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Apparently, the second group had returned from their search just as Morgan and Rain went around the corner. The evidence of this presented itself in the form of Lion, who came around the corner announcing that they were to rejoin the party and help move the gear upstairs. He stopped short at the sight of them squatting side by side, Morgan with her hand on Rain’s shoulder correcting her posture and balance so she did not urinate on her own breeches. Pelted by rocks thrown by the embarrassed young women, he raced back out of sight shouting apologies. He was waiting for them when they came around the front a few moments later. Rain stormed up, pounding on him as he retreated into the building. Morgan sighed and followed.

She could not help wondering what effect Rain’s transformation would have on the relationship between the two friends, as she watched them trade insults while they collected their gear. She had a sneaking suspicion that Rain had not just been altered on the outside, and Lion did not help matters by baiting the new made girl. She made a mental note to bring it up the next time she could speak freely with Logan.

She quickly collected her gear and joined the train headed upstairs. Thorn was describing the spot he had selected, a set of apartments at the end of a short corridor. Two guards could be posted where the residential wing branched off of the main upstairs corridor. Two more could guard the single entrance to the sitting room where their base camp would be. There was a hearth and enough wood to last them through the night. Lion and Rain dropped their gear and took up posts at the mouth of the corridor while the others made camp. Four bedrooms let off of that common area, which offered some comfort and privacy for sleeping. All the windows were shuttered and secured, and Thorn’s group had attempted to air the beds, which seemed surprisingly intact for the passage of a decade. Morgan was just grateful that this was no where near where she had slept as a child. No one she knew had died in those beds.

They cooked dinner over the hearth, and drew lots while they ate to determine when each of them would take a turn at the watch. Logan traded watches with Silk so that he could join Morgan on her watch, while Silk took the earlier watch with Akashi. Torrent had given Thorn the early watch, taking the dead of night with Logan and Morgan for himself. Fox and River each took a room, and no one said anything when Logan and Morgan took the third, leaving the last for their leader. Torrent just gave them a warning look before retiring to his room with a general advisement to the late watch to get plenty of sleep. It was going to be a long night. Logan and Morgan closed the door behind them and slipped over to the bed.

“I don’t know if I can sleep in this place,” Morgan announced, eyeing the bed warily. “If I did, the nightmares would probably be horrendous. Should we just slip out now and search for our demon?”

“What if someone checks in on us after we’re gone? You know they will start a search for us. If anyone gets killed because we wandered off, we’ll fail the trials. That’s not that important to me, except that I depend on my status in the game to influence people in it. I once tried ignoring the context of the game to get things done and ended up being opposed at every turn. That’s why I put up with all of that marriage nonsense earlier, and the restrictions of the trials right now.”

“And what about me?” Morgan could not resist challenging.

“Oh, come on, Morgan. Didn’t we already have this conversation?”

“Don’t get excited,” she turned away and started removing her armor. “I don’t mean, are you ‘putting up’ with me. I mean, now that I know the truth, how am I supposed to treat my own life? Should the concerns of my House or my Goddess—since she’s really your slave—interfere with what must be done to protect the world itself?” She hung her leathers on a chair and returned to the bed in her shirt and breeches. “I mean, what happens if we don’t stop this demon in time? What happens if we do?”

“I can’t imagine what you should do, Morgan,” he sighed, loosening his armor and pulling it off a piece at a time. “This is your world. The only world you’ve got. I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to throw any of it away in a rush to confront disaster. For now, the demon is contained. We have enough information about it that if it moves into the open we can spot it and track it. As long as we can prevent it from getting direct access to Phoenix, we have the advantage. We have time. If we flush it out here, we come one step away from neutralizing it. The greatest danger right now is if it figures out that we are on to it. To prevent that, we have to carry on as normal.” Logan finished stripping out of his armor. He sat on the edge of the bed. “I know that your life has been turned upside down. Once we deal with the demon, we both need to concentrate on how to deal with what we’ve learned about each other, and how the people in our respective worlds will react to these discoveries.”

Morgan considered that as he slipped between the sheets. Frowning to herself, she crawled into bed, frustrated by the fact that she had no choice but to follow his lead. Especially since doing so was, as she used to joke, the most reliable way to get lost. Of course, since she had confronted him with the truth, he had proven to be very focused and effective. “Was it always an act?” she asked impulsively.

“Was what always an act?”

“Your absent mindedness. Was that just a way to cover up for your differences?” she propped herself up on an elbow to study his face.

“Not entirely,” he shrugged. He sat up and inquired, “Do you remember what I told you about time in the game?”

She nodded.

“I took advantage of the capacity to accelerate the game to help deal with the demon corruption problem. The basis of the problem is the art of demonology. As we both know, the advances in art brought on by the Magus led to the steady eradication of the dark arts and those who practice them. I thought that by starting a new campaign, and forcing all the players to start a new generation of characters, I could both hasten the end of demonology and encourage the rise of demon hunters. To accomplish this, the game was accelerated by a factor of fifty-thousand, instead of the usual six. Twenty years passed in the four hours we were all logged in, during which our characters were designed, born and developed in context to the game. However well assisted, that much acceleration is hard for the mind to deal with. For the most part, it was a blur in which things slowed down for an instant here or there when we could make decisions or take actions to influence the development of our characters. The process created rich, detailed histories for us, but it’s more of an archive that exists to support our roles in the game. Most people never fully assimilate all of that information.”

“So, you don’t really remember our past together. That wasn’t really you?” she could not help betraying her shock and disappointment.

“Not entirely. The character a person plays is designed to be compatible with the player’s natural personality. You have to remember, this is immersive role-playing, the constructs players inhabit have psychological profiles of their own. I could sit back and let my AI run me through the game and have to deal only with command decisions. You could say, my character has a mind of his own, and I am more his soul, the motivating force. The more immersed I become in this role, the more ‘self possessed’ I become.”

“But this isn’t really you, is it?”

“This is a lot closer to who I really am than most of my previous characters. I am not trying to be someone else. I suppose I am more interested in being somewhere else. The differences are only those which make it possible for me to fit in here. The knowledge of customs and history, the languages, the skills and abilities I need to function in my chosen role, things like that.”

Her thoughts were in chaos as she struggled to grasp what this meant. The thing that screamed at the forefront of her brain was that the person she was in bed with, whom she had spent the most intimate moments of her life with, was a stranger. The boy she had loved, the past they had shared, was a fiction. “You can remember me, everything we did together, but none of it is quite real to you, is it? The truth is, you just met me. Like, you met a character in a play or a history you knew by heart, but I am a stranger to you.”

“Yes. That sums it up pretty well,” he confessed with a sigh.

Morgan climbed painfully from the bed and gathered her things while he gawked and stammered questions that never took full form. She remained silent until she was facing the door. Without turning she addressed him, “I am sorry for pushing you… for presuming too much. I understand now why you felt wrong about sleeping with me.”

He rose from the bed and came up behind her. She tried to slip out of the room, but he reached past her and forced the door closed. “Morgan. What’s done is done. I understand.”

“Do you? Do you understand that I am in love with a lie? A lie I can’t help but impose on you? I don’t even know you. Not really. I can’t know you as long as I see only the illusion.”

“Morgan,” he grabbed her by the shoulders and turned him to face him. She refused to meet his eyes, tucking her chin and looking away. “There isn’t anything else. There doesn’t need to be anything else. In this place, this is who I am. No one, in any reality, has more assurance than that. You can’t possibly know who someone else is, only what you can see and touch and remember.”

“You have a whole other life, a whole other world, and in that world you are an entirely different person. A person I don’t know!”

“The same can be said of dreams. We spend half our lives in a world no one else can know or enter,” he argued. “I may not be the person you thought I was, but I am the reality of that person. There is no other. Maybe you are just in love with your idea of me, but I think that’s true for everyone. You’ve just arrived at the same spot I was a few of nights ago. You didn’t let me run away, and I am not about to let you get away any easier.”

The members of the second watch had bedded down at the eighteenth hour and were roused six hours later. Thorn informed them, as they gathered in the main room, that there had been a steady stream of encounters while they slept. Demons and undead had been drawn individually and in small groups to their presence. There had been no massed assault, so the five on watch had been more than capable of dealing with the threat. Only once had there been an attempt by the creatures to scale the outer wall, and Akashi had picked them all off from above, firing her bow from the sitting room windows as they approached. To prepare the second group for what they would face, they were led to one of the other apartments off the defensive corridor. The remains of undead were chopped and stacked on the hearth, waiting to be added to the fire. Their attention was called to the remains of the demons.

It was commonly held that demons had, and could manifest, their own forms. They were not just hungry shadows limited to possessing the minds of the living. To manifest their true forms, however, demons required a sacrifice. That sacrifice could be made at their summoning, a soul loosed from its mortal vessel and seized by the demon. That same sacrifice could also occur if the host a demon possessed was denied sustenance. Instead of allowing the host to die, the demon consumed it from within. It shattered the mind and seized the soul to warp the vessel into something akin to its true form. While a demon’s true form might be hauntingly beautiful, this process created horrors.

“The only good side,” Silk commented softly, “is that they become anchored to the stolen soul. They’re almost impossible to kill, but they can’t disengage fast enough to possess you if you manage it.”

“This is what most people imagine when they think of demons,” Logan mused, crouching next to a corpse. “Twisted parodies of humanity that enjoy pain as much as pleasure, immune to almost any injury.” He knocked on one blackened head, satisfied by the hollow sound. If it had an ounce of brains left, it would regenerate and continue its rampage. “I assume your group made sure of these before you left them in here?” he challenged, rising to his feet.

“I think we’ve all come in here several times each,” Akashi nodded. “Personally, I wasn’t satisfied with just burning out the brain. I tried to sear the spinal cord and primary branches.”

“I understand the feeling. I would be tempted to reduce these entirely to ash, myself,” Morgan asserted. She wondered how many of these embodied demons began as men and women wounded in the Dream Gate Massacre. As a child she had no idea of the lengths a demon would go to, to preserve a foothold in the flesh. That horror had been a later discovery, and a feature of more than a few nightmares. After a last look at the monstrous corpses, she grabbed Logan and they went to the end of the corridor to relieve Lion and Rain. She guessed they had done a lot of talking in the past six hours, Rain slipped her hand into Lion’s as they returned down the corridor.

After they disappeared behind the sitting room door, she turned to Logan and confessed, “I thought I would be the one person who could really understand what Rain is going through. But, I am not seeing anything resembling my own experience. My other half freaked out when he found himself in a female body, and he fought it until he was forced to face the truth.” She did not need to explain what had brought her dual existence to an end. Logan had been there, helping her to deal with the crisis when she and her other half discovered they had once been the same person.

“Rain is not a boy in a girl’s body, Morgan. She is a girl created from the life and experiences of a boy,” Logan explained. He went on to confirm her suspicions that the gallery in the main hall was a relic from before the creation of the Annex. Because the tools for players to modify their characters had been found to work on the natives who encountered them, they had been disabled and reestablished outside the main construct. He never anticipated that the artifacts would survive and become active again, but they had, and they functioned as they were designed to.

“Does that mean the effects are permanent? Physical and mental?”

“Yes. You have to remember that any physical reality is possible, so the governing factor is what is appropriate for the mind of the participant. Such a radical physical alteration should have only occurred to accommodate a mental predisposition. The gallery is only a corrective mechanism. It’s purpose is to improve player-character compatibility.”

“I am not sure I understand.”

“One purpose of the game was to allow people to explore life from different perspectives. Every human attribute offers a range of perspectives, but people tend to focus more on the advantages and disadvantages they confer. For example, a lot of guys I know tend to play female characters in games to take advantage of lower mass, quicker responses and greater endurance. This game took gender bending in gaming a step further. It made it possible for players to fully explore life as the opposite sex, but not everyone could handle it. Everything was experimental for new characters and these devices allowed them to fine tune their constructs until they were comfortable and compatible with the players’ personalities.

“I don’t know why Rain was drawn to that device, or how he triggered it,” he confessed. “What I do know is that it would not create the kind of conflict you experienced. Rain will be something of a tomboy, I suppose, but she won’t feel any particular need to be male.”