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Morgan sat patiently to the side of her strange benefactor’s group, studying an immense water sculpture in the center of the plaza. Outwardly, she appeared composed and natural, while inwardly she was in terrible conflict. It was almost reasonable to say she was terrified and barely managing to keep herself in check. Her mind raced around the information that had recently poured into it. She had taken the stranger’s advice to reorient herself, but she did not like the idea that act now forced her to confront. Little things, like how to identify her benefactor as “Race Monkey” due to the strange creature in the flying contraption darting around his head, were practical bits of information she could deal with. It was the implications, taking all the bits of information and putting them together, that disturbed her. Particularly since, upon correcting his assumption about her, the final conclusion was that she did not really exist.

She certainly did not feel like a fiction cut loose from a “fantasy game world.” If anything sounded like a fantasy to her, it was the idea that all of this, everything she knew, existed in the heart of a vast mechanism—a computer, she reminded herself—that could not be seen or touched because it was all just information passing back and forth between motes smaller than a speck of light. Her disbelief had caused her to ask for more and more information, from the demon that never once tried to rape her mind or steal her body.

The problem was, the more information she received, the more sense it made. The harder she tried to find a flaw in the data, the more evidence she was forced to confront. She had gorged herself on alien history and technology, and it was impossible for all this information to spontaneously pop into existence. There was a clear and logical progression to everything she researched. She had not once run into an explanation that wrote something off as inexplicable magic or miracles. Human beings, in their desire to share their ideas, had created something that allowed them to pool those ideas into some sort of collective dream. Since she had been born in that dream, or some corner of it, she was a dream.

But she was her own dream. She had her own thoughts and feelings. She had her own reality. She would not be screaming and fighting inside if she did not. She argued with herself, pointing out that the very philosophy this alternate reality was founded on—the most basic tenets of its “science”—was adherence to what could proven, through measurement, observation, and repeatable experimentation. Science was an impressive catalogue of what people outside of this Threshold knew. But it also silently admitted that they did not know everything. She might need the rest of her life to ascertain the true nature of reality. But, she could reach this conclusion here and now. The Threshold was real. Its reality extended to that which was created with it and in it. She might not exist outside of it, but she did exist in it.

Her existence, while different in nature, was valid.

Because people who lived outside the Threshold might not perceive that, or believe it, it was entirely reasonable that they would, without qualm, destroy her world, along with her, if it caused them serious inconvenience. If the demons—the programs—that organized her world became perverted and dangerous, and wreaked havoc in other areas of the Threshold, her world could easily be seen as more than an inconvenience. It might even be seen as a threat. In confronting herself, she could not deny that rogue demons might not be the only threatening aspect of her world. The implications were mind boggling, but there was no question that she would do everything in her power to help Logan protect their world from such an end.

There was only one problem.

She had gone over things in her head and one thing had stuck out as an alarming possibility. Logan was not, like her, indigenous to her world. Race Monkey had assumed that she was, like him, a denizen of that outer world, a master of the Threshold. He had reached this conclusion by associating her with the Dragon, and that was Logan. She had not pursued that line of inquiry at the information kiosk, but she could refer to her own experience with him and safely conclude that he was a “gamer.” The things she had said to him that morning rang in her ears as the highest testimony. He was so obviously out of place in her world she, in complete ignorance, had noticed it.

Would it be a good idea to confront Logan here? Could she be risking her whole world by demonstrating how far she had come to reach him? She found herself hoping that Race Monkey failed utterly in tracking him down. It suddenly seemed far wiser to retrace her steps and get back to where she belonged, before anyone figured out what she was. Not being inclined to wait on someone else’s failure, she studied what she had learned and came up with an excuse to disrupt his search. Standing up, she approached Race Monkey.

“Still no joy,” he said, looking up at her.

She frowned and studied the translation before responding. “That’s alright. You’ve done enough by trying to help me.” She put on a thoughtful expression. “I am thinking this is just some kind of glitch. I am going to go log back in, log out, and see if that fixes it.”

“That might not be a bad idea. Well, go try it. If you are still having problems, and the guide can’t fix it, look me up and I’ll see what I can do.” He shrugged and shut down the programs he had been working with.

“No problem. Thanks!” she leaned over and kissed his cheek before departing. As casually as possible she retraced her steps, not looking back until she had been swallowed by the crowd. Once she had determined that no one was following her, she raced back to the balcony where she had first emerged. While the Threshold had lost a great deal of its mystery, it was just as strange as before. It revealed a lot about the people of that unseen other world, if not about that world itself. There was a lot more for her to learn before she would ever feel safe in its shadow, but that would have to wait. She crossed over to the Annex, and worked out how to return to where she had departed. She made haste to exit the gallery and lose herself in the gardens. If anyone asked about her absence, she could just say she had been dreaming, curled up in some obscure nook of the sprawling temple.

It was disturbing to discover, as she entered the gardens, that it was now late evening. She did not think she had been gone more than a couple of hours. By her estimate, she had lost twelve. This was confirmed as twenty-one bells rang from the Sanctuary towers, when she was halfway back to the hostel. Her mentor was going to lynch her for vanishing for so long.

It came as a relief to discover, upon arriving at the hostel, that Amber had yet to return from conferring with the master. A message had been delivered informing her that she had been free to amuse herself for the day. She stationed herself in the common room to watch for the arrival of Logan and his cohorts, and catch a late evening meal. Amber arrived while she was eating and joined her in silence. That meant they had a great deal to talk about when they retired to their room. Morgan helped herself to additional portions to delay their retreat, until Logan finally arrived.

When Logan did appear, he came over to apologize for running off on her. She forgave him easily when she detected no suspicion of her own activities in him. He excused himself to eat, with her blessings, after she promised him they could talk more the next day. Amber met her eye with a smile and rose from the table. Morgan would not need to explain her procrastination. Amber obviously had her own theory. If her universe had not flipped end over end, it would have been entirely accurate.

Once they were secure in their room, the great deal they had to talk about boiled down to: “Master Vinewood will examine you a couple of days before the trials. There is no point rushing it, since no amount of time will suffice if you are not equal to the challenge. Our current crisis, however, is now this.” Amber held up a letter with the seal of the Regent of the Phoenix House. It was addressed to Morgan in the care of her master. She took it with a heavy sigh. Amber patted her on the shoulder, “Since she can’t possibly be acting on what we discussed this morning, she has no doubt invented something else.”

The letter itself had been innocuous. It summoned her to attend the opening of Redleaf Manor, when the Regent of the Phoenix House arrived the next day, and a reception that evening, to ensure that all of Dream Gate was properly impressed with the occasion. Naturally, as the heir, it would not be proper for her to remain in a common hostel once she had the benefits of a functioning household, with servants and staff to attend to her as her nobility demanded. Incidentally, it would be ridiculous for Amber to presume upon this hospitality, since adequate quarters were already provided for her, to impose herself upon her charge. To do so would imply that the House was inadequate to ensure Morgan’s protection. Years of such interventions had taught Amber and Morgan how to interpret the regent’s machinations.

She would go to greater lengths to separate the two, but to do so at such a delicate time for Morgan, the preface to the trials, was truly diabolical.

Not that they could say that. They would never hear the end of how horrible and impertinent it was to suggest that the regent’s conscientious concern for, and devoted duty to, Morgan, Chosen of the Goddess, Heir to the Phoenix House and Legacy, was in any way suspect. Which would lead into another attack on Amber, the “criminal” outcast, and her damaging influence on Morgan. And the truth was, if Crimson hated anyone more than Morgan, it was Amber.

Perhaps that was because Amber had been recognized as a legitimate offspring of the Phoenix House, and Crimson had not, although their histories had been nearly identical. Both of them had been orphans discovered after the Purge, who had no way of tracing their heritage back through the rubble of three generations of assassinations planned to dissolve the house. Both of them had pursued noble rank through initiation, but Crimson had schemed to enter the Phoenix House through marriage, and used all of her influence, aided by undisclosed means, to ruin Amber. Disgraced in a watertight plot, Amber was discharged from the house and denied the rank and title she would have achieved through her initiation. Crimson, having survived the massacres that ended the purge, found herself elevated to the position of Regent over Morgan. Of course, if Morgan had not survived the last massacre herself, the wealth and power of the entire House would have devolved onto her.

Morgan always dreaded the thought of staying alone under the same roof with her. It gnawed at her gut all night long, as she struggled in vain to sleep. Breakfast was a few bites she managed to choke down with a great deal of water, which her stomach worried nervously all the way from the hostel to the gates of Redleaf, a couple of hours later. Morgan was hoping that Crimson had decided to be fashionably late. The woman absolutely loathed the prospect of leaving her bed in the morning. At the same time, she was an early riser, and expected everyone to be ready to attend to her needs. The staff and servants had probably come straight up from the port when the ship docked, and spent the whole night cleaning and airing the premises in preparation. The gateman who let her into the grounds certainly looked as tired and nervous as she. Morgan made her way to the main entrance, and stationed herself there to await Crimson’s grand entrance. When this occurred, at half past nine bells, the first thing her regent commented on was her wrung out appearance.

“I don’t see how that woman can claim to be taking good care of you,” she lectured as Morgan followed her into the foyer. “It speaks well of you that you do not complain of her treatment of you, Morgan. But certainly, your face speaks for itself. She’s taking advantage of her position to take advantage of you. On top of all that training you do, she must run you death with silly errands and menial tasks. I say, an initiate must learn humility, I know I certainly did in my time, but there are limits. I don’t know how you manage not to see it.” She turned and studied Morgan. Sighing dramatically, she turned and led the way into a study. “You’re not too sharp, girl. But, you’re the future of this house, and I aim to do all in my power to see you come out well. You’re truly lucky to have me to look out for you.”

“I suppose there is a kind of luck about it,” she responded in the appropriate pause. All bad, she thought to her self with a wry grin. Crimson regarded her sternly. Morgan composed her face and stared at a fixed spot to the left of her regent. The woman continued to regard her until Morgan answered with the expected phrase, “Naturally I am grateful for all you do.”

“As well you should be. Now take a seat and tell me how you and that fine boy, Logan, have been getting along.”

Morgan posed herself in the tall, regal chair, in which it was impossible to relax and watched as her regent settled herself comfortably upon the couch. She had performed this dance too many times to miss that step. “Well, as you know, this is the first time we’ve been in the same location for more than three months. We’ve only had a moment to speak since I arrived, and if I may say without offending, my summons to see you has caused me to miss my appointment with him.” She could not resist sticking that pin under Crimson’s nails. Her scheming had gotten them betrothed, it was delightful to blame it for coming between them.

“Ah. Too bad, but I assure you it was unavoidable. We will simply have to make it up to him this evening. I have the best maids in waiting here to prepare you for this evening, and I have informed his master to make some arrangements for him as well. You two should look your best for the announcement of your wedding.”

Morgan sucked in a breath and bit her lip. “Tonight?” was all she dared ask. She hoped that question conveyed by itself her protest at the timing of the event. What person in her right mind would announce a wedding in the middle of trials? But that was the trap, because of course, no reasonable person would expect a lady on the verge of being married to participate in the trials. A man could certainly announce his marriage in the middle of trials, all he had to do was show up at the proper time. It actually worked to his advantage to come to the nuptials having so recently proved himself. A lady was expected to absorb herself in the preparations for the event. Crimson, playing her cards close to her chest, simply raised her eyebrows, as if she could not imagine what might be wrong with sharing the good news. “Are you sure this is the right time for such an important announcement?”

“Yes, it is the perfect time,” Crimson smiled lovingly. “It is exactly one year since you two were formally introduced. It’s tradition. I know this seems sudden, but don’t worry. I have everything planned.”

Morgan tried to swallow the lump in her throat, while commanding her hands to cling tightly to her knees. It would not do to have them wrap themselves around her regent’s throat. In a strained voice she responded, “Yes. I see that you do. And while I am fabulously grateful, I do have one concern.”

“Nonsense. There is nothing to be concerned about. Logan will be grateful to have you. Any man would. I understand he is a bit absented minded, but I assure you, it does not mean he is uninterested. No man is uninterested,” she winked. “I know you have worried about that, you have told me many times. But, on your wedding night his eyes will open and you will become his one and only. That is how it is with absent minded men. They may stray in many directions, but not in that one.”

Morgan was flushed, more out of growing anger than embarrassment, but she was willing to work with it. “I, truly, did not have any concerns in that regard. It is just, I have to ask. Are you aware that I have trials at the end of this week? Surely there has been some oversight.”

Crimson made a good show of surprise and agitation. Making all the proper noises, showing proper distress, but she never swayed from her master plan. “This is so unfortunate,” she concluded after a few minutes of squawking. “It seems such a shame to waste all of that training, but what’s done is done. Everything has been arranged, and, so many important people are expecting this.” Morgan did not doubt it. A lot of important people would love to see the power of the Pheonix House fall into dragon hands. Those people would certainly see to Crimson’s advancement as a reward for such a brilliant sabotage. Of course, such a conspiracy would only be proven after the fact. By then, it would be too late. “The announcement is really just a formality, a confirmation. If we fail to make the announcement, our house will look so bad. It could be seen as an insult to the Dragon House, maybe even the Emperor himself!”

Morgan stared at her. “You mean, no matter what the cost, this is going to happen tonight?”

“I am so sorry, Morgan. I am afraid so.”

Crimson had planned her trap exceedingly well. After dropping the bomb on Morgan, she had sent the girl off to be bathed, primped, polished and dressed for the occasion, conveniently assuring she could not get away to confer with her mentor. Perhaps she counted on Amber’s well known aversion to psychic intercourse to ensure that Morgan brooded helplessly in the clutches of her maids in waiting. What she did not know was that Morgan herself had no such qualms about exposing her naked thoughts to an equally useful ally. Though Logan and Morgan had heeded their mentors’ advice about not indulging in physical intimacy during their official courtship, they had a long history of exchanging thoughts and feelings, starting with their introduction to the psychic arts. It did not take long for her to get his attention and relate the entire interview to her absent minded paramour.

Logan did not need a map and compass to see how brilliantly Crimson had cornered Morgan. Morgan’s revelation preempted the visit by Logan’s mentor, conveying the news from Master Vinewood, allowing him to alert Amber in detail before he too became tied up in preparations. Logan reached out to Morgan and assured her that the news had been passed on. Since there was no way for their mentors to be excluded from such a public event, they could count on some impressive fireworks to erupt when Amber finally had a chance to confront Crimson. Until then, they agreed to focus on finding some way to disarm or diffuse the trap before they were caught tight in its jaws.

It did not occur to Morgan until after their final contact that she had risked exposing everything she had learned the day before to Logan. After a moment of dread, she shook it off and assured herself that she had been so outraged by Crimson’s actions, her thoughts had been focused on nothing else. Logan’s own thoughts had been equally well masked by his irritation at the ridiculous distraction from important matters all of this had suddenly become. If all she had cared about was his affection for her, the tenor of his thoughts might have been painfully discouraging. The only indication of his secret life was his eager anticipation to hear her decision about joining his crusade. There was no doubt they would be talking about that, as soon as they came up with a way to foil Crimson’s plot.

Or at least cripple it a bit.

As the day progressed and evening approached, Morgan stormed her brain searching for anything that could diffuse the situation. She was still scratching for ideas as she stood in a reception line greeting the guests as they arrived. As Crimson had warned, the establishment of the empire had taken a strong interest in this affair. Among the lords and ladies who appeared before her were representatives of royal families from every corner of the shattered continent, as well as the imperial heir, representing the interests of the emperor and empress themselves. Ostensibly, they had all come to observe the trials, in which some brother, sister, son or daughter was participating. There was no way Crimson could have failed to note this when she schemed to take advantage of their presence here to corner Morgan.

Logan, when he paused before her to take her hand in greeting, assured her with a confident smile and slight nod, that he had come up with something. Her panicked expression changed to one of relief as he moved on with the parade. He quickly vanished into the crowd of nobles that circulated like a pot of boiling water. Eventually, Morgan had greeted and exchanged pleasantries with all of the official guests, and was able to break free to find some refreshment while tracking down her allies. Each of the masters present for the trials had been received with the courtesies due to their illuminated status, but their subordinate instructors, herding the throng of mentors and initiates, had entered en mass through one of the side doors. It took Morgan a while to find out if Amber had even made it into the manor.

She had earlier caught a glimpse of Logan escorting the imperial heir, his cousin, into a private chamber. Hopefully, he was putting whatever plan he had into motion. She just hoped that, whatever it was, he had time to enlighten her before Crimson put the two of them on the spot. When a couple tours of the main floor failed to turn up either Amber or Crimson, Morgan knew at once the battle had been engaged in her absence. Hoping that the improvised cloak of obfuscation she had picked up the day before was more than wishful thinking, she focused on blanking herself out and headed up stairs in search of the old rivals. No one seemed to notice, when she stopped at the head of the stairs and surveyed the front hall.

Continuing into the residential area, she allowed her mind to open up and receive impressions from whoever might have ventured away from the party. She was able to quickly dismiss the presence of servants and staff who idled in the wings. There were a few, heated, presences in a couple of bedrooms, but not the kind of heat she expected between such bitter antagonists. Their heat burned like a beacon from the third floor, at the mansion’s furthest extremity. Heading in that direction she quickly stumbled on an obstacle. The servants, overwhelmed by the task set upon them, had isolated and closed off an entire wing of the house, assuring the regent that repairs and renovations were essential before it could be lived in. It had also made a convenient place to stow anything that seemed unfashionably ancient or painfully difficult to clean and polish.

Morgan took one look at the clutter and concluded that it was an ideal alarm system. Fortunately, she knew the place far better than anyone could suspect. In another life, Redleaf Manor had been “that big, old haunted house on the hill” among the boys of Dream Gate. She—or back then, he—had explored every last nook and cranny a hundred times over. Once she pin-pointed the location of her prey, she quickly thought of a route that would put her in a perfect position to eaves drop. Slipping into an unused bedroom, she slithered out of her priceless gown, and climbed out the window onto a ledge. For once, she found herself wishing that her people had adopted the custom of wearing undergarments, or that the dress itself had been designed to be worn over a slip. Unfortunately, neither was the case and where it would be impossible to clean her gown after two steps along her planned route, a damp cloth would suffice to make her skin presentable.

Her hair, at least, had been braided and pinned up out of her way.

From the window ledge, she carefully transferred her weight to fingers and toes, clinging to the mortar cracks of the manor’s outer, stone wall. She progressed carefully, reaching through the thick layer of ivy that competed with her for a purchase on the wall, inching her way up to the roof. From there she crept along the mossy, muddy slate to a peaked window awning, projecting from the room where Crimson and Amber’s angry voices emerged. She slipped onto the window ledge and anchored herself in a position where she could peer in through the upper corner of the glass.

Amber stood in the middle of the room, facing roughly in Morgan’s direction, scowling at Crimson, who was just out of her field of view. “You’re absolutely impossible, you stupid bitch!” Amber growled. Morgan almost spilled from her perch in astonishment. Indignant noises spluttered from Crimson. “No. Shut up and listen, you arrogant little whore. I am tired of hearing you use Morgan’s welfare to excuse your abhorrent, self-serving conspiracies. You’re going to listen to me for once. You’re going to listen, because the only thing you can do now to stop me is challenge me to a duel, and we both know how that will end up.”

“Very well. I am listening,” Crimson suddenly crossed in front of Morgan, pacing before the window in obvious rage. “But if you are wise, you will endeavor not to continue in such an insulting manner. My patience with you is exhausted.”

“That was true the day after we met. I shall simply say this. If you dare to make this announcement, you are threatening to destroy the last hope of the Phoenix House. Maneuvering to put everything into Logan’s hands, just to keep Morgan from getting it, is not even protecting the welfare of the House. I don’t know what your problem with me is, since you succeeded in destroying my life years ago, but whatever it is, you must not persecute Morgan over it!”

“My objection, as I have made clear from the very beginning, is that she was corrupted by you! You are the one with a vandetta. You persist in saying I destroyed your life, when you can’t produce a shred of evidence to support your claim. I tried to protect her from your influence from the beginning, and now it is too late. You have had ten years to warp her into your own creature. I am not about to let her acquire the power to pursue your agenda.”

“Crimson, you have made the mistake of allowing yourself to believe your own lies. This cannot go on.” She shook her head and sighed, strugging for a reasonable tone of voice. “You made an excellent choice in Logan. He will be an excellent husband to Morgan, and I look forward to their union. But not like this. If you make this announcement, and cause Morgan to forfeit her initiation, everything is lost. Logan can not help destroying the House, if he becomes its head. He is not a phoenix, he does not carry the Phoenix Legacy, and could not prevent the House from being absorbed by the dragons.

“But ignoring that,” Amber sighed and regrouped, “consider what you accomplish by forcing Morgan to forfeit her career. Crimson, she is meant to be the champion of the Goddess, first and foremost. The very reason the Phoenix House came into existence was to champion the Goddess and protect the faith. How dare you interfere in that?”

Crimson snorted. “Who cares about the Goddess? Did you not learn, as an initiate, that the old gods—all of them—were a bunch of upstart sorcerers who used their knowledge of the art to cow the rest of humanity into subservience. It sickens me that one of them still holds sway over our lives. The rest of the world laughs at us for our foolish obedience to her whims. By what madness do we owe all that we have accomplished to some power hungry relic of the Cataclysm?”

Amber sucked in her shock. “I remember you once ranting in a similar way against the nobility. Now that you have wormed your way into the Courts, do you still feel that the nobility should be torn down? No. I didn’t think so. You’re problem, Crimson, is that you can’t stand the idea of someone having more power than you. You assume that it is rightfully yours and yours alone, and you will stop at nothing to claim it for yourself. I warn you. You defy the Goddess at your own peril. I am done talking to you.”

Amber turned on her heel and slammed through the door. Morgan clung to the window sill, trembling, waiting for Crimson to follow. As she did, her mentor’s last argument ran through her head. For most of her life, Morgan had wondered what “Chosen of the Goddess” in her title referred to. She had assumed, for the most part, that it was an honorarium, a reference to her miraculous survival of the Dream Gate Massacre. She knew that, historically, the Phoenix House had been founded by the champions of the Phoenix, at the end of the Age of Gods, and that it existed to protect the sanctuaries and priestesses of the Goddess. Its army, or in better times armies, defended the rights and welfare of her people, and its champions, paladins, prosecuted their enemies. She had assumed that her training had been to master the legacy, to hold the titles of the house in trust through the reconstruction. Was she also intended to become the first paladin after the Purge?

The question kept her company as Crimson left the room, allowing her to creep in through the window and sneak back through the shadows to retrieve her gown. Along the way, she slipped into a water closet and used the pump and a towel to scrub away the muck and grime. Since she had less need to hide her presence, she was free to use her powers to help make herself presentable as she dressed. Once she had returned downstairs without incident, she sought out Logan, hoping to confer with him before the announcement. She was forced to move quickly, as Crimson appeared and seating for the banquet began. She headed directly for the room where he had been closeted with the imperial heir and let herself in quietly. They were still seated together, but from the tone of their voices they had lapsed into reminiscing about their childhood. Looking up as she cleared her throat, they rose to greet her. Logan introduced her to his cousin, who gracefully excused himself, with a wink to both of them.

“I was hoping you would join us earlier,” Logan opened as he led her to the vacated seats.

“I considered it, but I had to check in on Amber and Cinder.”

“Ah. So I missed the show,” he commented as he sat himself across from her. “How did it go?”

“Fabulous. Amber called her a bitch and a whore, and dared her to challenge her to a duel over it. Crimson accused her of being deluded, and claimed the Goddess was a fraud. It’s a wonder the north wing was not reduced to rubble by lightening.” Morgan smiled as Logan shook his head and laughed. “Amber also declared that I was intended to become a paladin, and Crimson was taking a big chance putting that at risk,” Morgan confessed in a more self-conscious voice.

“Paladin?” Logan cried in amazement. Then he leaned back and tapped his lip, “That makes a lot of sense, actually. I am surprised I didn’t guess. But, this is excellent. This guarantees my plan will work.”

“What plan? You still haven’t told me anything.”

“Oh no. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.” He rose to his feet, pulling her up with him and dancing aside as she aimed a kick to his shin. “Be patient. You’ll find out soon enough. You’re reaction is important, since it will keep her from suspecting a conspiracy on our part. Just trust me.”

“That gets harder every time I talk to you,” she growled, as he led her from the room. They emerged just in time to be escorted to their places at the main table, between the regent and the imperial heir. While Crimson fussed over Logan, Morgan allowed herself to become better acquainted with his cousin. His younger sister was completing her initiation, and he had come to escort her home afterward. He talked openly about his own initiation, completed a year earlier, and encouraged her to share some of her own experiences. Being careful to avoid the insanity of her most recent year, she entertained him with some of her mishaps and adventures, to distract herself from the building tension. Finally, the remains of the meal were cleared away and drinks were poured, with the obligatory toasts.

When Crimson rose from her seat and tapped her glass for attention, the entire hall fell silent, and eyes darted between her and the couple seated next to her. Master Vinewood placed a restraining hand on Amber’s arm as she nearly jumped to her feet.

“My Lords and Ladies, and good people all, it is my duty, and privilege, to announce tonight, the fulfillment of a great promise between the two great houses of the North. If you will allow me, I would like to introduce two fine young people, for those of you who may not already know them.” She gestured for Logan and Morgan to stand. “Logan of the Dragon House, son of Mi’night, Lord of Darksands, and Furnace, Princess of Alten and Sister to His Imperial Majesty, Forge. Standing beside him, Morgan, Heir to the Phoenix House and Legacy, Chosen of the Goddess, daughter of the late Phoenix Ember, Head of the Phoenix House.

“One year ago, tonight, they were formally introduced in light of their betrothal. In accordance with tradition, I have the pleasure to announce to you all, the Union of Logan and Morgan, at nine bells midsummer morning, seven weeks and four days hence. If you would all raise your glasses with me, to toast this happy occasion…” There was a short, sustained rumble of people rising from their seats, accompanied by the soft chime of jewelry on crystal as they reached for their goblets. “To the Bride and Groom.”

The phrase echoed from the mouths of several hundred witnesses, followed by cheers and whistles. When it died down, Logan cleared his throat for attention. Glancing at Morgan, and seeing curiosity on her face, Crimson gestured for him to make his speech.

“There are,” he began, “very few people who are not aware of the hard times that have befallen the Phoenix House. I am certain that the loss of their leadership has been very hard for the people of the Autumn Dominion, and that the ascension of the Dragon House to replace them has been a cause for some concern. I am painfully conscious, as the people await the elevation of a new head to restore the Phoenix House to its former glory, that this engagement has also been a matter of some concern, and I have spent some considerable time searching for a way to alleviate that concern.

“Out of this great consideration for the people, and their love for their former lords and masters, I have consulted my cousin,” he indicated the heir, who nodded. “Together, we have determined that, out of respect for the people and the traditions of the Autumn Dominion, it is only just and reasonable to seek the blessings of the Goddess before consummating this union.” Cinder reeled on her feet, struggling to keep her face composed. Cheers and applause roared in approval of this announcement, on one hand fueled by the joy of the devout, and the other by the respect of the politically savvy.

“In the meantime,” Logan added, smiling and putting his arm around Morgan’s shoulder, “while I await the Goddess’s pleasure. I intend to encourage my bride to be to bide a bit, and not tempt fate with wedding preparations. Fortunately, we have trials coming up to distract her!” He laughed, and the people laughed with him. The couple sat down, holding hands openly on the table, and nodded gracefully as people began rising in turn to toast the occasion.

“That was well done,” Morgan beamed, squeezing his hand.

“Best I could do on short notice,” he grinned.

“Yes,” she nodded. “And, yes.”

“And yes what?”

“And, yes, I have decided to join your little crusade. I meant to tell you earlier, but all of this nonsense came up and distracted me.” He looked at her and smiled.

“I could just kiss you.”

“At the moment, you’d probably get away with it.”