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Crimson had taken the first opportunity to drag Logan and Morgan aside and demand an explanation of his declaration. She protested that the blessings of the Goddess were petitioned in the ceremony itself. She expressed a critical concern that his “delaying” the preparations was a prelude to backing out of the engagement. Unfortunately, Logan had already claimed the high ground. The political concerns he had addressed were very real. He calmly assured her that he intended to petition the Goddess at the first opportunity. She was not in the habit of refusing to hear such petitions, so there was no cause for alarm. When Crimson still insisted that prompt attention to the preparations for the wedding was necessary, he suggested that she focus on getting everything in order. Once he had the Goddess’s blessings, Morgan would be able to quickly complete her preparations. Since a date had been announced, everything else could be arranged accordingly needing only Morgan’s approval.

There was nothing Crimson could do.

Once the evening was over, Morgan retreated to her room. She dismissed the servants, stripped and let her hair down, collapsing exhausted into bed. In spite of a night without sleep, in the wake of months of fitful rest, she found herself staring at the ceiling and brooding. Before leaving, Logan had taken her aside to talk about the demon threat in more detail. As she had feared, he did not take her into his full confidence and she had found herself debating how to lure him into a full confession. Over the past ten years, she had noticed some bizarre traits and habits on the part of Logan and a few of his companions and she wondered if she could use her observations to trip him into a confession. When she pressed him to explain his mysterious departure the day before, he confided that he had received a dire warning of a demon that embodied the very threat he had hinted at.

While he discussed his concerns about how to go about locating this particular demon, she toyed with the idea of telling him that she had followed him through a door and behind a curtain which led to a world beyond her comprehension. Not sure whether it should have been possible for her to do so, however, she counseled herself against it. Instead, she forced herself to focus on the problem he presented. She asked him specific questions about what his informant had been able to tell him about the demon, how he had identified it as a threat to this world, searching for some clue as to its nature or motives. He told her the demon was instructed to discover the secrets which ensured the integrity of reality. She asked if he knew who or what possessed those secrets, stating that would be the obvious target. He assured her that only the Goddess knew such secrets, and she smiled and told him that their demon would reveal itself by seeking some way to get to the goddess.

The disturbing part of that was the thought that it might succeed.

How was she supposed to go to sleep with such a dreadful thought on her mind? She found herself dwelling on her most recent nightmare. She could clearly recall overhearing a man observing the critical role demons appeared to play in the Phoenix Massacres. Was it possible that the destruction of her House was evidence of demonic attacks against the Goddess? It seemed such a perfect hypothesis she felt an instinctive urge to discredit it, but she did not know where to start. She was impatient for morning to arrive so she could share her suspicions with Logan. Thinking about talking to Logan led to thinking about Logan and eventually to her first serious contemplation of the prospect of being married to him. She finally drifted off, wondering how a relationship between two individuals from two separate realities could possibly work, and her subconscious mind took over working on the hypothesis.

Her dreams skittered through a number of romantic formulas, dancing wantonly in and out of erotic situations frustrated by a lover who turned into smoke and light when she embraced him, or who turned away from her shocking transformations into the male version of herself. This frustration opened the door for her inevitable nightmares, as demons marched in to destroy all her illusions of a happy life, chased by faceless entities that caused everything the demons touched to melt into formless mist. Caught between this twin menace, Morgan exploded awake panting and cursing under her breath. Collapsing back, she stared sightlessly at the ceiling for an hour, trying to sort through the images. It had been months since her nights had been plagued by any insecurity about her sexuality. Except when something forced her to remember, she had not even thought about it when she was awake. Apparently, resolving the problem within herself did not answer her fears about what Logan, who had witnessed most of her ordeal, thought about it.

It was just one more thing that would have to be brought out into the open and discussed. Rising from the bed, she crossed the room to confront herself in the mirror. Candle wicks burst into flame in response to her desire for more light, as she studied the image of herself. She was tall and slender, in excellent athletic condition. The curves of her hips and breasts more than sufficient to proclaim her womanhood. She might have been a touch androgynous in a loose shirt and breeches, but there was nothing overtly masculine in her form or bearing. The fact that she could still change that with a thought was balanced by the fact that she had no particular desire to move in that direction. The confusion that had once made her condition uncontrollable had been laid to rest.

She still did not know why the problem had been created in the first place. But she had figured out who she was and, by that, what she was. She never wanted to go through that struggle again. When she went over, fetching a shirt and pants from her wardrobe, and slipped them on, she was confident that her choice was based on the convenience and freedom of movement those clothes allowed her in combat. In that, she was no different from any other female initiate. The only difference was that she had had a taste of the other side of life. The good and the bad, and her experience had made her wiser.

Rather than worrying about what he thought of her as a woman, she should be more concerned about Logan’s opinion of her as a person. As she listened to the peal of four bells, she sighed and shrugged. She had some time to kill before she could start working on that problem, but a nice long walk would help her dismiss these other disturbances and give her a chance to go over the problems her regent had dropped on her. The worst possible outcome, was that she missed trials and her marriage to Logan turned her into a well pampered homebody with no voice in politics and an aborted education. The life of choice for a lot of women who became initiates just to acquire suitable husbands. By traditional views, a very respectable accomplishment for a woman, and preferable to the usual alternative of becoming a priestess.

Morgan stopped in the vestibule to slip into her boots and cloak before stepping out into the misty, predawn chill. Dream Gate, on the Phoenix Coast, was in the southernmost reaches of the shattered continent, so it was not intolerably cold. She pulled her cloak tight to keep out the wind, streaming in off the sea, and followed the ridge road to the north edge of the port. She let her feet guide her as she contemplated the Goddess’s response to Logan’s petition. If Amber had been right, and she was destined to become a paladin, there was little chance that the Goddess would give her blessing to the union. If the Goddess wanted her to marry Logan, she might offer her blessing, but place some condition upon them which would allow Morgan to complete the trials. Of course, she still had to be tested by Master Vinewood, but after her experience with that demon on the Threshold, her response to them had changed significantly.

Her mind detoured into a sobering contemplation of that alien realm. These thoughts kept her company as she wandered through the early morning. Arriving at the north ridge cliffs, some time after five bells, she sought out the warmth of an inn. The north ridge housed the merchants, sea-men and fishermen whose trade kept them tied to the sea, and the shops and kitchens of the establishments that serviced them were open and bustling before the earliest light. Because of this convenience, the same facilities attracted the city guards, pausing from their rounds or before and after their posting, to warm and refresh themselves. Morgan should have been thinking about where this tidbit of knowledge had come from, because then she would have been prepared for her next confrontation.

“Well. If it isn’t the prodigal son,” a familiar voice crowed from behind her. She knew the voice as well as she knew Amber’s. A voice of wisdom, warning and instruction.

“Thorn,” she turned and greeted her other mentor by name. She resisted the urge to hug him. In his mind she was still a boy, and that display of affection would instantly wake his disapproval. “What are you doing here?”

“When I lost the battle to preserve my charge,” he began, referring to the events of the preceding year, “I was forced to seek another line of employment. Fortunately, Dream Gate can always use a good soldier. They made me a captain of the guard.” He studied her features while she tried to think of a response. It had seriously cost him to preserve her secret. “You’ve matured into a beautiful girl,” he murmured, in a slightly pained voice.

“It’s better than flipping back and forth, or being split into two people again,” she replied. She had already explained her decision to him, and her reasons. What more was there to say?

“Did you even try…”

“With who?” she cut him off, knowing what he was about to suggest again, “That girl my father tried to marry me off to? Correction, that man who claimed he was my father?” Thorn said nothing. “I have more respect for Raven. Should I have given Logan a try too? Compare and contrast? Is that how you think it works?” Thorn grunted and shook his head. He wandered away without further comment and she folded her arms and cradled her head on the table. That had not gone well. Worse, the cryptic exchange had drawn some attention, and people were staring at her. She finished her drink and stormed out of the inn. She felt more comfortable out in the cold.

She clambered down the rocky cliff to the beach, to wade through the waves and watch the sun come up, wondering what to do about the debt she owed Thorn. She lost track of time, until half past seven bells when she felt a curious contact from Logan. She opened her mind to him and established contact. She was grateful for the distraction, and the opportunity to share her thoughts with him. Discovering how far she had wandered down the beach, she turned south to head back to the port. As she walked, she relayed her thoughts from the previous evening, including her suspicions that the Phoenix Massacres were evidence of the rogue demon’s assault on the Goddess. She was sharing her memory of the nightmare, re-enacting the Dream Gate Massacre, when she noticed she was not alone on the beach.

In her distraction she had stumbled into the midst of a score of campers. That was a slang term they used among themselves that had somehow come to identify people who remained in Dream Gate past the conclusion of their initiations to hunt the ruins. They supported themselves by collecting on the bounties posted for the destruction of demons or undead that haunted the region. They wandered scattershot along the beach in groups of two or three, talking to each other in subdued voices. Just as she was about to dismiss them as harmless, a chill went up her spine.

Everything came apart in an instant.

As she stepped between two groups, they turned to confront her. At the same time, others took advantage of her open mind to stun her. Three or four campers hammered her in an explosion of psychic energy. The combined blow momentarily paralyzed her higher faculties. Her link to Logan was cut as she recoiled in shock. Her attackers used the moment to close in on her, drawing weapons. She whirled instantly into dancing mode, twisting, dodging and evading the group as the last of them closed in to attack her. With the economy of motion she had been taught, she used their momentum to disarm, disable or dismiss her opponents in a pattern that caused people and objects to fly away from her as fast as they advanced. Because her psychic defenses had been shattered from the outset, she could not fully recover from the ambush. Her timing and reflexes were disrupted by additional psychic or sorcerous assaults. Morgan was overpowered on the beach, and dragged into a cove.

In spite of the grips that kept her immobilized, she continued trying to resist, to keep them occupied, as she reached inward to regroup. An alarm was going off in her head, warning her that there was something wrong. The best thing she had to work with was the fact that she had been in telepathic rapport with Logan when her assailants attacked. If he acted quickly, she might survive this. The only problem was, she was not already dead. It took her a moment to realize why her brain insisted that was a problem. Then she understood that she was about to be raped.

“You don’t want to do this,” she warned the young men. Or tried. As soon as she began to speak a hand clamped around her neck in a strangling grip, choking her words. The sound of blood pounding in her ears drowned out their hushed voices and they conferred for a moment. One of them, gripping her from behind, cupped a hand over her breast and spoke harshly in her ear.

“Do not speak. I would warn you to keep silent, but,” he chuckled softly, “from my experience you won’t be able to. Just remember, the more you interfere, the longer this is going to take.”

Morgan moaned at this confirmation. For one second she considered revealing her masculine form, denying them herself. Unfortunately, her male body was not impenetrable, and might well provoke a more dangerous response. Training dictated that her first priority was survival. As horrible as it was, rape could be survived, but panicked resistance could prove fatal. With the odds so heavily against her, her best hope was to give them as little of herself as she could. As soon as they felt her go limp, they began tearing at her clothing. A brutal, symbolic deflowering shared by the group asserting its claim on her. She denied them the pleasure of hearing her protest about her virginity. They needed no additional encouragement. She was already withdrawing into herself, as she had been taught, when another horrible intuition seized her.

None of them were fumbling at their own clothing.

Looking into her assailants’ eyes, she saw the kind of menace that had lurked in the eyes of her mother ten years earlier. Those eyes promised far worse than rape or murder. They had cleverly used her own training to weaken her for a different kind of assault entirely. Having no time to verify her suspicion, she acted. Calling once more on her training, she tried to break away, forcing her consciousness to anchor itself firmly in her flesh. The instant she sensed another presence trying to root itself in her body, something inside her snapped, and she exploded into a blood red rage.

Logan had leapt into motion the instant he lost contact with Morgan. He had a general idea where she was from the images that had spilled over during their rapport. He was not as familiar with Dream Gate as Morgan’s alter ego, but back in the days when her other side was a separate entity, their rivalry had caused them to become familiar with each others habits and favorite haunts. It seemed kind of silly now to think that they had started fighting because they were among the top five initiates of their generation and had the same name. Now the other Logan was no more, but his spirit might have guided Morgan’s footsteps. He raced toward the north beach and arrived in time to see the carnage unfold.

It was as if the nightmares she had just been showing him had erupted into life straight out of her mind. As he came in sight, he could see her lying pinned in the middle of a crowd that had ripped open her shirt and stripped the rest of her clothing completely off. While he closed the distance, he saw the youth stretched on top of her suddenly disintegrate into a pile of gore. A second later, her gaze locked on another young man, who also shuddered into a tangle of limbs and organs spilling free on the sand. Logan came to a dead stop as Morgan freed an arm to pick up the sword dropped by her second victim, while two of the men standing around her lunged in and plunged their swords through her body.

Morgan gasped in agony as one blade entered her belly, and the other punched through her chest, into her right lung. As Morgan screamed, a concussive force exploded outward from her, throwing blood, sand, bodies and bits away from her. Logan had to drop onto his stomach to dodge the two swords she expelled from her flesh. Everyone scrambled to their feet, but Morgan was already up, propelled by her outburst. As she dropped to her feet, the sword she had liberated chopped through another foe’s arm. The fact that she was even up and moving implied that she had sealed her wounds, and held them closed, with her mind. Her blade twisted through a tiny arc as she reversed her swing to separate a head from its shoulders. As a third man lunged for the opening she had left, she glanced at him. Logan could actually sense the laser fine thrust from her mind, and feel how it shattered her opponent.

Swallowing his gorge, Logan stepped in to help her.

He was well armed and composed, his full faculties available for the fight, but he quickly found himself taxed just watching her back. She moved with merciless perfection, slashing, stabbing, striking and shattering one foe after another. At some point they had started running, but she simply reached out and tore them to pieces, forcing them to regroup and confront her with all they had left. The fury that animated her drove her until the last man fell twitching. When she came to a panting halt and confronted her handiwork, she suddenly snapped out of her rage and went into shock.

Her telekinetic grip suddenly relaxed and blood started gushing out of her chest and gut, while she collapsed to her knees and began pitching to the ground. Logan squatted and caught her, his mind probing her wounds as he cradled her in his arms. The regeneration that was part of the dragon and phoenix legacies had not had enough time to bind her wounds. Like himself, Morgan was better trained in the psychic arts than the magic arts. That power exacted a more immediate price. Combined with her shock, and the exhaustion of her unrestrained psychic onslaught, she was in no condition to repair the damage. Logan himself had expended a great deal of his energy racing to the scene and jumping into combat. But he had enough left to risk a teleport to the Sanctuary, and hand Morgan over to the healers there.

Their sudden arrival shocked the priestesses, gathered in the courtyard for morning prayers. Logan lurched and collapsed next to Morgan, joining her in unconsciousness after one plea for assistance.

He only required a good amount of sleep to recover. When he woke it was past the midday hour, and Morgan lay naked under a sheet in the bed across from him. He slipped out of bed and went to her side, probing her body with his thoughts to confirm that her wounds were cleaned and repaired and she was sleeping naturally. He remembered rousing as he was put into bed and informing someone that Morgan had been attacked on the beach. There would be questions to answer, especially by Morgan when she finally woke. An investigation should have already begun. After brushing Morgan’s hair back from her face and kissing her brow, he slipped out to discover what had happened while he had been unconscious.

Rather than seek out a human agent for information, he made his way to the inner sanctum and used a secret door to access the sanctorum. Once inside he secured the other entrances and called out.

“We need to talk.”

He watched as the apparition of the Goddess appeared and resolved into flesh. Here was the source of the features which defined the Phoenix House. Morgan was the final offshoot of the woman the Goddess had resurrected in her own image. Apart from sex, the two were identical. The Goddess was a unique creature, neither male nor female. Though she appeared completely androgynous, she had a unique reproductive system that the gods had adopted, which allowed them to sire or bear children. They, like her, had the flat chest of a man, but otherwise the proportions of a tall woman, which encouraged the use of the feminine pronoun. She looked at him and commented, “You’re out of character, Douglas. That can’t be a good sign.”

“I don’t have time for games right now. I meant to talk to you this morning, but things keep getting more complicated. This ambush goes right over the top.” He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “You know I need Morgan’s help. Are you *trying* to screw that up?”

“I’ve told you before. I just set the stage. I don’t control the actors on it. You wanted realism, that calls for autonomous entities. We went through this during the war of the gods.”

“Sorry, Phoenix. I’m not here to yell at you. I just… It’s frustrating. You know as well as I that the game is in jeopardy. I thought that, given the direction things were going, I only needed to nudge things in a couple of places and the problem would fix itself. Unfortunately, while I was setting this campaign up, someone moved to exploit the security flaw. I have a rogue demon, a worm virus programmed to seek out and crack the security core. Thanks to Morgan, I remembered that means you.”

“I know,” she smiled. “I monitor your connections personally. I always do. I have the rough code of the demon in quarantine. I have calibrated all my diagnostics to search for anything derivative in the construct plexus. The demon you are looking for is not active in the public sectors. At the moment it is encapsulated in a subsystem I cannot access. If you want, I can suspend services and run a node to node search until I find out which peripheral it is isolated in.”

“You mean the head? From what I saw this thing leaves a tail in everything it passes through.”

“Correct. The segments of the tail also represent a threat, but only by trapping the head can the problem be resolved. With it, the tail can be quickly rooted out. I suspect the revised worm exploits encapsulated node architecture. There are billions of places for it to hide, and because those places are in fact the psyche constructs of the populace, they are almost impossible to search. This thing is not much different from the infiltration modules you designed to impose the rules of the game at the point of access. It resides within the interface protocols of the infected entities, which puts it technically outside the game. Like any other demon, it can call functions within the game, or another secure environment with the same architecture, because it’s out on the Threshold somewhere.

“My best chance of discovering it is to stop time and interrogate every psyche node while they are paralyzed,” the AI explained.

“No. That’s the last thing you should do. Morgan was right. This thing needs direct access to you to complete its first objective. If you access the node it is in, it could probably infiltrate you faster than you can identify it as the worm. You need an agent to hunt it out for you. Which brings me back to what I meant to talk to you about this morning.

“What Morgan suggested, about the motive behind the Purge, and the Phoenix Massacres, tells me that this demon has probably associated itself with the enemies of the Phoenix House, or someone who can profit from their removal as much as it can. As your champions, they were your first line of attack and defense against threats in the world. I know you never looked at it that way, but strategically, that’s the reality of it. I think that’s contributed to the plots and attacks against Morgan. She’s obviously your best remaining asset. That forces me to ask if you were intending to name her your paladin?”

“Ah. Is this the part where you are asking for me to bless your union?”

“I wouldn’t be the first player to marry a *nipic*,” Logan shrugged, referring to Morgan as a Non-Player Character. “But then, I am not playing my typical game here, and I am not that desperate for companionship.”

“What does she think about getting married to you?”

“Are you kidding? Set up for the classic, boy-next-door childhood romance? I am sure she would love to get married, if she can. I know she doesn’t want to throw her career away over it, but,” he shrugged, “I do pick up the vibe from her. I am sure her emotional profile has her in love with me.”

“Does that actually mean anything to you?”

“What? That she loves me?”

“Yes. I love you. I am no more real to you than she is, and in many ways she is more sophisticated and *human* than I am. Do you love her?”

“Why do you care? Why does it matter? I mean, she is everything I love in a woman, in a person, but it’s… It’s not like we can have a real relationship. She’s a piece of fiction.”

“Well, then. In answer to your petition,” she straightened and assumed the air of a goddess, “I cannot bless your union until you resolve your feelings for her.”

Logan stared at her and then smiled. “That’s pretty smart. Thanks, Phoenix, that will solve the problem perfectly. I can wait until after the trials, when Morgan graduates, to ‘resolve my feelings’ and discover how truly and deeply I love her. You’re a genius!” he grabbed her and kissed her on the mouth in gratitude.

Phoenix stared at him and laughed. When he looked at her in confusion she shook her head and sighed. “Never mind. I don’t think you get it.” She asked Logan if there was anything else he wanted to discuss. He asked her to replay the events of the morning, focusing on Morgan’s movements and actions from the time she got up. The recapitulation allowed him to witness her conversation with Thorn, and study what had led up to her devastating response to the assault. For the first time, he noted the shadows that boiled out of the people she had slain. No wonder she had not let any of them get away. He had to share this discovery with the authorities.

The authorities were very interested in talking to Logan. After appearing and collapsing in the Sanctuary, the city guards were contacted and an investigation was quickly mounted. A captain of the guards had stumbled on the carnage mere moments after Logan and Morgan vanished from the beach, and summoned help for the wounded. According to his report, the survivors of the conflict all died from their injuries as help arrived. They could do nothing more than pick up the pieces, hoping to identify the slain, and try to figure out what happened. When that captain heard of Logan and Morgan’s appearance at the Sanctuary, bloody from battle, he had attempted to have them arrested.

His superior, already present while they were being treated, intervened. They were secure enough at the temple, until they had been questioned. They had been looking for Logan when he emerged from the sanctorum. He explained that he had taken advantage of his presence at the temple to make a petition to the Goddess, as he had vowed. He was happy to sit down and answer the investigators’ questions, giving them a complete recap of the morning’s events from his perspective. Morgan had roused and was brought in after Logan, to tell her side of the story. By this point the investigators learned the identities of the campers, and it was not hard to guess how they might have been possessed by the demons both survivors claimed were behind the attack. Neither Logan nor Morgan volunteered to speculate why she had been attacked. The investigators did not ask, either. Sometime late in the afternoon, Logan and Morgan were escorted to Redleaf where they were placed under house arrest, while the investigation continued.

They remained isolated for the next couple of days, which Morgan spent mostly recuperating. Regeneration ensured that she would recover fully in a few days, but placed great demands on her system. She was either asleep or trying to sate the gnawing hunger it caused. By the second evening, she was able to sit up for a few hours and talk with Logan. He told her how the Goddess had responded to his petition. For some reason, Morgan seemed to find Phoenix’s declaration particularly satisfying.

“I agree that this foils Crimson wonderfully, but what are you looking so damned smug for?” Logan demanded, as she sat there studying him with a smirk on her face.

“Because this brings up something we seriously need to talk about.” She fluffed a pillow somewhat roughly, added it to the stack behind her and leaned back. She frowned, her eyes flicking over something only she could see as she gathered her thoughts. “You don’t really think the Goddess said that just for our convenience, do you?”

“I don’t see why not. It is in her best interest to have you pass the trials. I don’t mind taking the heat for that.”

“Oh? You mean you don’t have any real doubts about marrying me? Or about me personally?”

“Oh, rot. We’re talking about an arranged marriage, Morgan. Our feelings were never taken into consideration. I’m not happy about having this thrust on me, but I like you a lot. I don’t have any real objections to you. I just don’t have any personal desire to get married to anyone.” He sighed and looked her in the eye, “From the beginning I set my feelings aside and concentrated on doing my duty. I assumed you did the same.”

“Oh, sure. We talked about this when we were first told about it,” she agreed. She reached out and laid her hand on his cheek. “I also seem to recall that you and I had a number of crushes on each other while we were growing up. We both agreed that a lot of it was hormones, and the kissing and touching was typical for kids like us, exploring our sexuality. We agreed that Crimson had set us up with the perfect excuse to go too far and *have* to marry early. I think we even agreed not to fall in love, to keep that from happening.” She took her hand away and added sternly, “But I am not asking about then. I am asking about now.”

“What do you mean?” he fidgeted on the bed beside her.

Morgan began pulling at the ties, opening her shirt down the front. “I mean, after all that happened last year, are you afraid I’m not quite the girl I used to be?” she focused on his eyes, watching as they strayed nervously to her chest. She continued loosening her shirt, exposing a track from her neck to her navel, without fully exposing her breasts.

“Morgan. Don’t…” he reached out when she grabbed the lapels of her shirt and began pulling them back.

“Why not? We’ve been engaged for a year now. You’ve been in my room alone with me for two days now. You think anyone imagines we haven’t been intimate, or that we haven’t every right. They can’t rush us to the alter any faster than they are. Why not?” she stared at him. “We’re good friends. Isn’t that enough for us get more intimately acquainted?”

“I don’t want… Morgan, you don’t need to do this for me.”

“I don’t agree,” she huffed, folding her hands in her lap. Her shirt fell open a bit more on it’s own, exposing a hint of her areolas. “I certainly need to do this for me. I’ve wanted to do this for years, but I… well, first I was afraid you thought of me as just one of the guys. Then I *was* one of the guys. That’s all over now, and I came to trials hoping we could—we would—do this.”

“Ah, Morgan.” He shook his head and looked down. When he looked back up his face was earnest. “That never mattered to me. I think you had more trouble with that than I ever did. I always thought it was fascinating. I admit, I was never turned on by you as a guy. But, I tend to think that your experience makes you a better woman, and, Goddess, it’s not like I want to say no. I just don’t feel right about taking advantage of you. I don’t want to use you for my pleasure.”

“Why do you look at it like that? What about my pleasure? Do you think the experience isn’t mutual?” she stared at him, steaming. “There on the beach, when I thought I was about to be raped, the one thing I regretted was that I had been saving myself for *you*.” Logan remained silent, struggling with the feelings she was provoking and almost angry that the game could do this to him. With all the realism, with the complexity of the characters, he had always struggled to keep from becoming too attached. He shut his eyes as he struggled within for perspective. He felt her sliding out the opposite side of the bed and looked up in time to see her nightshirt spill off her shoulders. She stepped out of the garment, piled at her feet and came around the bed to confront him. “The way things are going, I could die the next time I step out that door. I always dreamed that you would come to my bed, in an act of love. But to be perfectly frank, I’d be happy if you just fucked me. Used me and walked away, because at least I would know I won’t die a virgin.”

Logan had been too distracted by her nudity to rise from the bed. Now she had him pinned against the edge of the mattress. If he stood, he would be pressed up against her, but if he tried to retreat over the bed, she would be on top of him in an instant. It was an absurd situation. He grabbed her hands and clasped them together in his own, conveniently putting an obstacle between their bodies. “Morgan. I understand. I really do. This is just not the time. You’re still recovering from the fight. If you keep pushing you could get hurt and your injuries might scar. We can’t afford that, not with trials coming up.”

“Then give me another answer,” she pleaded.

“I just told you I am not repulsed by you. For crying out loud, just look down and you will see how attracted to you I am. What more do you possibly need to know?”

“I know men. A hole in the wall is enough to get you excited. But you,” she emphasized, pulling away from him and stalking over to a mirror, “you keep talking about how *you* feel. You don’t want me to indulge *your* desires. *You* don’t want to *use* me. Like what *I* want doesn’t even enter the picture.” She turned and glared at him, “Do you know what that sounds like to me? It sounds like the only person who is real to you is *you*.”