Revision Note: This works for the girl’s evaluation to see if she is fit for trials in spite of her nightmares and the ordeal that inspires them. weapons of illusion are used to provide perfect realism without lethal consequences.]

pages ∙ words

Morgan slid to a stop, pivoted and raised her guard as the onslaught continued. Dust clung to her sweat-damp skin. She tried to ignore the sensation of hot blood flowing down her side. In a moment the shock would pass and she would feel the sting of the long slash cutting her open from ribs to hip. Somehow managing to keep her instructor’s blade from getting another bite out of her, she concentrated on folding the edges of the wound back together, willing the parted flesh to seal. She resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from her eyes; all she needed was muddy vision. The wound vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, and again she was in motion.

Skirting the edge of the terrace, she got out into the open. Mason was still pressing her, so she fell back to the center of the circle. Half of the circle nestled into the side of the temple, the other half of the circle was an unbounded drop to the rocky tops of the sea cliffs. Looking back over the way she came, she could see ocean and sky. Mason kept his distance, flexing his injured leg. She still had not drawn her blade, using her body and her mind for attack and defense. She kept a sharp eye on him as he started to close again.

Mason still limped from her combined kicks to knee and hip. A bit too cocky, that. It probably cost her a pint of blood, taking that slash on her way out. Still, soft tissue healed faster than bones. Much, much faster than joints. A successful strike with her blade would have more lethal effect, but against one as good as Mason, would be much more difficult to achieve.

The tickle touch of alien thoughts scurried along the edges of her mind. She readied herself for his attack. She could feel Mason trying to break her concentration, but she had her mind wholly shielded against telepathic attack. Against another telepath, or a person with a sufficiently disciplined mind, telepathy was not enough of an advantage. It just opened one’s guard. Case in point. Stabbing into his mind with the edge of her thoughts, she punched through his defenses. Almost as quickly, her sword leapt from it’s scabbard and darted through a flashing series of strikes that crippled his defenses. In the space of a breath she landed three crippling and two killing blows. Mason slumped to the ground, almost too shocked to hold his body together. Morgan stepped back from him, flicking the blood from her sword, and looking up for the mediator. Several of the other students broke the circle rushing to Mason’s side.

The mediator was a younger Vai instructor, Mason’s usual assistant, Kynh. She found him standing behind her, blade ready. She nodded and moved aside. Kynh stepped into the opening between Morgan and Mason.

Morgan held on to her discipline with a firm grip. It had happened so fast. She could hardly believe she had “killed” him. Mason pulled himself together, shoving his students off, and rose to his feet. Very formally he bowed, eyes never leaving hers. She quickly wiped down her blade and sheathed it, then returned his bow and the gesture of respect.

“Cleanly done, Nai,” he said, as he cleaned and ran his blade home in it’s scabbard, “You have my respect.” Kynh received their final bows, and sheathed his sword. He had been ready to strike down either one of them from the moment the fight ended, had either one attempted to re-engage the other. With the close of duel formalities, Kynh moved away from them to reprimand the students who broke the circle. In the moment of privacy, Mason bent close to her and challenged, “You have the skill for the arena. Do you have the substance?”

“I am willing to take the test,” she replied.

He smiled mysteriously. “I would expect a bit more apprehension, vao. Dying is not as easy as it looks, and it has a tendency to be permanent. You are a fast healer, I’ll give you that, but you are not immortal,” he pointed out. As they moved back out of the circle, he asked aloud for the class’s benefit, “Now, tell me, why did you wait so long to draw your sword?”

Morgan retrieved her shirt from one of her classmates and cocked her head. With a slight shrug she replied, “I drew it as soon as I knew I would win. If I had drawn before I was ready I would have lost.”

“Indeed, you would have,” Mason nodded, and addressed the crowd. “The mind is the sword of the soul, it’s best weapon and it’s best defense. The body is but a sheath to protect the edge of that sword and veil it’s lethal potential when the soul is at peace or in harmony with the dream. If Morgan had relied foremost on the physical weapon, she would have dulled her effectiveness. Using her mind as her weapon, she won the fight before even drawing her blade; it’s only purpose was bring the contest to a definitive end.” He retrieved his outer garments and handed his sword to Kynh. Casting a wary eye up at the sun, he joked, “A good thing, as it happens. It is much too hot for fighting out here. What say we adjourn to the gym for the remainder of class?”

As one, the class moved out of the sun and in among the columns of the caoi danh, the temple atrium. Looking back over the cliff top terrace, Morgan ran her fingers along the split fabric of her body sleeve. Mason had recognized her skill, but the challenge that came with it troubled her far more than her bravado had allowed. To bear a sword, one only had to be Nai, but to trade on that skill, to enter the lists one had to be Vai. She honestly did not know if her mind was strong enough to defeat death. She had proven herself the master of her body barely ten years ago. All to soon, it was time to see if she was as much a master of her mind. The wind stirred around her, rising up the cliffs from the ocean below. The chill she felt came from within.

Mason glanced back and saw her standing lost in thought. She was a promising student. Almost too promising. He ran his hands along his torn body sleeve. It reassured him to see that the thought of the test did indeed give her pause. He turned and walked away. The temptation to name the day of her test was too strong. He did not trust it. All of his instincts told him she was ready, and it scared him. Always before there had been some doubt, some feeling that the student was not ready. He had called her into the circle, with naked steel, thinking to spot the hidden weakness, the telling flaw. The only insight he had walked away with was that she scared him. He shook his head. Either she was ready, or deep down inside he was willing to let her face an execution.

He would need an outside opinion. Someone who would be able to see past her martial proficiency, to judge the integrity of her spirit and the soundness of her discipline. Someone worthy of her fear as well as her respect. The memory of her luminous grey eyes piercing his gaze during the fight surged to the front of his mind.

He knew immediately who should evaluate her.

The matter settled for the moment, he stepped up his pace. Catching up with the stragglers from the class, he accompanied them back to the gym. Behind him, Morgan’s hurried footsteps could be heard. She caught up to them as they were filing through the door to the training hall. He gave her an appraising look and then turned to Kynh. “We look like hell. You can manage things here. I’ll see you for the evening class,” he gave his assistant a pat on the shoulder and pulled the door closed after him. Morgan raised an eyebrow once they were alone in the hall. He smiled, “You and I are going to head for the baths. You’ve earned it, and I need it.”

Morgan quickly stripped out of her soiled clothes, and stepped into the wash stall. As a common house, the baths at caoi danhai were public. One could wash in modesty, but house code required only cleanliness to enter the pools and basins. And little else. Washing was simply cleaning the body, but bathing was a subtle amenity. A bath was a place to relax and play, to heal and promote good humor. It was an important aspect of avon social life, allowing one to temporarily abandon the honor and obligation of a name, and just be who you were, without accouterment. Terrans always had difficulty making that adjustment, escaping from a minutes where morality and sexuality were painfully entangled. Avonai had never tried to deny their bodies. They were animals as well as people. So, they had never been so at odds with their animal natures as humans seemed to be. Of course, one had to really live with them in their own setting to really understand, despite identical chromosome counts, and compatible germ plasm, how alien humans were. Morgan looked up from the wash bench as a group of familiar voices rang out in the small chamber of the bath annex.

Kali, H’Len, D’Nae, K’Mae, Jen

The bath annex was empty when they entered. The sanctuary was a vast estate, devoted to the housing of transient visitors, as well as the ruling House of the province. A place of learning, enlightenment and bureaucracy, encompassing the facilities of House, School and Court, like all caoi danhai, it served as the social and cultural center of avon civilization. One observed House code. Av has come into the sophisticated heart of exotic society, where exquisite craft predominates literal technological advancement. Household life is full of subtle amenities, such as bathing. Washing is simply cleaning the body, bathing is relaxing and promoting healing and humor in the body. A bathed body is wrapped in house robes—never does one put on previously worn clothes after bathing.