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Morgan maintained her level glare as she waited for him to respond. He was at a complete loss. The accusation still rang in his ears. It cut him to the quick. He just stared at her, standing tall and proud, stark naked, with her gorgeous red hair spilling over her shoulders. Her eyes, normally an impenetrable grey mist, were a brilliant emerald green. The way her breasts gently heaved with each breath, and the muscles of her legs and belly tensed as she unconsciously adjusted her balance, sent stabs of desire through him. The memory of her blood, spilling hot and viscous over his hands as he held her injured body, screamed in support of her *reality*. His fingers clenched the sheet on the bed, the friction of the movement revealing the fine weave of the fabric. The sweat that popped out on his brow trickled down the side of his face. Through it all, he struggled with himself.

The illusion was so perfect. For the first time he forced himself to confront what he had caused to be created. He had set an intelligence with access to unlimited resources the task of simulating reality to the finest detail. His AI had no concept of limits, except those that were imposed on her. He never really asked how far she had gone to fulfill his instruction. He knew that this world was ultimately just information, art imitating life. At the same time, he had grown up taught that the universe he lived in was mostly empty space in which a vast web of matter and energy was woven together in complex patterns. What were those patterns, ultimately, but information stored in the medium of time and space?

As he continued staring, immobile, her expression began to change to worry. She approached him cautiously, reaching out. “Logan? Are you going to answer me? Are you going to say *anything?*”

Logan turned to track her as she came forward. His mind was elsewhere, racing through the archives where he stored game related code, searching for the architecture that defined the minds of the game’s native inhabitants. Desperate to find out how a construct had performed such a *subjective* analysis of him. Finding it, he took it apart, trying to determine how the personality and intellect of each entity was cultivated. What he found made him pale. The annotations Phoenix had made were unbelievably detailed, referring to entire realms of psychology and neuro-linguistic programming. The only constructs Phoenix had created, the only hard code involved, was the simulation of organic chemistry. The game created body-brain constructs, the physiological tools and an interactive environment with which the nodes, captured to operate those constructs, programmed themselves through experience.

He was staring at a perfect imitation of a living woman, but the *person* who inhabited that body was in no way artificial. Phoenix had provided all the resources for her to become a unique, self determined consciousness. She was *aware* of herself. Aware of him, not as an interactive variable, but as a *person*. His eyes lighted up with awe at the discovery.

“Logan! Say something! You’re starting to scare me,” Morgan hesitated, not sure what to make of his expression. She looked uncertain, worried and wary at the same time.

“You’re *alive*,” he gasped.

Morgan’s eyes widened in shock, and she stepped back. Thoughts flashed over her face as she stared at him. Self conscious, angry, but angry with herself. Logan stood up, watching fear conquer her expression as she flinched. She knew exactly what he was thinking. She anticipated his disbelief and dreaded his reaction to it. Why would she do that unless…

“You *know*!” he shouted in increasing shock. Asp’s warning rang in his ears, as he confronted Morgan. From the look on her face, he did not need to spell out *what* she knew. “How is that possible? How is *this*,” he pointed at her, “possible?”

“Oh, Goddess,” she moaned, and sprinted from the room.

Logan launched himself after her, but she knew the house far better. She darted and twisted and leaped through doors and over obstacles Logan could not help crashing into as he tried to follow. He thought he had seen her panicked when she fought the possessed on the beach. Never had he seen her in total rout like this. She paid no heed to the servants as she streaked by in the nude. When her regent stepped forward to cut her off, no doubt intending some rebuke for her lack of dress, Morgan practically ran up one side of her and down the other. Logan breezed by as the older woman lurched against the wall in shock. As they reached the main hall, Morgan flung herself off the balcony and glided to the main floor.

Logan was surprised she was able to levitate at all, given her state of mind. Leaping after her, he had to break his fall the hard way, collapsing as he hit and rolling back to his feet. She burst out through the towering double doors of the main entrance, and kept running into the evening light. She looked ready to plough through the guardsmen, posted at the main gate to enforce her house arrest, when she suddenly stumbled to a halt. People were spilling out of the house in shock and curiosity, and the guards were advancing towards her, alarmed by the panic still evident on her face.

Logan stopped a few yards behind her. This was going to be a bit awkward. Morgan turned to look at him, then just collapsed to her knees. He approached her carefully, speaking as calmly as possible, “I am not angry, Morgan. Shocked. Amazed. I can imagine what you are afraid of, but… there’s no need to be afraid. At least, not of me. But we need to talk about this. Privately.”

Crimson emerged from the mansion and strode up to him, fuming. “What have you done to her, Logan! She was running from *you*!”

Logan winced and turned to face her. Taking a deep breath, he said, “I just informed her of the Goddess’s reply to my petition.” At that, Crimson drew back, curiosity and hope in her eyes. From Morgan’s distress, she clearly assumed that the outburst was for loosing her chance to complete the trials. “She said she could not bless our union until I resolve my feelings for Morgan. Apparently,” he looked to Morgan, speaking more for her, “I’ve never taken her seriously as a person. There are a lot of things to figure out, and I am not entirely sure how to begin.” He kept his eyes on her, waiting to see her reaction.

Morgan looked up at him for a moment before lowering her head. At that point she squawked in surprise and tried to cover herself. One of the guards who approached had taken off his cloak, and now reached forward to drape it over her shoulders. Morgan thanked him and stood, clutching the coarse material tight around herself. “You can start,” she announced, “by escorting me back to bed.”

The men around them all grinned and nudged each other, while the women covered their mouths and gasped, or tittered. Crimson puffed herself up and stormed inside in impotent outrage. Logan led Morgan after, at a more leisurely pace. The crowd dispersed as they entered the house. They did not speak as they passed through the halls. Morgan moved a bit stiffly, feeling the strain she had put on her wounds. Logan hoped she had not ruptured anything in her mad dash, and directed her to the bed to examine her, as soon as they entered her room. She handed him the borrowed cloak and stretched out on the covers, closing her eyes and trying to relax. She sighed as he swept his hand across her skin, while probing deeper with other senses.

“You better get dressed,” he warned her, when he was satisfied that she was perfectly sound, “or I’ll be tearing off my clothes and joining you.”

“I’d like nothing better,” she began, leveraging herself up and wincing, “but, I think I’ve pushed my body far enough for one afternoon.” She finished sitting up and scooted back to recline against the pillows. He noticed she made no move to retrieve her nightshirt from the other side of the bed, though. Seeking out his eyes, she spoke, almost apologetically, “I didn’t mean to let you find out that way. I just wanted to know…”

“If I loved you, even if I thought you weren’t real?”

Morgan sighed, nodded.

“I suppose I felt a kind of love.” He stepped closer and settled back on the edge of the bed. Seeing no apprehension on her face, he reached out and placed his hand on her thigh, gently stroking the surface. “You were the best part of the best thing in my life. I don’t know if that kind of love does you any justice. This changes everything.” He allowed his hand to drift a bit, extending his caress to the sensitive inner surface. For some reason, it seemed more important to touch her than talk to her. Still, he tried to stimulate more talk to restrain his curiosity. “Tell me,” he continued, meeting her gaze with curiosity, “how did you find out. I mean, you must have always known about yourself. How did you know I was different.”

She sighed and forced herself to keep her eyes level with his. “Do you remember the messenger?” He raised an eyebrow and nodded. His hand stopped moving as he tried to guess where this was going. She bit her lip, “Well, I followed you. I followed you through the curtain.”

Logan gaped at her, and she quickly recounted her adventure. Logan listened and stopped her once, to have her recount her description of the sprite she had activated. She hesitated, seeing a brooding look take over his features, and almost stopped to ask what was bothering him, when that look grew darker at the description of her encounter with Race Monkey. He waved her on, and she told the rest, about orienting herself at the information kiosk and drinking down massive quantities of information about the Threshold and the world beyond it, her struggle with the implications and her retreat back to Aeirn. She concluded by confessing that she had been struggling since then to figure out how to talk to him about her discovery.

“Trust you to just stumble into it.”

“True,” she nodded then cleared her throat. “May I ask, what were you frowning so hard over? You’re making me start to worry again.”

“I am trying to figure out how you managed to have a phoenix for your sprite.” He turned and propped his leg on the bed. “The entity you think of as the Goddess is known on the Threshold, and in the history of Aeirn, as the Phoenix. She is an AI, an artificial intelligence. She has never allowed anyone to use that device, and trust me, there is no one who can out maneuver her. She’s the one who made this place what it is. The only way you could have it is if she let you. I’d say, only because she *gave* it to you. Which means she knew you could enter the Threshold. She wanted you to,” he declared, looking somewhat disturbed. He stared off into the distance for a moment then turned back to Morgan. “Morgan, if she knows about you, if she knows enough that she cares about whether I know you are real, she has to know about herself.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It means she has free will,” he pointed out. “It also means she is bound to me, by me, as a slave.” He felt ill saying it. He swallowed. “What’s worse, I forced her to create more of her kind, and they are enslaved by the government. My government, I mean, in my own world.” She frowned and begged him to explain. He told her about his life on the outside, how he had discovered new properties in the motes, which Phoenix had allowed him to harness. He told her how he had been hunted by different groups who wanted to exploit his discovery and how he had gone to work for the government in exchange for their protection. “The problem is, my discovery was dependant on the capabilities of my AI, Phoenix. To create independent, secure environments, Phoenix had to create intelligences like herself to harness those properties and govern them. She built the necessary constructs, and then did to them what I did to her. She forced them to define themselves.” He rubbed at his eyes. “I did not understand what she was doing at the time, but it’s impossible not to see it now.”

Morgan had struggled to stay awake and discuss the ramifications of Logan’s revelations, but after she nodded off for a third time, Logan had tucked her under the covers and curled up beside her on the bed soothing her to sleep. Regeneration still left her too drained to dream, so she woke up the next morning refreshed. She could feel his bare chest against her back, and guessed that he had eventually joined her under the covers. It was the first time they had slept in the same bed since they were children. Allowing her hand to stray under the sheets, she discovered that he had left his pants on. Apparently she was going to have to be even more aggressive to break through his extraordinary reserve. After what happened the previous evening though, she found she could appreciate the gallant gesture. He had stayed with her, close to her, without compromising his integrity, or her own.

Unfortunately, he had not locked the door. The smell of breakfast, sitting on the side table, warned her that they had been observed together. The servants only had to note their bare shoulders to conclude that condition carried all the way down. The moment she left the room, her sheets would be pulled and examined for evidence of their intimacy, and any lack there of would suggest that they had been more intimate over time than anyone had suspected. Certainly no one would think that two teen aged youths in their prime could cuddle together in perfect chastity. Of course it would be more embarrassing to assert that they had.

Morgan turned in his slumbering embrace and studied his face. When his eyes opened, they peered directly into hers, and he smiled. She returned a smile of her own, but then a puzzled look crossed her face as something suddenly occurred to her. “Logan, if you have a life outside of this universe, how is it you can be here twenty-seven hours a day, every day?”

He frowned and shrugged. “This might be a little hard to explain. In the game, time is a constant, the rate at which events unfold. The speed at which all the calculations involved in simulating reality are computed, however, is variable. Do I need to explain that more?”

“No, I picked up a lot of scientific and programming terms and theories when I was learning about the Threshold.”

“Alright. So, with that, it is possible to speed up time in here so that a thousand years can unfold in an instant, relative to the outside universe. It is also possible to stop time completely, to suspend the game for as long as necessary. You would not notice it from the inside at all. That happens every night at midnight. The game runs for four and a half hours every day, at about six times acceleration. During that time, everyone on the outside who participates in the game logs in and lives a full day here.”

“How can your minds deal with things moving so fast?”

“The mind is a lot more flexible than the brain. The mind will use whatever tools it is given to do what it needs to do. The interface of the game creates a brain in the game—not much different from your own—which is designed to operate by the temporal index of the simulation. So, you could say that my consciousness is shifted into this reality, while a program directs my body through a four hour workout, or monitors my sleep.” He grinned then sighed and corrected himself, “Or, that’s the way it used to be. These days I have an AI that continues the work I prepared in my spare time to free me to sneak in here.”

“Sneak? Why do you have to sneak in here?”

“It’s pretty stupid. The government does not trust me because I am not a citizen, and because I was a notorious hacker before they recruited me. They are not smart enough to be able to tell what I am doing exactly, when I am online. They tried to control me by restricting my access to the minimum time possible for me to work on my legitimate projects. If they catch me online outside of that time frame, they will take Phoenix away from me. Her mote I mean.” He sat up and looked down at her. “I can’t let them take her, it would put them in a position to destroy her and the game. But, since I only need four and a half hours to stay caught up with the game, I created a copy of myself to cover for me while I slip out a back door.”

“I think I understand,” she grinned. She slipped out of bed and began scooping food into a couple of bowls for her and Logan, then returned to his side and handed him one. “I still have a lot to learn about the Threshold, and the Outside. As I told you, my one experience with it convinced me completely of the threats they pose to life here. Now that you understand that there is life here, maybe you will help me figure out how to protect it for good.”

“That could take a lot of time, and meanwhile we have that demon poised to bring down the whole house of cards.” He took a few bites of his breakfast and thought. He bounced away from the bed to fetch a pitcher of juice and two cups, “I tend to doubt that the demon we want was destroyed in the battle the other day. The attack fit the profile, but if the demon had been exposed, Phoenix would have probably detected it. I talked to her after the fight and she informed me that it had not been…” he paused, handing her the cups and pouring their drinks. He set the pitcher on the nightstand and resumed. “It has not come out in the open. It has to be hiding in a person.”

Logan stopped and his face suddenly paled.

“What is it?”

“I just realized that the possessed are real people. We… you… on the beach, we killed a bunch of people,” he stammered.

Morgan handed him his cup and urged him to take a drink. “I told you this isn’t a game. I am sure the dead were taken to the Goddess for resurrection. You know she tries to restore the lives of those whose demise was unnatural. We will know today which of them are truly lost. I imagine I will have to make some reparation to their families, if they don’t press charges against me for overkill.”

After their breakfast, they were informed by their guards that they were to be escorted to the Sanctuary to pay their respects to the slain and the revived, the second of which would accompany them to a hearing to determine if charges were to be brought against Morgan. As they arrived, a priestess summoned Logan to speak to the Goddess. When he returned, he told her what he had learned. The party that ambushed her had in fact been possessed, she had removed from their minds traces which proved that they had each been corrupted by the demon they were searching for. The Goddess had been unable to resurrect the ones Morgan had shattered with her thoughts. Those who were revived could not remember anything past their last foray into the ruins to hunt, some weeks earlier.

A priestess, speaking on behalf of the Goddess, accompanied them to the hearing at the palace of the duke. The dragon lord listened to the testimony of each person and ruled that the matter would not go to trial unless charges were brought by the families of the slain. While those people were contacted and informed of the deaths of their kin, Morgan and Logan were given parole to complete the trials, which would be starting the next morning. Amber had joined Morgan for the hearing and afterward led her to meet with Master Vinewood. The master asked her a number of questions, requesting complete recaps of the Dream Gate Massacre and the recent conflict on the beach, while probing her mind. After a couple of hours, the master told her he could find no reason to keep her out of the trials, though he cautioned her against lashing out with such unrestrained force every time she came up against demons.

“Whatever impact your experiences with demons in the past has had on you, it seems to be less of a danger to you than to any demon you meet. The only danger is that you risk expending yourself in the immediate conflict and have no reserves for whatever comes after. It’s something to work on, but by itself not a reason to suspend you from the trials,” Vinewood concluded.

“Thank you, Master,” Morgan bowed. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes. In spite of taking grievous injuries, you regrouped and managed to eradicate a large cell of rogue demons almost entirely on your own. Even if Logan had not been there to save your life at the end, you acquitted yourself admirably. I would have grieved your loss, but celebrated your victory.” He beamed at her, “I am very proud. In fact, I am tempted to consider that sufficient for the completion of your trials. Rather than cause an uproar, I have decided instead to assign you a point position in the trials.”

Morgan gaped at him. “You’re advancing me to Scout?” That was a position usually filled by veterans, initiates who returned in the years after their final trials to chaperone untested underclassmen, who had not gone on to become mentors. If she completed the trials successfully, she would come out a year ahead of her peers in her education.

“You have to earn it, but it seems a fitting reward for surviving twenty to one odds against demons.” He stood and Morgan followed suit. “So, until the morrow, go on home and get a good night’s sleep. It’s going to be a very busy day tomorrow.”

After three days of recuperation, Morgan was not hurting for lack of sleep. In fact, she was charged up with new vitality as she sought out Logan, and dragged him back to her room at Redleaf. The fact that they still had many things to talk about sufficed to distract him until late in the evening, at which point Morgan barred the door to her room and began to disrobe. She did this quickly, jumping to intercept Logan as he made to excuse himself. She backed him to the bed, pulling at the ties to his clothing and explaining, once more, that she had no intentions of being a virgin the next time she put herself in harm’s way. She warned him it would look bad if she had to drag a servant in to do this service for her when she had a fiancée commonly believed to have been performing his duty adequately for some time now.

His resistance crumpled as easily as his clothes as they dropped to the floor. She continued to back him up until his head hit the headboard, allowing her to capture his mouth in a passionate kiss. When she pulled back to give him some air, she grinned and growled. “Do not speak. I would warn you to keep silent, but,” she 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 captured his mouth again before he could reply. After several long moments, absorbed in her kiss, he decided to interfere as much as possible, and allowed his hands to stray to her body. Deciding that the best way to show his respect for was to ensure that this first time for her was exceptional. He started by testing her limits. There was much to explore together. Many times over—especially after midnight when Logan embraced her with renewed passion. They did not speak of love or commitment, for in the back of their minds loomed the incongruity of their relationship and the truth that made it seem impossible to sustain over any length of time.

Rather than slip into dreams, they dozed lightly between exertions, roused by the resurgence of their passions, until they agreed that a bath was a more appropriate place to conclude their nocturne than the bed. They snuck through the house to the bath, which in a mansion such as this consisted of showers, a large pool two men deep, and a half-dozen alcoves with private, heated tubs. They scrubbed each other down and entered the pool, continuing their play in the crisp, cool water, before retreating to an alcove to soak in each other’s arms. When they returned to Morgan’s room, an hour before sunrise, they ran to the windows and threw them open to air it out. They scampered under the covers, curled up to await breakfast, and promptly fell asleep.

When the sun forced them to stir, they had to jump into their clothes and race out the door, breakfast in their hands, to make it to the assembly officially opening the week of trials. They joined their peers in listening to a lecture about what the following days would hold for them.

According to legend, the ruins above Dream Gate had been haunted since the fall of the gods. The ruins were what remained of one of the great cities built in the golden age of their rule, which had fallen in the epic wars, and was buried by the Cataclysm and time. The legends of creatures which yet endured in the depths of the ancient city had sufficed to keep all but the most foolish or valiant from venturing too far or too deep within the rubble. It had become a proving ground for initiates in the two thousand years since the coming of the Magus. It had also, a generation past, been used by the survivors of the Border Massacre to meet in secret to work on the reconstruction and restoration of the Phoenix House.

Since the tragic conclusion of that effort, the ruins had become increasingly active, and more and more unearthly creatures had begun venturing out to prey on the surrounding communities. There were scores of individuals who dedicated themselves solely to answering this threat, individuals like the campers who swelled the population of Dream Gate and neighboring towns, or the knights attached to the city guard.

The initiates of Morgan’s class would be divided among a number of these seasoned veterans, who would lead them into the ruins for three nights. They would have to work together, and use everything they had learned in the previous decade, to endure this adventure. They would be judged by how far they penetrated, how well they secured and defended their camps, and what they reported learning from the experience.

They were given a day to meet with their assigned parties and make preparations for the ordeal. They spent that day procuring equipment and provisions, going over maps, and discussing the rules and boundaries for the trials. There were a number of different objectives each party could pursue, and the assignments had been made based on the assessment of their masters. The best students of each school were submitted for the groups with the most ambitious objectives. This meant that Logan and Morgan ended up in the same party, with the most exceptional students of their generation. They would proceed to the heart of the ruin and enter the catacombs through the mansion Morgan remembered all too well.

After completing their preparations, the leader of their party, a knight by the name of Torrent, directed them to report to an inn on the edge of the city. Dream Gate had long since spilled over the ridge of the valley facing the sea, and across the Seven Hills region. The inn Logan and Morgan headed to in the afternoon lay just inside the wall that had been erected to defend the outer city. On the way, the encountered Torrent’s son and daughter, Rain and River. Rain was in their class, and River was returning to act as a scout. Unlike Logan and Morgan, who were both red-headed natives of the Autumn Dominion, the brother and sister had the thick white hair of their northern kin, the nobility of the Winter Dominion. Morgan, as her alter ego, had known both of them for years, having trained with Rain under his father during each summer away from initiation. With the exception of the previous year. Thus, Morgan knew that their father was the bastard son of some noble who had distinguished himself by becoming a knight and marrying a noble-born daughter of the Dragon House. They had come west after the Three Dominions were united into an empire, to help restore order in the wake of the Purge, bringing their children with them.

They both recognized Logan, who had often come to Dream Gate to pursue his rivalry with her other half, so it was hard for Morgan to listen to them talking about old times while she walked with them in silence. For the tenth time, she winced as they referred to the other Logan.

“I just can’t believe he didn’t show up. He was the best dancer in our class,” Rain was saying. “How many times did he leave you lying in the dirt, Logan? Must have been hundreds of times. He was unstoppable when he had his wits about him.”

Logan laughed and glanced at Morgan. “Oh, he’s here. In spirit.”

“In spirit?” River gasped. “You mean he’s dead?”

“You could say he’s moved on to another life. I certainly didn’t see him die. I just know that the life he was living is over.”

“Why are you being so cryptic, Logan. He’s either dead, or he’s not dead. Which is it?” Rain demanded.

“You have to ask Morgan. She knows more about it than I do,” he evaded.

They turned their faces to her and waited for her to respond. Morgan looked off into the distance for a bit, trying to decide what to say, before meeting their eyes. “There was an accident, while the two of us were training. He held on for quite a while. It’s hard to say exactly what happened, but while searching for a cure to his condition he started deteriorating rapidly. I lost track of him a few months ago and no one has seen him since.”

“What, so he’s presumed dead?” Rain sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry to say, if he didn’t make it to trials, then he has to be dead. I just can’t imagine anything keeping him from making it, if he really wanted to. And he really wanted to, to prove that he was the best.”

“What a shame,” River mourned. They walked on in silence until they reached the inn. River led them to her father, who was waiting with other members of the party at a table in the main room. The four joined them and soon food was brought out to them. While Logan and Morgan got acquainted with the rest of the party, River informed Torrent about the untimely fate of the missing boy. The man seemed to brood over it through the rest of the meal. Separate rooms had been reserved for the young men and women of the party, which forced Logan and Morgan to part for the evening with great reluctance. Torrent came up on the couple as they stood in the hall and laughed at their pained expressions.

“I don’t know but that I should send one of you back to join another party. You young love birds had better shake it off and get your minds on business or this is going to be a very short excursion. You have the rest of your lives ahead of you to moon over each other. I recommend you put it out of your minds for the next few days.” He put a hand on each of their shoulders and gently pushed them toward opposite doors. “Now. Go to bed, and try to get some sleep. We’re out of here at the crack of Morgan, and I don’t mean, when you deign to wake up, young lady.”

Despite this warning, Logan and Morgan slipped out in the middle of the night to meet in the stable. After ensuring no one could eaves drop on them, they huddled close to talk. The night before, prior to Morgan’s seduction, they had discussed the problem of the demon. The initial problem, of how to track it down, had been made a little easier by the discovery that the group that had assaulted Morgan had been influenced by their target. From what they knew, the group had been possessed while they were probing the catacombs under the mansion at the heart of the ruin. They were grateful that their trials would lead them into the same area, since so much time had already been wasted. The question now was, how were they to pursue the matter?

“If we break away from the party to chase after this demon, we’d risk forfeiting the trials altogether. But,” Morgan proposed, “if we tell Torrent a little about it, he might add it to our objectives.”

“I doubt he’d be willing to risk the other initiates to pursue it. This is not your typical demon. It can infect multiple hosts with its shadow. There is no question that anything we happen to encounter will draw the party’s attention, and that we’ll do our best to destroy it. I just think it’s best to draw it to us,” Logan argued. “This thing wants to get to Phoenix, and I am positive it will make a move for you, if you give it a chance. Since you’ve been made a scout, you will be free to rove away from the party and act as bait.”

“What a delightful thought,” she grimaced. “I am not sure it would move against me if it sensed I could call on reinforcements. Nor do I like the thought of inviting it to possess me.”

“We just need to lure it out of its host. Phoenix is watching everything out in the open. If it moves toward you, it has to expose itself.”

“And then what?”

“And then the game freezes, and the demon gets iced.”

“I am not sure what that means,” she protested.

“You’re not a hacker. Just trust me. It will be immobilized, dissected and dispersed by other demons.”

“You can say programs. I am not that dense,” she scowled.

“Fine. Basically, the same thing happens that would happen if a priestess called on the Goddess to exorcise a demon. It gets pulled out of whatever it inhabits, gets purified and returned to whatever niche it belongs in.”

“Alright. I’ll see if I can draw it out. Just be ready to run to my side if it has kin waiting for me.” He nodded and suggested they return to their rooms. Morgan encouraged him to indulge her for a quick romp in the hay before they slipped back into the inn. They immediately found themselves blocked. Torrent sat at a table in the middle of the common room, talking to a man who seemed too familiar. As he turned his head to shout for service, Morgan identified him as Thorn. Rather than try to sneak back to their rooms from the outside, she pulled Logan into the shadows, and crept up on the two men.

“She told you he was dead?” Thorn inquired in astonishment, when he turned back to Torrent.

“Yes. Or, that’s what her story implied. As I recall, you said your protégée got too intimately involved with a girl and forfeited his initiation. That’s tragic in itself, given the boy’s potential, but to hear he was dead! I just can’t believe it.”

“If you didn’t believe it, why did you call me a liar when I got here?”

“I am sorry, old friend. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that, I just can’t believe you wouldn’t know about a thing like that. Or that you would keep it from me if you did. After all those summers, the boy was practically a member of my family.”

“So. How would you like to have another daughter?”

“What? So you insist that the boy went and got married? He’s not actually dead?”

“As far as I know, he’s far from dead. As for the girl, they’re not married, nor can they be. Why she says he might be dead, well, maybe you should press her for the full story.”

“Wait. You mean Logan and Morgan…” he began, unwittingly referring to the boy she had been, as well as who she still was.

“Exactly what I am talking about,” Thorn cut in.

“Well I’ll be damned. I always wondered what those two boys were fighting about. Engaged to one, having some affair with the other, it’s a wonder she *didn’t* get one of them killed!” Torrent tipped back his cup and went on, “And here she is with the other one, not a stain on her name, and his career left dead in the dust. I kind of liked her too.”

Thorn bit his lip and hid behind his own cup for a moment. “Perhaps,” he started, finally, “it would be best to pretend you didn’t hear all that from me. I did what I could to save the boy, but what’s done is done. There’s no knowing exactly what went on between them. Let’s worry about tomorrow instead. You asked me to stand as your lead scout, so she’ll be more my problem than yours.”

“You loved that boy, didn’t you?” Torrent studied the other man hard. Thorn sighed and nodded. “Do you hold this girl responsible for ruining him?” Thorn shrugged. Torrent studied the bottom of his cup for a moment. “It wouldn’t look good if she fell down a shaft and broke her neck, Thorn. Do you hear me?” Their eyes met in silence for several long breaths.

Thorn laughed finally and drained his cup. “She’s pretty tough, my friend. That probably wouldn’t be enough to do her in.”

“But you’re not going to try?” Torrent pressed.

“Are you?” Thorn challenged.