this is the rough draft, I assume you can deduce its objectives and find some way to get ahead of it. Apart from that, you know it’s there, you know what it wants. I’ll work on getting more information out of that punk. I can’t be too obvious about helping you. It’s one thing to fight amongst ourselves. Quite different if one of us betrays another. It’s kind of a shame you just amped the game like that. I imagine you had a reason for starting a new campaign when you did, but the timing is real bad. By running the game in quick mode you gave the demon a twenty year head start on you. You better move fast.”

“Painfully true, but ironically, I started this campaign to create a response to the demon threat, and more importantly the exploit that creates it. I just got ready to hunt demons, now I have a demon to hunt. If you can find out who helped create it, I can work on that problem too.” Logan stood up to shake the boy’s hand, “What do I owe you?”

“Keep the game running and you won’t owe me anything.”

“You’re an evil, scheming bastard, Asp,” Logan grinned. “But a very good man. I’ll do my best.”