pages ∙ words

[revision note: changes in progress. additional adjustments needed to reset this prior to the resurrection of the demon within.]

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 horrible images of human slaughter quickly faded. For a moment, she feared the darkness, filled with the horrible conviction that her eyes had been blinded and she was trapped helpless in the midst of that canage. 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 the child the nightmare had reverted her to. They were 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, leaving little likelihood of going back to sleep. Gentle snoring from the bunk across from hers warned her that her mentor was in deep and enviably peaceful sleep.

In the dark, she searched with nimble fingers 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 a simple recapitulation of the massacre at the Avon Tear Academy. It was as if, after a decade of elaboration, the most frightening permutation her mind could come up with was the actual memory. 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. She was returning to the academy from her missions abroad with her mentor. 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 and gazed with detachment as 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 dawn light turned the faces of the flanking cliffs into wings of fire, for which the region was known as the Phoenix Coast. 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 an initiate. Prior to the academy, she had known only the sanctuary and the mansion in the forests and ruins outside of the city. She had left her childhood home when she was seven to begin her initiation and had not been back since. No one who knew her then would recognize her now. She was a stranger. It was better that way. The past year had taught her that. What had happened to her as a child was too much to explain to anyone. It was certainly not something she wished to share with anyone. Since people were unlikely to believe it anyway, 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 an initiate to run around with her friends, exploring. For her, it was a backdrop to the most tragic and horrifying experience of her life. In the days to come, the ruins would also be the stage for the final challenge of her initiation.

Another familiar face walked by.

“This must be very strange for you,” her mentor commented. Amber, of course, knew the story of her childhood tragedy. Her task from the beginning had been to rescue her from the depth of the ruins and then help heal the scars of her ordeal.

“You have no idea, Amber,” she laughed. She shifted the weight of her pack and glanced at her companion. She decided to share her thoughts, “I never really thought about how many people I know here. I get the urge to run up to some one and catch up on what I’ve missed, and they in turn will ask about my trials.” She remained silent for a while, before muttering, “You’d think I’d be used to that question by now.”

“But it isn’t really the question that upsets you, is it? It brings up the past, and you still have difficulty talking about it. I know you’re in an awkward position, but you don’t have talk about it. Just remember that the question is really about the future. You may be facing your childhood fears, but this is also your time to prove yourself, and the latter is all you need say. Or, you can simply wait until after the trials to get reacquainted.”

“If I survive them.”

“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. I didn’t spend ten years of my life teaching you to send you to your death right out the door. 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 it.”

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, scars, physical or otherwise, are weak spot 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,” she acknowledged, falling silent and brooding over their words until her attention was drawn back to her surroundings.

A lifetime of residence could not diminish the awe inspired by the vast architecture of the sanctuary city. The scene about her seemed to have been sculpted as much out of light and shadow as from glass and stone. Green things strained to clamber over pale stone, as trees, vines and bushes swelled to drink in the sun. The wind that gave the plants their apparent vigor played through her hair, until her face itched and tickled under the caress of delicate, crimson strands.

If not for her honor, the coastal breeze that plagued the Phoenix Coast would have driven her to shave her head, and spare herself the frustration of trying to manage her unruly mane. It would certainly have been seen as a gesture of defiance and disrespect by her regent. That alone would almost have been worth it. With a wry grin, she offered a silent prayer of thanks that she had not.

Amber and Morgan continued in companionable silence all the way to the hostel where they would stay through the trials.

“Are you certain you wish to proceed alone?” Amber asked, after they had checked in and made arrangements for their room.

She turned to her mentor and nodded. They each had things they had to take care of before settling in at the hostel. There was no reason not to split up and take care of them at the same time, even if she loathed the task ahead of her. She knew her mentor was looking for more of a response.

“It is not,” she struggled to explain, “that I am in such a hurry to leave you. And not just now, either. I would not mind if we had more time together before trials.”

The woman smiled and waited for the girl to continue.

“Crimson is well aware of my affection for you, and I can’t afford to meet my regent still clinging to your skirt. As much as it must have pained her, she dispatched her message as one adult to another, and I must try to convince her that I *am* an adult or risk falling prey to more of her schemes.”

“Morgan, you speak of her as if she conspires against you.”

“Oh, it’s much worse than that. She believes that she conspires *for* me. If I were inclined to see the world as she does, I could ask for no one better to dictate the course of my life for me.” Morgan scowled for a moment behind wind-blown bangs, then sighed. “I think it best to announce the completion of my training by taking my own affairs in hand, and respond to this summons alone.”

“If you wish. I certainly do not have the right to say otherwise.”

“Amber,” she addressed her mentor, “please be careful who *you* tell about my nightmares. As you said, she will find a way to use it against me.”

Amber stopped and turned toward her former charge. “What must be known by more than one can never truly remain a secret. Your past is certain, but your future is not. Do not think that future cannot be taken away from you by the coming test. No. Do not protest. If these nightmares pose a serious threat, we must not send you into the ruins. Try to find some solace in knowing that you have something to tall back on in the event you cannot complete your initiation.”

Morgan considered that for a moment. Finally she bowed to her mentor, “I don’t mean to be disrespectful. My intention is simply to deny my regent a weapon to use against me. She never approved of my initiation, and would try to prevent me from completing it if she could not guarantee my failure. I assure you, whatever nerves I confess, I will not falter. I will not fail. I promise you.”

“Which is all I could ask,” she replied sagely, before excusing herself to pursue her own errands and leaving Morgan to settle their gear. Once she was done, Morgan had a moment to roam the grounds and see which of her classmates had already arrived. She was beginning to think she was the first of her group to arrive, when she encountered 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 of her. She was famous, after all, for surviving the Academy Massacre, but also a bit infamous for always being pointed out as a role model to other initiates. 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 to breakfast at a local inn.

Morgan took a deep breath and sighed, before turning to head off in the direction he indicated. Adjusting the sword at her belt, displaced there by the pack she still carried on her back, she crossed the circle and headed down the Avenue of Spears. She recited the boy’s dirctions in her head as she went. If her memory was right, the inn was one she had heard about from a master at the academy—and by his account, one frequented by an individual who could help her take care of one of her errands.

As she feared, the streets were crowded to overflowing as people flocked to the city for the annual rites of fertility. After half a league she had seen enough overwhelmed inns to feel sympathy for anyone seeking lodgings in the city. Once again, she regretted the day of her birth, and having to celebrate her annual passage on Midsummer’s Day. Rather than dwell on the fact that this year it also fell in the midst of trials, she resolved not to let either event dampen the thrill of turning seventeen.

Pushing the coming celebrations and ordeals to the back of her mind, she focused on finding landmarks described to her by one of her instructors. Thinking of him, she remembered that, having successfully mentored her, Amber would now be promoted to that instructor’s level, while he would ascend to the rank of adept. Due to her shock and dismay at learning where the trials had been set, she had forgotten to congratulate either of them.

On that thought, she arrived at the inn. A sign in the window caught her eye, advertising the services of a professional scribe, confirming that it was the right place.

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.

She stepped to the side, clearing the door while she allowed her eyes to adjust to the cool, dim interior. Once her vision cleared, she sought out the host, spotting him perched on a stool at the bar in back.

She cut through the crowd, past the table where the initiates from the hostel were seated, too absorbed in their own conversation to have noticed her entrance. As she passed, she tried to pick their conversation out from the confusion of table talk surrounding them. Unfortunately, she made out the topic of discussion at the neighboring tables first and had to fight the urge to turn on her heel and walk out.

When she had taken for the taproom of an inn was more like the parlor of a brothel. She allowed herself a small smile as she pressed through the crowded room to approach the scribe. Although this establishment had rooms to let and served simple meals, most patrons paid by the hour, and ate to counter the drinks that fueled their courage. House of ill repute or no, having entered she dared not retreat before conducting her business. It would not be a good idea to suggest that she had entered such a place in error, before men who valued women for their lack of wits.

The host rose from his stool as she approached, a silent question in his eye.

She fished a few coins from her purse and laid them on the counter. “A plate and two cups, Goodman,” she ordered, gesturing at the sign on the counter adversiting a simple meal of warm, buttered bread, fruit and cheese, with hot mead. “Mead in one.”

“And the other?” he prompted gruffly.

“That depends on your good scribe’s thirst,” she replied as he reached for the cups. “Assuming of course that he is not currently indisposed.” The burly man sneered half a smile and indicated, with a shrug that almost managed to point out, a table in the far corner.

Taking this cue, Morgan accepted the plate handed to her and made her way to the table, where a young man appeared to slumber, leaning into the corner. The host followed in her wake, carrying the drinks. As she sat, she noticed a blind, behind which must have been a window. She reached over and pulled it aside. The light, and the thump of two wooden goblets served to rouse the man.

“Wake up, Meager,” grumbled the host, reaching over her to tie back the blind. “You have a client, and this one ought to brighten your lights!”

Meager blinked and rubbed at his eyes as he struggled to orient himself. After straightening in his seat and smoothing down his clothes, he looked up at Morgan and blinked again. Morgan pushed his cup toward him, urging him to drink. The host hovered for a moment, as the young man took a couple of gulps. Morgan produced another coin piece, flicking it onto the table, and waited wordlessly for the host to collect his commission and depart.

“Sorry to have woken you,” she apologized, once they had the illusion of privacy, and laughed, “Though, I don’t know how you can sleep amid this commotion.”

“This is nothing,” he sighed, his eyes indicating the floor above. “These nights there is no peace in my bed. Not with walls so thin.” As his gaze returned to her, he flushed and reconsidered his next words. Composing himself, he inquired, “What can I do for you?”

Morgan explained her need for letters of congratulation, and a response to her regent’s summons. He quickly digested her request, collecting his supplies from under his seat. Morgan tried not to notice as he lingered long enough to study her legs from that position, and note the presence of her sword. That last she guessed by the respect on his face as he came once more upright. After a few technical questions he urged her to begin dictation and commenced to write.

“From the look of you,” he paused to comment, “I would think you as well lettered as I. That is, by your sword you must be noble, and most likey an initiate—surely you are equally equipped with a pen.”

“From the look of you, I would think you might practice your trade in a cloister, rather than a brothel.”

“Ah, well, it’s kind of funny about that.”

“How so?”

“Cloisters tend to be set apart from the world of men, which deprives them of much custom. As it happens, indulgence tends to inspire contrition, which often is best expressed in written form. So, you can see I am of more service to my fellow man here than in a cloister.”

Morgan laughed. “A fair answer; so let me answer in turn. I can read and write, but I pity anyone forced to read my writing. In any case, these are formal documents better suited to a professional pen.” Meager stared at her for a moment, his face carefully still, before bending to his work with his full concentration. As he did, Morgan allowed her attention to wander. It amused her that what took place in this building was branded with a taint of guilt and corruption, but in essence was no different from a service once provided by priestesses for the benefit of men and the goddess. A service her goddess could demand of her, as well, as a daughter of that lineage.

She flushed and tried to distract herself from that line of thought, idly scanning the crowded room. Of their own will, her eyes snapped back to focus on a detail she had almost overlooked. Rising and turning a bit to perfect her gaze, she looked full upon a familiar face. The eyes within it snapped up to meet hers as she stared in disbelief. Too late she looked away, heat rising to her cheeks, for the boy she had spied rose from his seat and began to approach her. Quick darting glimpses confirmed that his movement had attracted attention and many eyes followed his progress to her. These witnesses quickly calculated the equation before them and began hooting and shouting their encouragement.

Morgan leaned back in her chair and sighed.

[insertion point: her other half or his rival. Logan, as presented here, could be either.]

Morgan had not seen Logan for a few months. She took a moment to compose herself and slow her pulse. 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.

Unfortunately, before she could, she was spotted by one of her classmates who broke off and waved her over to the table. She 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—or even 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!?”