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On the second day after the official end of winter, the rain returned. Morgan chuckled as her mount heaved and sighed in annoyance, while she secured her gear and provisions and examined the tack. With several groups struggling to mount expeditions into the ruins, they had all been forced to stand in the mud outside the stables or beat each other senseless with their knees and elbows. It was no wonder why Torrent had left his charges the previous morning to secure the rooms they had enjoyed for the night. Sharing her room with three other girls, Morgan had been swarming in luxury compared to the males in the party, who grumbled about the close confines of their own lodging. She was just glad she had been able to sleep.

Peering over the back of her horse, she spied on Torrent and Thorn as they stood arguing at the end of the courtyard. The previous night her lungs had almost burst as she waited for her party leader to respond to Thorn’s challenge. After several breathless moments, the knight had grumbled and declared that he hardly knew Morgan. He was not about to mar his own name by betraying one of his charges over an ill reported offense. The fact that Phoenix Logan had loved her enough to forfeit his future spoke well of the girl, in his opinion. Since it was well known that she was betrothed to Dragon Logan, she could hardly be blamed for moving on from that relationship before it brought her down too. Morgan would have loved to hear where the rest of the conversation had gone, but Torrent had filled his cup and announced it was his last before he checked on the students and bedded down for the night. She and Logan had raced around to an open window and climbed up through it. They were in bed when Torrent checked, pretending to be asleep.

From the sensation their absence caused among their peers, there was a chance Torrent might learn they had absconded for a little friendly fornication, but hopefully not that they had been eavesdropping while he all but conspired to get Morgan killed.

That would make the next three nights painfully awkward.

Dodging a glance from the two men in her direction, Morgan refocused her gaze to study the four members of their party she had met the day before. One of them she knew as the other local prodigy, an intimate friend of Rain’s. Lion was an import from the Summer Dominion, with the golden hair and masculine beauty that made his name painfully appropriate. The combination of a robust sense of humor, a playful nature and deadly sharp wit made him a notorious prankster. He was the reason she had not risked coming to Dream Gate the summer before. If he had discovered the condition that had resulted from merging with her other half, he would have tortured her to death exploiting it for fun, and the whole world would have known her secret by the start of autumn. He was also one of the best friends she’d had as a boy. As a girl, her feelings turned in another direction entirely, which her fiancée could hardly approve of.

The other three were a bit safer for her to contemplate. The boy, Fox, was a slight thing with dark, auburn hair and severe features. She had been told that he didn’t speak, but he was fiercely intelligent and agile. Morgan thought he would have made an excellent thief, since his knack for silence extended to his every movement, while his gestures and expressions spoke volumes. The two remaining girls were an interesting contrast. One had the black skin and white hair of the arctic mountain fey, and went by the name Akashi. The other, Silk, had the pale skin and raven hair of the most powerful merchant families of the Three Dominions. It was hard to say which was more likely to pursue a career as an assassin. That natural assumption probably explained why the two had turned to each other for companionship. They might not trust each other any more than others trusted them, but it gave them something in common.

Seeing that everything was in order, she led her horse over to Thorn. River joined them a moment later, and the former mentor detailed their responsibilities as outriders to the heart of the ruins. They would flank the party to either side, while Thorn rode ahead. They would form a triangle that kept all of them at the limit of eyesight to each other, ensuring they were easily observed by the rest of the party. The party would be joined by three men who would take charge of the horses when they reached the mansion and lead them back to the inn. On the third morning, they would ride back out with the horses for their return to the city.

By the time everyone was mounted and headed out of the West Gate, the sun lit the clouds on the horizon. Light occasionally lanced through a break in the overcast, relieving the gloom with sudden, brilliant color. Morgan spurred her mount into the woods, taking the right flank, while the rest of the party turned onto the road that cut through it. Things were significantly darker under the canopy of the trees. It made for a poor roof, penetrated by a veritable hail of swollen droplets pawing through the underbrush. As she wove her way through the natural columns, the others flickered in and out of sight. A quarter hour of these mind numbing cadences prompted her to reach out to Logan. A silent conversation was just the thing to lighten the tedium of her isolation. They exchanged thoughts amiably for a while, until Torrent pulled up beside her fiancée for a private exchange.

“I understand you and Morgan slipped out last night,” he began.

Logan studied him and smiled gently. Rather than excuse Morgan, he urged her to listen in. “We thought it would be best to get some things out of our system before hitting the ruins. You know how it is, the prospect of battle,” he shrugged. “I hope you don’t think that was out of line, Sir. We are engaged, after all,” he added unnecessarily.

The knight grunted. “I can’t argue with human nature, and you don’t seem to be suffering from the lack of sleep. Ah, the powers of youth.” He chuckled and glanced over the party. “Naturally, we’re all aware that the two of you are on the verge of getting married.” He wiped his face and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully before adding, conversationally, “I understand that, apart from the trials, there was another obstacle to your union?”

“I figured that would get out. What do you know of it?”

“I believe there was a question about your feelings for the girl,” Torrent paused, and Logan nodded. Torrent pressed on, “I hate to presume on rumor, but, do these doubts have anything to do with your rival?”

“Phoenix Logan?” Logan offered an incredulous look.

Torrent sighed and hardened his gaze, “You were aware that the boy was sleeping with your fiancée? According to Thorn, you were around during that summer. You were all training together, correct?” Logan nodded again. The knight pressed on, “I understand that affair is the reason he is not here today.”

Logan considered that. “I suppose that it’s true that he was sleeping with her. Technically. Under the circumstances, they didn’t really have a choice, forced to live together like that,” he temporized, without explaining.

Torrent raised his eyebrows. “You say they were thrust upon each other by outside circumstances?” Logan nodded. “I suppose that happens. I can think of a number of reasons a couple of initiates might be put up together. I don’t doubt his father had something to do with it. He was the only one who would have dared try to engage those two. Guarantee his sons inheritance by joining his claim to hers, both of them win, technically. Still, it can’t sit well with you now, to know how intimate they must have been.”

Logan shrugged as the knight shook his head. After what he had overheard the night before, it was not hard to see what Torrent was up to. “I think people assume too much. In some ways they were closer to each other than anyone can imagine. I can’t say I know what they did, but I know what they could not do.” Torrent raised an eyebrow. “There was no actual sex.”

“I was under the impression there was no doubt they had intercourse.”

“Trust me. It wasn’t possible. For one thing,” Logan pointed out with a grin, “they had the same mother.”

“Now that can’t be true. Logan was the son of Cinder and Ash. His father told me the whole story.”

“He believed what he wanted to believe. For his story to be true, Logan would have to be several months younger than Morgan, but in fact they were born on the same day. You know that Morgan’s birth was kept a secret for years, until her mother’s promotion flushed her out.”

“But… that would make them twins. That also means that Morgan is not Ember’s offshoot.”

“I shouldn’t have pointed that out. You must tell no one,” Logan grabbed the other man’s arm. Torrent nodded. “To think that I revealed that when I was trying to hide my real assurance that she did not have sex with him.” He sighed, “Torrent. She was still a virgin when *we* started sleeping together.” He gave the man a look that left no room for doubt.

“Then why did Logan throw his career away?”

“You have to ask Morgan. She’s the last person I know who saw him.”

Morgan retreated into her own thoughts as Torrent spurred his mount to the head of the column. Logan had done a fair job of dispelling Torrent’s concerns about her, but at what cost? He had brought into question her very identity. Her claim to the Phoenix House was largely undisputed because people thought she was the reincarnation of her mother. Her birth was supposed to have proven Ember’s mastery of the Phoenix Legacy and caused her to be named its head after the Border Massacre. She had never really questioned the assumption and now wondered what might be discovered if someone pursued an investigation. Her inheritance would surely come into question, but her recent enlightenment made her less concerned about her duty to preserve one house when the whole world was at risk. After the trials, she could not end up any worse than Amber, who still had great prospects ahead of her as a disciple of the Magus.

She decided she would talk to Logan about it later. He had been backed into a corner. He could not explain the real relationship between her and his namesake without revealing her secret. Though, it was hard to see how the truth could be more damaging than the fiction Logan had now endorsed for Torrent. She might just have to confide the truth to Torrent and nip this lie in the bud. Of course, that would require showing him a side of her she did not care to manifest. It might revive questions she had laid to rest.

She turned her attention outward, drinking in the sights of the forest, and keeping alert for signs of danger. This became a little easier as the rain stopped and the sun came out. As things heated up, she threw her cloak back and admired the wonder of the mist boiling up among the trees. Soon enough, the ground began to rise as the party mounted the foothills of the ruins. When she paused on a hill top clearing to scan the area, she glanced out toward the sea and noted that they had been granted only a short reprieve from the rain. Another storm was headed in toward them, dark and angry. She sighed, there would have to be a thunderstorm the night she returned to face her nightmares.

It was close to the midday hour when they arrived in the heart of the ruins. After passing the foothills, they had entered a garden of awesome proportions. Vines as thick as tree trunks twisted around the stones and pillars of an ancient civilization, so well wrought they ignored the crushing embrace and sneered at the oncoming storm. If tens of thousands of years had not weathered them, even the worst of nature’s tempers could not faze them. The style of the architecture was instantly familiar to anyone who had visited the Sanctuary of the Goddess, where attentive hands had kept similar growth from attesting to similar age. The groups that had shadowed them on the road had mostly split off to venture into the outer reaches as they continued deeper into the eerie stillness. The few that had followed them further in had split off in turn at the last rise. Mounting the pinnacle of the lost civilization, they came into view of the sprawling manor.

Its stones were as ancient as anything they had seen, but it showed the signs of modern renovation, undertaken to make it a livable retreat for the scions of the previous generation of phoenix lords and ladies. The grounds encompassed a small temple and the barracks and fortifications which made it possible for humans to endure the long nights cut off from the outer world.

With the sky threatening, they quickly dismounted and collected their gear. Once more they checked their provisions, before turning the horses over to their attendants and waving them on their way. The scouts had checked the perimeter ahead of the party’s arrival. There was some discussion of using the barracks as a place to establish their base camp and spend their first night. Morgan coughed and suggested that, in her experience, the manor itself was more secure. It was a not so subtle reminder that the massacre had begun with the corruption of the soldiers sleeping in that very structure. Besides, the manor would be much more comfortable. They entered the foyer and stowed their gear, while they concentrated on scouting and securing the mansion for the night. Morgan was the first to venture into the main hall, pausing to shake the image of blood stains and children’s corpses out of her mind.

Her first thought, on looking at the hall with more experienced eyes, was that it resembled the Annex rather strikingly. It was a vaulted, narrow chamber. At one end was a vestibule and foyer, at the other two grand stair cases curving to either side, a raised dais nested in their oval frame. The balcony that ringed the hall was recessed behind the great columns, so the walls had the illusion of rising uninterrupted clear to the roof. In between the columns hung portraits that had disturbed and fascinated her as a child, and shiny placards she had been too young to read. In a bizarre way, the themes of the images were also a host of human traits and virtues. She turned to look at Logan.

“Do you see what I see?” she asked in a strange voice.

“I noticed the resemblance. I wonder…” he broke off and approached one of the pictures. He stretched out a hand and laid his fingertips gently against the frame and closed his eyes. They popped open a moment later in surprise. He turned to speak to Morgan and noticed the rest of the party filing into the hall with curious expressions. He cleared his throat and revised what he had been about to say. “I don’t think these are recent additions. They have the feel of ancient artifacts. Which is strange. The magic they thrived on was supposed to have vanished with the gods.”

The initiates all exchanged looks and proceeded to examine the portraits. Torrent stepped forward and asked Logan how he could make that assessment. Logan reminded him that he and Morgan had been tutored on occasion by the Magus himself, and introduced to relics of the first embodiment of magic. “I don’t recommend studying them too closely. According to the legends the gods created these things to alter their very nature.”

Unfortunately, this warning came a bit too late, as two or three initiates stumbled back from various paintings with cries of shock or alarm. Morgan’s eyes darted from one to the next, as Torrent and Thorn shook their heads and moved to discover what trouble their charges had gotten into. It was hard to tell what had happened, until Morgan looked at Rain. Unless she was mistaken, Rain was suddenly a girl. Her eyes darted back to the other two. The elf, Akashi, seemed, possibly, to be taller. Or else her clothes had shrunk considerably in the rain. Looking at Lion, she could not make out any transformation, but Rain! She turned back to him, her feet unconsciously propelling her closer to her old friend, and studied him—her carefully.

“Tell me I am dreaming,” Rain gasped, in an unfamiliar voice.

“Goddess, Rain!” That was River, practically eating her fist in shock.

“Rain. You… you’re a girl,” Lion choked. He stared in amazement, then doubled over laughing. Everyone paused to look at him, but it did not seem like he was going to stop.

“I don’t think you spoke up in time, son,” Torrent declared, turning his head to address Logan. His voice was tight as he struggled with his instincts as a father and his duty as the party leader. Both men were a step behind Morgan as she rushed up to examine Rain. As she stopped in front of Rain, she found herself impressed at how well he seemed to be taking this shocking transformation. He stared at his hands, a moment, then casually began patting his body down, confirming what was, and what was not, there.

“I’m a girl,” she said, meeting Morgan’s eyes. “I should be freaking out, right?” It came out sounding so calm, so rational, Morgan could not help nodding in total sincerity. She remembered how her other half had reacted after finding himself in her body. He had nearly fainted. Poor Rain probably just did not know how to react to the shock. Rain turned back to the picture she had confronted a moment before. Morgan risked a glance at it, and the attending placard. It read, bluntly, “Sex.” The picture showed, to her chagrin, a scene she could recall from her own life; a girl and a boy, identical in all other respects, stood naked, confronting each other. “I don’t get it,” Rain complained.

“That’s odd,” Morgan frowned beside him. “I stared at these pictures for hours as a girl. They never did anything to me then.”

Logan approached the painting carefully and touched the frame. He soon frowned. “It’s discharged.” He crossed his arms, right forearm cocked up to he could prop his chin on his fist, and thought. “That could be it. In the war of the gods, the gods tried to cripple their opponents by depriving them of powerful artifacts. They did this by destroying the source of their power. The artifacts themselves were often too well made to deteriorate. They just lay dormant until someone found them and provided them with new power. The destruction of artifacts actually happened during the Cataclysm when conjurors used the souls of their victims to power them for the conflicts that ensued through the next four thousand years.

“I am guessing that these things got charged up somehow,” he proposed, “enough to work once at least. I am sorry, Rain. I don’t think we can reverse your, um, transformation. At least not until we figure out a safe way to charge this artifact and use it again. I strongly suggest that no one messes with anything else in this house without sensing for the presence of magic first.”

Everyone muttered, while Logan went over to see what pictures the other two had exposed themselves to. Torrent stepped up to Rain and spoke with her softly while everyone else focused on Logan. Akashi’s transformation was confirmed as Logan read the placard. “Height. Relatively harmless. Do you mind being taller, Akashi?” Akashi shrugged, smiling as she realized she was now at eye level with Silk. “You might have some problems in common with Rain. The change in stature might compromise your reflexes and coordination.” Torrent and Thorn nodded their agreement. Logan stepped over to the third painting and laughed, “Oh, fabulous. Intelligence. You really needed that, Lion. Looks like you came out ahead in this mishap.”

“Are you sure it didn’t diminish his intelligence?” Rain scowled.

Logan grinned and shrugged. “Did anyone else get zapped?”

Morgan, turning to see if anyone responded, found her gaze trapped by a painting and squawked. Everyone looked at her as she struggled to avert her eyes. Thorn darted forward to read the placard, then risked a glance at the picture. The portrait, depicting a woman with all of her skin peeled off, quite reasonably terrified Morgan, who had been mystified by it over a decade ago. Her heart pounded as a chilling tingle engulfed her body. She sensed Logan rushing to her side. Her eyes squeezed shut, imagining this fatal disfigurement being replicated on herself. The shock passed and she panted, afraid to find out what had happened. Logan grabbed her and shook her.

“Read the inscription, Morgan. It’s okay.”

She opened her eyes and read it. Beauty.

“What happened?” she asked, staring at her hands and seeing they looked perfectly normal. She had not been skinned alive. She looked up, wondering why no one had answered. The party just stared at her.

“I think she has you beat, Lion,” Torrent coughed.

Morgan closed her eyes and reached out to Logan, trying to peer at herself through him. At first she did not see any significant difference. She recognized her features, familiar and unchanged. Her hair as unruly as ever, a rich red contrasted by her pale flesh. After some moments of study, however, she noticed the polish and poise that had not been there before. It did not sit with having braved the wind and rain on horseback for several hours. Her appearance, basically unchanged, had been refined. Her natural beauty, of youth and excellent health, had been augmented. Her mind searched for a word to describe the quality that had been added and could only spit out elegance.

“Okay. That’s it. Everyone to the center of the room,” Torrent reprimanded. “These things are dangerous. There’s no telling what all of them do.” Everyone turned their eyes to the floor and retreated as ordered. When they were gathered in the middle of the hall, their backs to the portraits, the knight turned and asked, “Morgan, you said you used to study these things. Can you recall what else they do?”

“I couldn’t read when I was that young. I remember the pictures well enough though.” She described them, pointing in their general directions, while the others tried to guess what attributes they affected. The man with the top of his head chopped off, holding his brains in his hands, Lion had already looked at. Akashi had studied the one featuring a man stretched out on a rack.

People guessed the themes as she started describing others. A painting of a bony little man collecting severed, muscular arms and legs in a wheelbarrow, Torrent and Thorn proposed to represent strength. One featuring a sickly mother nursing a robust child, River thoughtfully named constitution. Two remarkably similar ones, a man with empty eye sockets fumbling with his hands in bowl full of eyeballs of differing shades, and a bald woman collecting the scalps of fallen soldiers in a basket, were guessed to alter eye and hair color. A horribly disfigured man leading handsome men into battle suggested charisma. A lady with all of her fingers chopped off, for dexterity. An old hag strangling a young girl, as her mother watched in horror, might have represented age. A youth juggling swords in the air, surrounded by others who were impaled, would have to be agility. The list seemed to cover a score of attributes, many of which they could not even guess.

“I hesitate to guess how these things work,” Torrent began, studying Rain with a pained look, “nor would I care to experiment. However, if these were in fact tools, and not traps, their effects must depend on some choice on the part of whoever engages them. Perhaps even so far as what draws a particular person to become absorbed in a particular image. I gave several of these a hard look as I passed by.”

“Are you suggesting I *wanted* to be a girl!” Rain demanded.

“Don’t get excited son,” Torrent waved her down with one hand. “I watched you, Rain. You examined every image on that side of the hall. The one that got you was, what, the sixth, the seventh? What made you pay more attention to that one in particular? I am trying to understand. You tell me what happened.”

Morgan cleared her throat, as Rain started to redden. “I can tell you what was going through my mind, when I got zapped.” She waited for Torrent’s attention. He looked at her and gestured for her to go on. “When I first looked at it, I just looked at it. I did not want to get sucked into the image, but I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to look away, but something in the back of my mind insisted I look closer. The harder I tried to look away the more insistent the feeling got. Like there was a point to it, a message. Something I understood about it I needed to pay more attention to. I could remember studying it as a child, wondering why someone would peel their own skin off. I mean, I could see, from the way she was built, from her proportions, that she must have been very beautiful. Why would she ruin herself like that? Unless,” she paused for emphasis, “she could not take it for granted. Maybe she did it to find out what made her beautiful, to see what was under the surface.” Morgan shrugged. “When I started to think of it like that, started to think about how *I* was put together, I began to tingle all over.”

“Sounds more like a test than a choice,” Lion muttered.

There was a moment of silence as people mulled this observation over. Rain in particular looked thoughtful, glancing back toward the picture that had affected her. Fox began tapping his foot and glancing around. He paused, looking toward the entrance, and then nudged Torrent, gesturing toward the door. The knight glanced outside and then announced that it was getting dark. The storm was rolling in fast. As it blotted out the sun, the creatures within the ruins would likely rouse into activity. They did not have time to worry about the transformations if they wanted a secure perimeter against the haunts.

Morgan suggested a few places where they could fortify themselves against an army with just the ten of them. Torrent wanted the party to conduct a sweep of the mansion while the light was good, so everyone could familiarize themselves with the area in case they had to move during the night. Morgan quickly described the layout of the mansion, as well as the locations of probable artifacts to avoid. With a last caution about tripping over themselves again, the party was split for a quick reconnaissance. In two groups of five, they conducted a room to room search of the upstairs and downstairs, securing windows and doors, while searching for a defensible place to camp for the night. They soon discovered that revived artifacts were not the only danger.

The campers that preyed on the denizens of the ruins had lay traps all over the place. Morgan stumbled into one that sent her crashing from the main floor into a cellar, where she jumped quickly to her feet, anticipating the onslaught of demons or undead out of the darkness. Her first instinct, to levitate back up, was confounded by a mind jarring shock. As she reeled from the psychic booby-trap, she drew her sword and put up her guard. A few long, breathless moments ensued, with the thunder of footsteps from above as the others ran to investigate her fall. When nothing leapt out at her, she turned to study the walls with her hands, looking for a purchase to scramble back up. Stumbling over bits and pieces she did not care to identify, she followed the wall around to her right. She quickly discovered that there were no exits from the room, and even if she could scale the wall, no way to reach the opening she had fallen through. A stone twisted in her hand as a rope dropped down from above.

“Quick. Climb back up the rope,” Akashi shouted down.

“Just a second. I think I found something down here,” she called back up as the stone slipped free of its mortar in her hands. Biting her lip, peering through the shadows into the hole she had just opened up, she tried to decide what to do. Stretching her senses carefully, passively, she detected a couple of objects inside, but nothing indicating a trap. Sensing a startling power in both objects, she impulsively darted her hand in and pulled out what appeared to be a deck of cards wrapped in some kind of silk, and a signet ring. Her eyes widened as something like a shock of recognition passed through her. The others shouted down for her to hurry up, intruding on her musing as she turned the objects over in her hands curiously. They could be examined later, she consoled herself. She pocketed them and quickly grabbed onto the rope. Slithering up, as the others pulled, she was quickly free from the darkness. When the others asked her what she found, some impulse urged her to say it was nothing, her imagination. Initiates were expected to come back with some trophies of their adventure, she rationalized.

This sudden possessiveness did not strike her as odd in the least.

After a complete sweep of the first and second floor, the two groups met in the library. After a short consultation, Torrent told Thorn to take his group and continue searching the third floor and the towers, while the knight took his group down a level to check the cellars and look for the entrance to the catacombs. Morgan, Akashi, Fox and Rain followed Torrent back to the cellar stairs as Thorn led Logan, Silk, Lion and River up to the third floor. That group had already, tentatively, picked out a place for the party to camp for the night, and just needed to make sure it was secure from above as well as below. Morgan’s group broke out torches and headed down to see if there was any immediate threat from the depths. The tour of the cellars turned up a number of storage rooms, an armory, a couple of furnace rooms, three or four archival chambers, fruit and wine cellars, a meat locker, and a group of twelve undead.

This was, in Morgan’s experience, the first time she had faced the living dead. As the scout of their group, she had shared the lead with Torrent, and had the misfortune to be the one who stumbled into the lair. Her first impression had been that she had entered some kind of morgue. Bodies were laying atop of stone slabs, or leaned up in narrow alcoves. Standing in the door, torch in hand, she took one look and backed into the hall, calling to the others. She watched in dread fascination as the corpses stirred in response to her presence. The four stretched out on slabs laboriously levered themselves up to sitting positions, while another six lurched upright and began to shamble out of their alcoves. With each movement, a cloud of dust and rot tainted the air. Morgan had to struggle not to gag as the scent billowed through the door.

Torrent was by her side as the first four made it to their feet and joined the other six in their advance. They were almost taken by surprise when two more corpses burst through the cobwebs covering the walls of the corridor, from concealed niches. Morgan lashed out in a series of strikes, half expecting her target to disintegrate under the force of her blows. The dry flesh was surprisingly firm and substantial. The creature staggered back a couple of steps and resumed its advance. Torrent had not fared much better, as his opponent ignored the thrust of his sword, disarming him when the following kick sent the ghoul staggering into the wall. Fox, who had been a few steps behind Torrent, caught the creature from behind. He slipped an arm around its neck and twisted violently, producing a jarring series of pops and cracks as the motion shattered the cervical column. Fox completed the graceful assault by dumping the body on the floor, but it lumbered back to its feet, head hanging at an unnatural angle.

Morgan stood her ground at the door, drawing her sword to threaten the mob in the room while her first opponent loomed over her in the hall. She heard as Torrent retrieved his sword from the mindless zombie, shouted for him to watch the door, and lunged at the immediate threat. She pounded on the sentry with a series of kicks and strikes, backing it down the hall, so the rest of her group could advance and engage the other monsters as they tried to come through the door. From the sounds, the other three were currently trying to dismantle the one Fox pulled off of their leader. Once Morgan had room to swing her sword, without clipping one of her own, she started chopping her foe into pieces, starting with the hands that reached out for her. It took a while to reduce the thing to quivering bits, taking care that no bit was whole enough to pose an independent threat. By the time she was done, her sword was covered in thick, black ichor. A fair amount of which was spattered on herself.

Torrent noticed she was returning to his side, and let one of the creatures through the door, directing it toward her. Morgan saw their leader was feeding other zombies one at a time to the trio of initiates on his right as well. Her next foe was another sentry, about as mindless as the first. She tore into it, sensing from the sudden ring of magic in the back of her mind that Torrent would need help soon. She found herself wishing she felt threatened enough to stumble across that deadly weapon in the back of her mind, but these were not demons. Animated death was just not that scary in comparison. Once her foe was disarmed, so to speak, she glanced down the hall and observed the system the trio had going. Torrent passed a zombie off to Fox, who broke various bones and dislocated various joints before passing it on to Rain and Akashi. Those two hacked at the knees, neck and elbows as they kicked the zombie back and forth between them, and tossed the parts into a small bonfire they had started with the first corpse and the torch Morgan had dropped to defend herself.

Fortunately, the oily smoke this tactic produced had found some vent above them to escape through or they would all have been suffocating as the third body fed the flames. They were working on their fifth victim as Morgan finished playing with her second. The last sentry came toward her without its head, as Torrent warned them that the last four were intelligent, possibly vampires. Fox darted past the knight to help Morgan finish the last sentry as quickly as possible, so they could join their leader against the greater threat.

Torrent, taking advantage of a good strike to blood his sword, tested his theory by flicking his weapon toward the fire. The spray of blood ignited explosively as it hit the flames. He ordered Morgan and Fox to cover the door as he stepped over to the fire and speared a burning chunk of thigh. He returned to the door and advanced on the vampires with this makeshift torch, forcing them to retreat into the room. While he held them at bay, he issued warnings and instructions to his charges. These undead were animated by the blood of true dragons, and possessed many of the same traits as dragon lords. They could wield magic and psychic arts. They also had natural regeneration and rejuvenation. If they fed, they could walk among humans undetected except in direct sunlight. That and fire were their only true weaknesses.

Akashi promptly strung her bow, asking the other initiates to wrap cloth around the heads of her arrows. Rain prepared a torch to light her arrows. With these preparations, Morgan and Torrent took up torches and entered the chamber to flush out the vampires, who had listened to the whole exchange grimly and run for cover inside the room. A flood of pleas and promises issued from the mouths of the vampires as the scout and the knight advanced, begging for mercy and offering the gift of immortality and eternal youth, if they were spared. If they had not looked so much like desiccated corpses, their pitiful cries might have touched a chord with Morgan’s humanity. Seeing them as they were, however, there was no difficulty reminding herself that these were cold blooded predators who exploited their human origins to trap their prey.

As they flushed the monsters out, Akashi sunk two or three well aimed arrows into each. The flaming missiles evoked terrible screams and convulsions from the vampires, as they exploded into flame. Out of pity, Morgan took her sword and made a quick round of the room, decapitating the four to cut short their agony. The room rapidly filled with smoke, forcing her and Torrent to retreat for air. The group remained long enough to see that all of the remains were reduced to ash, before completing their tour of the basement. The entrance to the catacombs, when they finally found it, appeared to be directly under the main hall. They found a concealed staircase that let out into the corridor behind the dais. They went to collect the gear they had stashed in the foyer and wait for the other group to come down and report on their findings. Morgan wandered to the entrance and looked out into the rain.

A moment later, Rain appeared at her shoulder, looking uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong, Rain?”

“My bladder is about to burst,” she muttered under her breath. Morgan glanced behind them, noticed Torrent looking in their direction, and led Rain out to stand under the awning.

“I am assuming you came to me for some kind of advice?” Morgan probed, studying her carefully. Rain blushed and nodded. “Not sure how the new plumbing works?”

“I tried to relieve myself earlier, when I lagged behind in that water closet we checked. I feel so stupid. I got so upset when I tried to, you know, whip it out and it wasn’t there. I just couldn’t relax, then my dad started pounding on the door telling me to stop playing with myself and keep up with the group!” she fumed and fidgeted.

“From the way you’re blushing, I guess that cut a little close to the truth,” Morgan commented acerbically. “Hey now, don’t get upset. How could you not be curious? Just tell me what happened.”

Rain growled and looked away. “I don’t know how it works for you girls, but for a guy there’s this whole point and shoot thing you have to go through if you don’t want to piss all over yourself. It’s kind of hard when there’s nothing to hold onto and you’re not even sure where it comes out. So I started poking around and got distracted,” she shrugged and returned her gaze to Morgan. “But if I don’t do something quick, I’m gonna burst!”

Morgan smiled, “I imagine if I tickled you right now the problem would take care of itself, but it wouldn’t be very kind. Let’s step around the corner and I’ll walk you through it.”