Morgan - 1 - Threshold

pages ∙ words

On any other night, the storm would have lulled her to sleep. The restless rattle of rain tapping on the window, drumming on the windward walls and roof of the manor, came in soothing waves between reports of thunder and the steady pounding of an unsecured storm shutter. She could have slept through worse, if she had not been too anxious to sleep.

The apprehension had passed to her from her mother, hours earlier, when she had been tucked into bed.

In spite of her normal tendency to fall asleep the instant her head hit the pillow, her mind would not rest. That formless dread had grown each time she closed her eyes and tried to slip into dreams. As soon as she did relax, her eyes popped open again.

For hours, she had gazed at the images painted with moonlight and rainwater on the wall across from the window. The endless, shifting patterns drew her eyes but did not really hold her attention. It was only when she tried one more time to shut her eyes and sleep that she understood what was feeding her apprehension.

Under the noise of the storm, she had been listening to voices filled with disturbing notes. Sitting up in bed, she concentrated on the drowned out sound.

“Are you still awake, Morgan?” a weary voice inquired from the corner, eager for conversation. “I can never sleep during a storm like this.”

“Hush,” Morgan hissed, straining to hear.

“Don’t worry. We won’t wake anyone who can sleep though a storm like this,” the other girl insisted, propping herself up.

“I’m trying to hear something,” she snapped, cocking her head to pinpoint where the voices were coming from. Once the other girl fell silent, Morgan discovered that the echoes of adult conversation were coming from the vent in the floor. She crawled out of bed, pulling her mother’s shirt tight around her, and crouched down next to the heating vent. The voices overlapped too much for her to make out what anyone was saying.

The other girl sighed, and sat up to watch.

Morgan ignored her and focused on listening. After a moment, the girl flopped back and burrowed deep under the covers, pulling her pillow over her head. Morgan decided that the voices she was hearing came from a score of different rooms, but there was too much tension in the voices for a party. Then, in the midst of the confusion, she picked out one special voice. Her mother was back! The world spun and danced as she hurtled from the room, with the blind, effortless grace of childhood excitement.

In a flash she was perched on the balcony, watching a gathering of adults greeting each other as more of them came in out of the rain. She resisted the urge to run to her mother. All that would get her was a warm hug and an escort back to bed. Instead, she peered through the railing that ringed the vaulted hall until the gathering moved deeper into the manor.

She crept after them on bare feet, as silent as a shadow. As the adults gathered in the lounge area below, she entered the upper level of the library, flitting through the stacks to another balcony. Her mother, Ember, seemed to be the center of attention. Morgan watched her, not really paying any attention to what was being said. She did not notice when she dozed off, and was startled awake by a sudden commotion. While she blinked and tried to get her bearings the men and women below were jumping to their feet and drawing their swords. The terrible, chilling sound that woke her was instantly familiar, the piercing screams of children.

Morgan had never heard them ring with such terror before.

Note by note, those shrieking cries choked and fell silent, before anyone could reach them. Her mother had leapt across the tables in the lounge, launching herself over the heads of men and women standing between her and the doors. Closed and barred though they were, the doors exploded open under her mother’s glare as she led the charge back to the main hall. Upstairs, Morgan ran after them, stopping only when she crashed into the railing of the grand balcony. Standing there, she could see the soldiers returning from the children’s rooms, blood dripping from their weapons and clothes. They rushed into the hall and took up guard positions against the lords and ladies of their own house. Those nobles looked on in horror, paralyzed by shock, as more soldiers filed into the hall, dragging the bodies of children they had been charged in the utmost to preserve.

While Morgan stared in shock, struggling to comprehend what she was seeing, the garrison started cutting down the stunned nobles, forcing them to defend themselves. Though the nobles moved at once to protect Ember, she charged forward recklessly to strike the traitors down, her eyes darting from one child’s corpse to another, searching for her daughter. From above, Morgan began to scream as grief overcame disbelief. Ember snapped around, eyes drawn instantly to the sight of Morgan running for the stairs towards her slain friends. Ember lurched to intercept her, narrowly avoiding a decapitating stroke.

The nobles closed ranks as Ember ran back toward Morgan. Catching her at the bottom of the stairs, Ember picked her daughter up and hugged her close. In the same motion she whipped back around, her eyes glued to the fight. One of the traitors went down and a cold, dark shadow rippled from his dead form. It rushed across the gap and engulfed one of the lords. The man shuddered, then turned and attacked the lord next to him.

“Demons!” Ember shouted. “They’re possessed by demons!”

This started a retreat into the depths of the mansion. They encountered more soldiers, part of the garrison stationed in the ruins where the manor resided, who blanched in shock when the nobles brandished their weapons at them. After a quick exchange it was determined that these guards had not been relieved. They had remained at their posts out back until drawn by the commotion in the manor. The news that the garrison had been infiltrated by demons made them blanch again.

“They must have been summoned in the barracks, where the men were sleeping,” Ember suggested, after hearing the soldiers’ reports.

“Goddess. How do you fight an enemy who attacks you through your own men?” cried one of the lords.

Another lord, the oldest, glared at him and shook his head, “This must be how our armies were taken at the border. Guard your thoughts, people, and don’t look them in the eye. Killing our men, as much as we are forced to, won’t stop these things. It just drives them in search of new hosts.”

“Now how do we know who is possessed and who isn’t”

“You’re going to have to trust your instincts,” Ember shouted as the fighting surged forward and they became too busy to argue. As opportunity allowed, they called upon the arts they had mastered, fighting back with sorcery as well as swords. Morgan’s flesh started to itch and sing as the presence of magic around her ripped across the surface of her mind. Time started to come unglued, unraveling into a moment of incomprehensible flux. Morgan buried her face in her mother’s bosom as Ember called upon the powers she had mastered, as a priestess of the goddess, to bind and banish the demons as fast as she could. The possessed redoubled their efforts to get to Ember and Morgan with each of her mother’s triumphs. At some point it became clear that new demons were being released into the fray. Whoever had started this massacre was still active, adding fuel to the fire.

One of the lords, a general who had been courting Morgan’s mother, as well as serving as her right hand man, spotted the author of the conflict, striding forth under the protection of his minions. He had the black hair of the merchant class, which marked him equally as a potential assassin or lord of the underworld. For the first time, the nobles of the Phoenix House were able to take the offensive. They concentrated their forces on the demonologist and his ring of protectors, and quickly overwhelmed them. As soon as the man dropped lifeless to the floor, the surviving phoenixes retreated and secured an area for Ember to continue her work. The general stood watch beside her, holding onto Morgan.

She was exhausted, but wide-awake with shock. Her eyes stared wide and unseeing until they fixed on a shadow limping toward them from a darkened corridor. There was something wrong about the way he moved, something mesmerizing in his presence. To her mind, raw from the constant abrasion of combative sorcery, he seemed to resonate to a dark, beautifully eerie song. Something inside her told her he was dead. He had been dead for a long time. The song was holding him together, but the music was unraveling. He stared past her, as if intentionally ignoring her.

Ember noticed Morgan’s fixation on the shadows and peered in the direction her daughter was staring. Her gaze fell into the stare the dead man had locked on her during his approach. Her mind was drained by the hours of chanting to the goddess, and weaving sorcerous attacks and defenses. Too late, she realized that the demonologist had been undead, and that he had carried a demon within him. That demon leapt from his mind to hers, crushing the pitiful resistance her exhausted mind tried to erect.

Morgan did not notice as Ember froze behind her, then twitched once in aborted convulsion. Still staring at the thing she was perfectly convinced was a monster, she felt a moment of relief when it suddenly slouched and crumpled. The haunting music she imagined, to interpret the forces that had animated it, faded, and the heavy, pulsing beat that had driven it to destruction was all that remained. Her attention was finally drawn to her mother when Ember stepped up to the general and laid her hand on his arm. Morgan snapped out of her daze when she realized that they were the only three left standing. The hall was littered with the dead and dying and the last assailant lay kicking at the general’s feet.

“It’s over,” her mother said softly, taking the sword from her lover’s hand. He blinked and scanned the room, unable to believe the scope of the devastation. He turned back to Ember in time to see her draw the sword back for a lightening strike. “You never stood a chance,” she sneered, after striking his head from his shoulders. She watched his body topple with a faintly interested expression, then tossed the sword to the side and faced Morgan. “For a moment there, I was almost worried,” she said conversationally.

“You killed him!” Morgan blurted, completely dumbfounded.

“Well of course I killed him. I killed everyone. Didn’t you notice?”

“You loved him!” Morgan argued, gasping for breath and struggling to achieve coherent thought. Shock had pushed her well beyond the limits of sanity, and thought came with great difficulty. It all seemed absurd. Dream like. All of the details she had witnessed, and the snatches of conversation she had overheard started to sort themselves out. Her concentration was taxed by the deep, throbbing beat that now emanated from her mother. Her mind struggled against the obvious.

“I loved him?” her mother frowned. “What a ridiculous notion. I don’t even know him.” Ember bent over and studied her. Straightening and putting her hands on her hips, she announced, “I suspect you don’t understand what just happened here. I think that must be funny. I’ll have to mention it to the master. I am sure he can tell me.”

Morgan recoiled, struck by a sudden comprehension. “You’re a demon.”

“Correct.” The demon sighed and examined Ember’s hands, “This is a nice vessel. I wonder if the master will let me keep it.” Without warning, the demon reached out and caught Morgan by the arm, just as she was about to dart away. “Hold on. You said this is your mother’s body. That makes you the offshoot. If what they say about you is true, I should examine you before I kill you. No point wasting a spare body, if it comes as part of the package, right?” At the words “spare body” Morgan gasped and clenched her eyes shut. The only advice she had heard about fighting demons had been not to look them in the eye. She intended to follow it. “Smart. But not effective. I only need eye contact to take you in the heat of combat. Since I don’t even need to possess you for this…”

Morgan screamed as something cut into her mind and disrupted her thoughts. There was nothing surreal about this brutal invasion of her psyche. It entered her like a white hot nail driven directly through her skull. Her thoughts and feelings twisted away from this searing intrusion, baring layers of information she did not even know existed within her. A second nail followed the first. Then a third, in time with the menacing pulse that emanated from her mother. The first nail withdrew, having drunk its fill of secrets, as the fourth punched into her. The horrible, alien presence thrust mercilessly into the folds of her mind. A terrible cadence that promised never to stop, probing deeper and deeper, while Morgan writhed in her mother’s grip.

“Well! This is interesting,” the demon chirped, as the rhythm paused.

One of the lances in her mind twisted, and something like a flash of lightening arced across her nerves. Morgan’s eyes snapped open, burning with a terrified and dangerous light. “Get out!” she growled suddenly, as something powerful flooded through her. “GetoutgetoutgetOUT!” Her thoughts coiled and then ignited with a passion that made her tremble. The air around her stirred, pulling at the garments of the slain and whipping their hair as it picked up force. The hairs on Ember’s arms suddenly stood on end, as the atmosphere around her thinned and became hard to breathe. A strange rupture seemed to be forming around Ember’s body, as if she stood at the mouth of an abyss. Unable to push the demon out of her mind, it seemed Morgan was somehow warping space trying to push it out of her world.

“This is very interesting,” it added, with growing excitement.

The breeze turned into a wind, as the aperture continued to open, and the demon narrowed Ember’s eyes against it. The demon ignored the blast, as air rushed to fill the peculiar void engulfing Ember, exerting enough effort to anchor her vessel in normal space while concentrating on what it had found in Morgan’s mind. Among the wounded, heads turned to observe, commanded by demons curious to see what was happening. Distracted from their efforts to repair the bodies they had stolen, they began to pick themselves up and shamble over toward Ember and Morgan.

Morgan stared at Ember in growing fury. With each twist and perversion of that alien presence in her mind, she became more desperate. Her consciousness recoiled from every thrust, retreating deeper and deeper into her own mind. As she descended, she tripped over and grasped at the threads of her potential. Whatever her psyche could provide as a weapon, she tried to turn against her assailant. Most of it danced past the demon’s invading consciousness, spiraling out to feed the fury that engulfed Morgan. Dust and debris lifted from ground, to become deadly shrapnel in the growing tempest.

The possessed surrounding them suddenly sensed the threat to their leader, and stumbled forward to disrupt this unholy communion. The leader, finally grasping the kind of power the child was tapping into, launched a direct attack, hoping to shut her down. Morgan wailed in agony, curling into a tight ball in her mind. A thousand times worse than the pain of the probing, Morgan reeled, losing touch with reality for a moment. She balled herself up even tighter, pulling in everything she had been throwing out. The tempest suddenly died as Morgan collected herself. Thinking itself on the verge of success, the demon in Ember focused everything into one last attack. The ball of untamed potential suddenly compressed to a point as Morgan recognized the possibility of her death, and welcomed it.

In the moment of clarity, Morgan noticed the possessed all around her, hands and arms cruelly locked around her and Ember as they tried to pull them apart. She refocused her eyes on Ember’s face. The humanity that made it her mother’s was gone. All that remained was the monster who took her mother’s place. “Go away,” she said. An irresistible force seized Ember’s body and flung it away from Morgan. Ember was ripped out of the clutches of the those around her, and smashed through the wall at the far end of the hall.

Once Ember was out of her sight, Morgan turned to look at the possessed clinging to her. It did not occur to her that they had tried to separate Ember and Morgan, or that they inhabited the bodies of people she knew. All Morgan could see was that they hurt her. She decided to hurt them back. Holding nothing in reserve, she lashed out at them with the only thing she had. Her mind. The delicate patterns of art and nature she had interpreted as music now appeared as tangible and clear to her as crystal. In each entity rang a single note that kept the whole design tuned and coherent. It was simplicity itself to reach out, silence that key note, and watch as the pattern shattered and unraveled. The physical consequence was shocking. Her enemies fell, quite literally, apart. Dismembered by the dissonance in the forces that defined them.

With calm, cool deliberation, Morgan struck them down in turn. The demon, forcing Ember’s body to rise from the rubble, paused at the sight. It watched this awesome demonstration of destructive potential with fascination. Impressed, but conscious of its own peril, it shifted its attention from what Morgan was doing to the girl herself. The damage Ember’s body had sustained, smashing through a stone wall, was sufficient to ensure that it could no longer serve as a vessel. There was no reason to be destroyed along with it. Since it had already established contact with the child’s mind, it simply had to flow from one vessel to the next. Morgan could sense this, as the demon’s thoughts spilled through that connection, and waited. Death being much preferable to possession, she was already studying her own key note.

The demon forced Ember’s body to its feet. “Take a good look at your future, child.” The demon smiled. “I have already won.” The demon closed the distance on trembling legs, grinning as she coughed up blood from ruptured organs. “Strong bones, but weak guts. I’ll have to remember that. It probably runs in the family.”

With each step, Ember was racing toward death. Some small corner of Morgan’s mind rejoiced that she would not have to destroy her mother to force the demon’s hand. Only herself. Their eyes remained locked as the demon advanced.

A few steps away from Morgan, Ember’s legs gave out, her body falling to its knees. “Tell me something,” the demon began, panting for breath. Morgan, paying more attention to the demon’s presence in her mind than in her mother, was not really listening. “All of these people,” she coughed up another gout of blood, and struggled to fill her lungs. “All of these people… died… to protect… you. And you…” the demon choked a laugh, “plan to destroy your self.” It forced Ember’s body to crawl forward. For a while, it could not make Ember speak. When it reached Morgan, it looked up, gasping, and forced the question out, “Is that funny?”

The light was fading in Ember’s eyes, and tears streamed silently down her face. Similar tears blurred Morgan’s vision, but her attention was on the presence that was rushing in on her mind. Poised to self-destruct, her instincts screamed that timing was absolutely critical. The demon poured into her, and Morgan reached to snuff out her own light. To her astonishment, the presence, washing over her like a shadow, twisted through a corner of her mind and vanished. Before reflex could cause her to suicide, a voice rang in her mind, so loud it was nearly audible.

*No!*

Morgan went rigid. “What was that?” she gasped aloud, eyes searching.

*Sleep.*

“Who is…” She slumped to the ground unconscious.

Morgan lurched forward, sheets flying as she exploded into consciousness. Her heart hammered in her chest and sweat soaked her hair and shirt to her body. Her eyes darted wildly in the darkness, into which the horrible images of slaughter quickly faded. For a moment, she feared the darkness, filled with the horrible conviction that her vision had been obscured by possession. Her hands flew up to cover her face, and found it wet with tears. In the dim light from the porthole she could see these were not the hands of a child, elongated and calloused by adolescence and training. The child, she remembered finally, had been left in the past.

Her trauma, of course, had not.

Morgan took long deep breaths to stop her gasping and slow her heart. Her blood sang with adrenaline, pumped out to fight her nightmare, so there was no chance of going back to sleep. Gentle snoring from the bunk across from hers warned her that her mentor was still deep asleep.

In the dark, she searched with nimble hands for her breeches, and slipped them on. She glided away from the bed, collecting her cloak and boots from beside the door and slipped out of the cabin she shared with her mentor, careful not to wake her. A lantern burned at the foot of the hatch at the far end of the upper hold, lighting the way. She stepped carefully between crates and pallets as she headed forward to the ladder.

Scaling the ladder, she emerged from the hatch on the main deck, just aft of the forecastle and midway to the main mast. She turned toward the bow and climbed the port ladder to the forward deck. She carefully dodged crew men as they darted amongst the rigging, and made her way to the prow. As she settled into her familiar perch, she was grateful that this was the last night of their voyage. It was frustrating having nowhere to walk and clear her head. The captain had chewed her out for pacing the deck every night, and banished her to the prow with firm instructions on when she could be where. The simple version was, never in the crew’s way. Desperate for something to occupy herself with, she had offered to help the crew, but the captain had threatened to clap her in irons if she mentioned it again.

As she settled down, she wondered about her nightmare. It was unusual for being the most accurate recapitulation of the Dream Gate Massacre she had ever had. It was as if, after a decade of elaboration, the most frightening permutation her mind could come up with was the truth. She was half tempted to write it down while it was fresh in her mind. All her life people had asked her to explain what had happened that night. The first year, her mind had refused to consciously acknowledge that it had happened at all, and by the time she could bring herself to talk about it, her dreams had made the truth very hard to recall. Eventually, the event had been reported fully by the investigators, after painful reconstruction.

She shook her head and tried to think about something else.

That was pretty hard, given where the ship was headed. Her mentor was taking her to Dream Gate. All of the initiates in her class were assembling there for the trials which would complete their training. There was no point in arguing against it, so she had not. She had simply bit her lip and prayed for dreamless sleep. As long as nightmares were put into a separate category, her prayers had been answered.

Morgan sighed and climbed over the railing. Just forward of the prow, she could straddle the bow spirit, or sit in the catch net, and remain for the most part out from underfoot. She composed her mind and began to meditate. It would keep her thoughts from straying into dark corners and compensate a bit for lost sleep. She quickly fell into a light trance in which the sun rose and the Phoenix Coast sailed into view. The bucking of the ship as it cut through the waves kept her from sinking into a heavier trance. She remained cradled in the catch net as the ship pulled into the harbor at Dream Gate. As the ship sailed into port, she made her way back down to her cabin in the upper hold, to inform her mentor they had arrived.

Her mentor took one look at her, half drenched from the ship’s jousting with the ocean, and sighed. She filled the basin and ordered Morgan to wash, while she rifled through the girl’s pack for something halfway presentable. She laid out some clothing and collected Morgan’s soaked and salt-crusted shirt and breeches with their laundry before heading up to the deck. Morgan did the best she could with a soaked rag and dutiful scrubbing, but it was no substitute for a bath. Once she was dressed, and her pack reassembled, she joined her mentor above.

She found Amber at the railing, drinking in the sight of the city. It lay in a broad valley that sloped down between the coastal cliffs to either side. The Morgan light turned the faces of the flanking cliffs into wings of fire. Wood trimmed and whitewashed stone buildings climbed the valley walls, becoming finer and more impressive in their architecture as they neared the tops of the cliffs and ridges. Tree lines streets and courtyards spread a canopy of green between buildings, nursing blue shadows in the white walled depths. The grand columns of the sanctuary at the head of the valley were imitated throughout the city, making it all seem part of the temple of the Goddess. Her birth place.

While they were gazing at the city, the ship pulled into port and docked.

It was ironic. For half of her childhood, this had been the place she thought of as home. It was true that most of that time she had been away, but it had been the one place she always returned to. Of course, that was her life as a boy. As a girl, she had known only the sanctuary and the mansion in the ruins outside of the city. She had left when she was seven to begin her initiation and had not been back since. No one who saw her now would recognize her. She was a stranger. It was better that way. The past year had taught her that. What had happened to her as a child, the consequences of which she had spent the past year overcoming, was too much to explain to anyone. It was certainly not something she wished to show anyone. Since people were unlikely to believe it without seeing it, she was better off letting go of those old friendships.

It still made her feel weird though.

She knew this place, the people in it, so well. She could close her eyes and walk from the port up to the ruins. Not that she would ever want to. It was bad enough that she was back here because she *had* to visit the ruins. It had been a great place for a boy to run around with his friends, exploring. For her, it was a monument to the most tragic and horrifying experience of her life. Now, it was the final obstacle to overcome in her initiation.

Another familiar face walked by.

“This must be very strange for you,” her mentor commented.

“You have no idea, Amber,” she laughed. She shifted the weight of her pack and glanced at her companion. “I never really thought about how many people I knew here. I get the urge to run up to some of them and catch up on what I’ve missed, and then I remember.” She remained silent for a while, before muttering, “You’d think I’d be used to feeling strange by now.”

“You just weren’t prepared for it. I know you’re in an awkward position, but if you give it time you can do something about it. There’s more than one way to get reacquainted. Or more accurately, get acquainted for the first time.”

“If I survive the trials.”

“Morgan,” her mentor stopped and faced her, “You’re not a child anymore. Even as a child you managed to survive worse. The training you have now is more than sufficient for the trials. I didn’t spend ten years of my life training you to send you to your death right at the end. Try to have a little more confidence in yourself.”

Morgan sighed and shook her head. “I am sorry. I know. It’s just… the nightmares keep getting worse.”

Amber placed her hands on Morgan’s shoulders and leaned close to touch foreheads with her protégé. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You mean you really didn’t notice that I practically wet myself at the thought of going to bed?” She smiled, after getting a grin out of her mentor. She gave a small shrug with her hands, her shoulders being a bit encumbered, and tried to explain. “I’ve always had the nightmares. I’ve sort of gotten used to them. After a while you learn not to wake up screaming. Panting and sweating like a race horse, yes, but you keep it from boiling out. I meant to say something about it earlier, then you told me about the trials. I couldn’t bring it up after that. I was afraid you would think I was just trying to get out of them.”

This time Amber sighed and shook her head. She straightened and shook Morgan firmly. “Foolish girl. I would never suspect you of cowardice, except when it comes to what people think of you. Your nightmares are the scars of a great trauma. As you know, trauma scars, physical or otherwise, are dangerous weaknesses in combat. They need to be identified, repaired if possible, or compensated for through training. If you had told me about it, we could have done something. I don’t know if we have time now.”

“Wait. You’re not saying I have to withdraw from the trials, are you?”

The note of alarm in Morgan’s voice made Amber pause.

“Amber! You know what will happen if I don’t pass the trials!”

“I know.” The older woman hung her head thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I am not the one qualified to decide. You need to be examined by your master. I would hate to see you forfeit your initiation at this stage.” She resumed walking with more determination. “Don’t mention this to anyone else. The last thing you need is for word to get back to your regent. She can see to it that your examination takes long enough for you to miss the trials completely.”

“I understand.”

The couple walked in silence all the way to the hostel where they would stay through the trials. After checking in and getting their room, Amber left Morgan to settle their gear while she sought out the master. Once she was done, Morgan was free to roam the grounds and catch up with her classmates. She thought she was the first of her group to arrive, when a quick tour of the grounds turned up no familiar faces. There were a few initiates present with other schools, but no one she had met. Finally, one of them approached her. Not surprisingly, this stranger knew her. She was famous, after all. Part of that was due to being the sole survivor of the Dream Gate Massacre, but most of it was due to the fact that their masters always pointed her out as a role model. Instead of answering his questions about the ruins, and what it was like to face a demon, she interrupted him to ask if any of her classmates had arrived. He asked around and came back to tell her that a group of students had gone down to the nearby inn, and that Logan was among them.

That was welcome news.

Morgan had not seen Logan for a few months. She left a message for her mentor, explaining where she went and ran down to the inn. It would be wonderful to see him again. A great deal had changed since the last time they met. Most importantly, she had resolved the problem that had stood between them for the last year. She was smiling and humming to herself as she reached the inn and slowed her pace. She took a moment to compose herself and slow her breathing. She was excited to see him again, but she did not want him to know that. At least not until she saw his reaction to seeing her.

She focused her mind and invisible fingers combed through her hair or smoothed and straightened her clothes. She checked her appearance through the eyes of a couple pedestrians passing by, and then stepped through the open door into the inn. As her eyes adjusted to the cool, dim interior, she sought out the host. Spotting him she approached to order a simple meal of bread, fruit and cheese to break her fast, with iced tea sweetened by local honey. Watching as her order was filled, she fished a few coins from her purse and laid them on the counter. She took her plate and cup, heading toward a corner table.

Her path took her past the table where the initiates from the hostel were seated, and too absorbed in their own conversation to have noticed her entrance. As she approached, she was able to pick their voices out from the confusion of table talk surrounding them and make out the topic of their discussion. She almost turned on her heel and walked out. Unfortunately, before she could, she was spotted by one of her classmates who broke off and waved her over to the table. She sighed under her breath and plastered a smile on her face as she reached the table and settled into the spot they vacated for her on the nearest bench.

“We were wondering when you would arrive, Morgan.” The initiate who waved her over quickly introduced her to the students she didn’t know, and she greeted the rest in her normal fashion, a nod and a smile. To her disappointment, Logan, who had remained silent, jerked his head up a notch in greeting and returned, impatiently, to the argument she had interrupted.

“No,” Logan said, turning back to the person he had been addressing, “Demons aren’t the real threat. That’s not the point. Swords kill people all the time, and whenever some idiot starts crying that all swords should be destroyed, everyone laughs at them. The point is that demons, like swords, are dangerous weapons that spend most of their time safely sheathed and bound. The only time a sword is a threat is when it is brought out and pointed at someone. People who ignore it get killed. What you don’t seem to understand is, the instant a demon manifests in this world, it is a drawn weapon in the hands of a dangerous enemy.”

“But,” the boy retorted, “You were just talking about how demons are part of the natural order, like lions and dragons. We hunt those when necessary, but we don’t talk about wiping them from the face of creation.”

“Oh, be honest. You just don’t want to be the one who has to deal with them. You want to be a proud noble warrior and leave the dirty work of killing these monsters to crazy people like me who just want to wipe them out. Wake up,” Logan growled. “Demons are part of the natural order, but they are not living things, like lions and dragons. Crystal said that and she’s wrong. Demons, such as we are here to hunt, are deadly weapons that feed on life for power. The people who wield those weapons are the real threat, but unless we destroy the weapons they wield, deny them that power, we can never draw them out where we can deal with them directly.”

“I can’t argue with that,” another boy said. “The thing I can’t believe is that you intend to devote your entire career to this. Worse, you’re trying to get us to do the same!” He shook his head. “There are hundreds, thousands, of threats that are equally dangerous. What about the undead? In terms of capability and threat, they are the equals of demons. Should we ignore them to focus on your demons?”

“Why are we arguing about this,” Crystal demanded. “We should just follow our training. To protect our communities, to respond to the threats that appear, whatever they may be, and pass on the legacies of our birth and training. Where do you get off trying to start a crusade, Logan?”

Morgan found herself looking between Logan and Crystal. She frowned. She had known Logan for most of her life. Though they had separate mentors, they trained under the same instructors, all under one master, and at one point had even been betrothed to each other. Like her, his training had focused on answering the threats of the damned arcane arts, but he had never shown a particular interest in hunting demons. “Where did you even get the idea?” she asked, settling her gaze on Logan.

Logan stared at her a moment, then scanned the crowd before throwing up his hands. By chance, he stopped eye to eye with Morgan. “This is impossible. None of you understand how dangerous demons really are.” He failed to notice as Morgan’s face paled and her right eye began to twitch. “That’s fine. We’ll see what you all think after the trials. Months from now, when you wake up every night, from nightmares about demons, maybe you’ll think about what I said. You will hear reports of a demon haunting a town on the other side of the continent and kill your horse trying to reach it and kill it before its influence can spread.”

Morgan had risen to her feet, her breath suddenly coming hot and heavy. Logan looked up into her withering glare in shock. “You arrogant, stupid…! How *dare* you say that to me!?”