Hunger and Thirst, Alternate

Synopsis: Revision: Morgan Av Arden was raised by her mother and a grandmother, with her mother’s patron for a father-figure. She had a number of half siblings or cousins, and several candidates for a father—but nothing to prove who her father really was. Her upbringing included training as a gymnast, a dancer and a courtesan, and she acquired illicit training as a cat-burglar, fencer and fighter by posing as a boy while growing up. Her familiarity with the ruins and association with the underworld came as the result of childhood misadventures. At one point, Morgan began to suspect that her mother was more than a courtesan. Her curiosity led her to discover that she was a member of a house in exile, a house that turned her mother into a spy and assassin. Her mother had fought fiercely to keep her daughter from being forced down the same path. It did not take Morgan long to realize that her house was at war with a rival house.

Morgan came to the attention of the rival immortals by selling her services as a guide to the Ruins of Aeslyn Tear. The party that hired her was led by a paladin on a mission to retrieve an artifact from the ruins. She was introduced to her clients at a public house where her contact typically conducted business. The party atmosphere was shattered by the intrusion of the immortals. In the ensuing confrontation, she leapt to the paladin’s aid. Already aware of how deadly the paladin was, the immortals concluded that the most effective way to hurt and incapacitate the paladin was to destroy his lover before his eyes. For all her talent and skill, she was not ready to fight such foes, and she fell quickly and helplessly into their hands. As one, they bit her, and threw her back to the paladin. Alone, neither bite would have been a threat, but because of the antagonistic nature of vampires and weres, they became a lethal combination. Her dual infection was an assassination attempt gone awry as the result of fusion of the minor regenerative powers she gained with the psychic potential awakened during her first ordeal in the ruins and the regenerative powers of a vampire and were. Her survival recaptured the attention of the rival sires, prompting a wager over the result of her turning, and their actions pulled her deeper into the ruins and onto a path leading to the crypt of the goddess.

Transition Notes: Absorbing the influences of Avonlea and Morgan Wildmuir, Morgan of Avon Lea was required to endure the ordeal of the wager. In instances where weight was given to exploring the duality of gender, events had to evolve in a direction that reasonably provoked the wager. A chance encounter at a party was plausible, but something was necessary to encourage the immortals to condemn Morgan to certain death. Selling her services as a guide into their realm was one option, and having her intimately associated with someone the immortals would destroy her simply to wound was also viable. In either case, her dual infection was an assassination attempt gone awry as the result of the regenerative powers she gained upon assuming the full weight of the curse. The certainty of death and the beginning of her ordeal is itself worth some regard. Her survival recaptures the attention of the rival sires, prompting the evolution of the plot into a wager over the result of her turning. The immortals’ actions pull her into the ruins and onto a path leading to the entrapped demon. In assimilating the were curse, Morgan is led to believe that her tiger form replaced her male form, when in fact it simply displaced it, becoming an intermediary form. Her male form can only be accessed by moving deeper through her tiger form. In her encounter with the demon, Morgan is twinned, escaping destruction by reviving the magic that once split her sexes. A story utilizing all these options would be called Thrice Cursed.

The one weakness of most of the singular duality threads is the fact that the male incarnation was almost always secondary to the female. Most of the inspirations associated with Morgan were originally devised for a female character. In the rebirth and displacement threads, his life was likewise given only an abbreviated glimpse. He was given the most attention in circumstances where his upbringing was closely integrated with her own. Ironically, other male characters developed with strong conceptualizations and reasonably detailed notes. His thread was developed most coherently in cases where he faced transition from being male to being female, either as the first or second incarnation in a rebirth and displacement scenario. In the division of the family curse, the story benefits from having little temporal distortion and neither aspect has an obvious advantage over the other. It also presents a foundation for Morgan to evolve into something unique through the interaction of the curses. By necessity, however, the plot arc involved in Thrice Cursed must be longer and slower to enable the reader to remain sympathetic to the character. That is why the plot integrating the wager and the ring together makes such a strong alternative. It spans two generations, but retains all the same elements while introducing them to the reader in a more digestible progression. It also results in Morgan being one of three unique and identical entities.

It is not necessarily undesirable to have Morgan appear as one third of a trinity, particularly when each is predisposed to a different gender. The set up can be simplified by having Morgan find the ring in her youth, being its sole wielder, and having the ordeal of dual infection lower her defenses against possession. Given the events of her childhood, she might well know about the regenerative and polymorphic powers of the ring, and even employed them as necessary. There is sufficient cause to deter her from exploiting the polymorphic aspect without great need, and possessing the ring itself would have been sufficient cause for the Order of the Ruins to take an interest in her. Instead of striving to become a maiden of the goddess, she would be trained by members of the order. It certainly offers a more plausible foundation for her to be lured into crime, since part of her training would include the skills of a thief even if her mentors had not intended her to become one. It definitely suits itself to having a member of the order become her mother’s patron, associates the mother and daughter with the Sword & Sorcerer Inn at which both found employment as well as residence. Her grandmother remains the cause of Morgan’s courtesan training. Morgan’s association with the order is sufficient by itself to make her a target of opportunity, at least, as long as she was not recognized as a member. Killing her would simply be a way to send a warning to the order, a retaliation for the violation of the status quo.

The entire issue of Morgan’s reincarnation as a boy would be simplified thus: Morgan was imprinted with the capacity to change sex, but had always relied on the ring as the mechanism to trigger the changes. The demon would have expelled Morgan through parthenogenic rebirth simply to gain sole possession of her body. Morduin would have been able to force Morgan to assume male form as a deterrent to her reawakening, expecting that the boy would never discover and exploit the potential it had engraved in her. This would eliminate the need for a host mother or surrogate father, since Morduin would simply abandon the baby at an orphanage—forced to allow the child to live since killing it might cause his soul to reattach to its original body. However, at age seven, when the boy was tested for magical ability, the polymorphic ability was triggered. There was no full awakening, and his upbringing as a boy compelled him to reassert his manhood as soon as he realized what he had become. The experience deterred him from having anything to do with magic, though it did prompt a knight of the Order of the Ruins to take him on as a squire. Then, as the boy approached the age at which Morgan had been displaced, he began having dreams, memories of her life filtering through his subconscious prior to her reawakening. Her full awakening was proceeded by spontaneous transformations into her form. While he was adapting to being female, she was finally resurrected.

Cast

Morgan Protagonist

Rowan Her mother

Rhiannon Her grandmother

Angus Rowan’s patron

Kevin Her fiancé

Jamie Kevin’s best friend and academy roommate

Lloyd Her mentor in crime

Logan Were-tiger, Sire

Roark Vampire, Sire

Establishment

The largest port, and third largest city in Arden, Avon was unique for not having a reigning lord. The goddess Arden and the god Arduin had founded the ruling Houses of Arden and Arduin. While the two houses were originally the royal branches of House Avon, the champions of the god and goddess, and natural allies—they evolved into rival nations bitterly divided over the role of men and women in society. This dispute eventually prompted the god and goddess to withdraw their support of the two monarchies and establish the neutral domain of Avon. The rest of the nation was left vulnerable to the invasion of the new religion, and worship of the One True God. When the houses fell, during the unification of Ar Doen, and the purge began, the heirs of both houses were sent to Avon to preserve the bloodlines. House Avon had traditionally been the servants of the god and goddess and the defenders of the throne, so the Seat of Arden lay within the Avon Domain. When Royal Branches of House Avon fell, and no legitimate heir could be found—meaning, they had been purged or driven into hiding—the crown prince was appointed regent and ever since the domain had been under the indirect rule of the throne. In spite of the fact that both houses were under persecution, pride and tradition prevented them from renewing their alliance. While both houses turned their attention to surviving the purge and tearing down the new monarchy, the feud between them became more intense.

Because the two houses were so greatly diminished, they were forced to pose as commoners and accept the patronage of the House of Avon, in the service of which their children could be trained and serve the purposes of the fallen houses, both driven underground by the purge that followed the unification of Ar Doen.

The temple of the goddess crested the ridge dividing the Port of Avon and the City of Avon with a commanding view of the surface aspects of the Ruins of Aeslyn Tear and the former Seat of Avon. The port and city were both home to vampire communities, each under the thumb of vampire princes, while the villages and countryside were both haven and hunting grounds for shape-shifter clans headed and protected by the tiger clan--tigers being the fiercest natural predators of the north.

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An adventurous and athletic young girl, Morgan was a natural born tomboy. Fearless and curious, it was inevitable that she would get into serious trouble. Morgan had her first brush with death when she was seven years old. She had been with her friends at a swimming hole along the Avon River, when she was sucked into one of the underground channels into Ruins’ Deep. It was a wild ride and Morgan was pretty beaten up by the time the current slowed and pooled. For a while, she was trapped in a small cavern, but the water in the pool was pure and sweet and crowded with fish. A resourceful girl, she did what was necessary to stave off hunger and thirst, drinking from and fishing in the pond that she was trapped by. Eventually, she realized that no one was going to come and rescue her, and she turned her attention to escaping. She had become much better at swimming underwater, and had discovered where the water drained out of her pond. She had not risked following the river for fear of being seriously hurt, but the thought of remaining trapped alone forever grew into a bigger concern. She took a chance and continued downstream, coming close to drowning more than once before emerging in the buried city. Days passed as she explored the ancient city, marveling over how intact everything was as she searched for a way to the surface. As hunger and exhaustion wore her down, Morgan discovered there were frightening things trapped in the city with her.

There was no question the ring was magic when it shrank to fit her perfectly and proceeded to heal her cuts and bruises. Eventually, Morgan discovered she could not remove the ring. To be more precise, she could pull it off of her finger, but it stuck to her like a magnet. Worse, when she put it back on, she turned into a boy. It did not take her long to discover that the ring had a girl side and a boy side, and how she put it on determined what it would turn her into.

Ghosts and other spirits—the former wandering freely and liable to follow her everywhere, the latter seemingly bound in place—were undetectable until she stepped into their warding circles and found herself struggling to defend her fragile mind from their ruthless probing. Her fear of being lost and alone compounded and evolved into greater horror and desperation with each of these encounters. Unlike the ghosts, the demons could molest her, mentally and physically, as long as she was in their sphere of influence. Morgan sensed the demons wanted to break her in order to possess her body. But that was nothing compared to being swallowed alive by a dragon and then spat back up in the middle of a dragon's nest. If not for the magic ring she had found, she would have died right there. As the baby dragons jostled each other to get at her, Morgan twisted, contorted and slithered for all she was worth to escape the clutch and dive out of the nest. Slashed, scraped and bruised, Morgan dragged herself out of the dragon's lair and resumed her quest for the surface. By the time she was discovered wandering through the surface ruins, her wounds had been healed by the ring—but the sum of her efforts had drained her to the point where she appeared to be dying of starvation and dehydration. She was in shock, deeply scarred by the traumatic ordeal, but once she was returned to her home she made a rapid recovery. She had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare her dead.

On emerging from the ruins, she was taken to the temple for healing, where her courage, toughness and determination, and the story of her adventure, caught the attention of the Order of the Ruins. Surviving in the depths of Aeslyn Tear was quite an accomplishment for anyone. The city once smothered by the wrath of the gods was far more extensive and surprisingly intact than anyone suspected, a sprawling underground metropolis dwarfing the port and city and underlying the surrounding countryside. The members of the order decided to take her under their wing, an opportunity that was everything a young tomboy could wish for. She began her training with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. The only real obstacle she had faced was the disapproval of her grandmother. A compromise was reached that allowed her to train as an initiate of the order, but required her to be trained as a courtesan. Thus, Morgan acquired the wiles of a woman in addition to the skills and status of a warrior. Ironically, while Morgan had the talent for magic, it went untested and untrained. Provoked by her traumatic experiences, it evolved instead into a natural, if modest, psychic ability under the influence of her training. Her training as an initiate of the order was essentially limited by what her mother and mentors could teach in their free time, but she applied herself passionately to their instruction, determined to master her mother’s gymnastic fighting techniques and a host of eclectic skills, starting with the long sword.

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Morgan's initiation by the order allowed her to participate in training generally offered only to boys, a situation which stripped a girl of every shred of modesty, and encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys. Ironically, Morgan had discovered she could escape from the demands of her training by posing as a boy. She made friends with the orphans of the streets, and unwittingly involved herself in their criminal exploitation, playing the games of adventure and daring that prepared and conditioned them for life in the underworld. She had been taunted into exploring—and eventually stealing from—people's houses. Presented as increasingly bold dares, she was carefully maneuvered into spying, casing and eventually cat burglary. Morgan responded to the challenges, blending her formal and informal training to best effect. Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her own psychic abilities were weak and quirky. Overlooked, but most profound, was the development of natural regeneration. She did not heal much faster than normal, but she healed completely and proved very resistant to disease and infection. Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to.

An odd side effect of her perceptiveness, Morgan became keenly sensitive to the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even the simplest of common spells. That sensitivity was one of the things that discouraged her from exploiting the alternate form the ring could give her. The transformations were disturbing to experience, but even more important, boys proved to be far more tolerant of tomboys than they were of effeminate boys. Once her alternate form became a target, employing it only invited torture or torment. The ring erased the physical scars, but not the ones on her psyche. She concluded that the ring healed because its transformations only got people hurt. Unfortunately, she could not truly escape the ring’s magic. Possession of the ring was part of the reason she was an initiate in the order. Most of the people in the order had rings like it. Although, they strenuously avoided discussing the rings with her and discouraged her from playing with its powers. More importantly, no matter what she did with it, the ring always stayed in contact with her body. Eventually she discovered that the ring had to be worn on a finger for the magic to effect her, so she started wearing it as on a necklace. Intimidated by magic, she also found herself somewhat intimidated by those who were proficient at using it. Only the fact that her psychic perceptions gave her an edge in protecting herself from—and dispelling—magic allowed her to be confident in herself.

The Order of the Ruins had been created during the purge, to serve as the Wardens of Aeslyn Tear in the place of the god and goddess when they were driven into exile. Angus and Lloyd, two of the most influential of her mentors in the order, were both wardens, the guardians of the ruins and the guards charged to watch over the gods and immortals imprisoned in its depths. To enable a warden to stand against gods and immortals each of them was given a ring that endowed him with the powers innate to demons and angels. The powers of regeneration, rejuvenation, resurrection, rebirth and reincarnation were natural endowments of demons and angels. The ring's ability to alter the sex of the wearer was a side effect of how the ring harnessed--and how humans accessed--those powers. The ring had a male side and a female side, and the changes were reversible only through the use of the ring or an equivalent power. In addition to the powers it endowed, possession of the ring granted a warden limited authority over the ancient city and command of its resources. But, for all the abilities the ring granted, it was powerless by itself. It captured and harnessed the soul of its wielder. Thus, not even death could separate the ring from its guardian. In the event the guardian was slain and the ring seized by an enemy, the guardian remained within the ring as its true master. Attempting to wield the ring simply gave the guardian the means to take possession of the usurper's body and resurrect himself.

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The elders of House Avon had arranged a marriage for Morgan in an attempt to end the feud between the Houses of Arden and Arduin. Morgan first met the boy at age eleven when they were both fostered for the summer at Orchard Inn. After some intense, initial rivalry, they became close, intimate friends, their friendship spiced by good-natured competition and uncanny chemistry. The engagement was kept a secret, both to keep the matrons of the goddess ignorant of the commitment until the last minute and to allow nature to take its course in welding the pair into a couple. It was one of the few times Morgan had ever been encouraged to spend her time as she pleased. She devoted most of the summer to exploring the countryside and playing with Kevin. Neither looked forward to the end of their time together, so it came as a pleasant surprise when they discovered that the academy and the temple were close enough for them to hook up when they returned to school in Avon. Jamie, Kevin’s roommate, insisted on tagging along whenever he met with Morgan. He was a solid and reliable sort for a practical joker and troublemaker. Morgan introduced Kevin and Jamie to her gang of friends, once they promised to keep her true gender a secret. The three were well matched, equally talented at getting into and out of tight scrapes, some mere mischief but often enough sobering misadventure. A penchant for exploration and exhibition caused them to embark on grand adventures.

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A natural leader, and an orphan himself, Jamie had no trouble commandeering Morgan’s gang of friends. The existence of underground passages was a well known secret among the youth of Avon, and Morgan’s friends, Jamie in particular, decided one day to initiate her into this mystery. At first, being dragged underground awakened the trauma of her childhood ordeal. Her reaction stunned and scared Kevin and Jamie. Worse, that adventure had marked a turning point, as it revealed her gender to a couple of the boys. Inevitably, the more familiar she became with the street kids, the harder it would be for her to successfully pose as a boy. It was simply a matter of time before her true gender was exposed to everyone through horse play and fighting. Inevitably, some of the boys recognized her in her normal guise as the poised and polite young lady her grandmother labored to turn her into. In spite of being unmasked, she was far from being cured of misadventures. She tried in vain to keep the truth from changing her status in the gang, only to have her pride and stubbornness exploited. Her need to prove herself eventually led her to explore the underground more thoroughly than was good for her. As a result, she was one of the few humans to discover that the ruins of Aeslyn Tear undermined the entire city and surrounding wilderness of Avon. Thus, she was conscripted as a minor member of the Order of the Ruins and sworn to secrecy.

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No amount of success could outweigh the simple fact that she was a girl, however. It was not uncommon for any of the boys to goad her into wrestling with them, exploiting the struggle for erotic thrills. They would catch her in her feminine guise and use her to distract their marks. Often she was required to pose as a girl friend as part of some scheme or simply to increase the status of the boy she was with. This only made her more determined to be one of the guys, to challenge them on the grounds they most prided themselves on. The problem was, when she really put her mind to it, she could pass perfectly as a boy. Inevitably, the boys decided it was time someone taught her the difference. It was not difficult to exploit her pride and determination to prove herself to get her alone and naked. That had been one of their regular scams. They waited for a pleasant day to propose a visit to their favorite swimming hole. It seemed harmless, given it was typical for boys and girls to bathe or swim nude in public. The difference was that on this occasion her true form and identity was not the disguise it had once been. In addition there was no adult supervision, no moderation as the boys indulged their curiosity at her expense. Morgan’s curiosity, combined with injured pride over challenges against her gender and ability, conspired to make her, unwittingly at first, into a willing accomplice. After it was over, Morgan never said anything about being molested by the boys.

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Morgan eventually discovered the boys did not share her restraint. They said nothing to her, but she caught them laughing over it a few months later. From their conversation, it was obvious that the ordeal had been meant to shame and debase her. It might have, if she had possessed any qualms or reservations about her sexuality. Or if they had dared to rape her. Always a sensual creature, exploring her sexuality came as naturally to her as breathing and her training as a courtesan prepared her very well for the prospect of sex itself. But while the experience had not been entirely unpleasant, the loss of friendship and respect hurt her deeply. She attempted to cut her ties with the gangs only to face threats and blackmail from their patrons. For the first time she saw her life of crime for the trap it was. She knew she was in over her head when she found herself blackmailed into working for Lloyd as a cat burglar. She knew she had to do something about it when one of her jobs turned into a disaster where she was forced to kill to protect herself. Worst of all, her best friend and their mentor were dragged into the middle of things because of their concern for her. Together, the two youths were able to extract themselves from their criminal careers, but not before both had been marked. As time passed, Morgan’s preparation to assume the mantle of a maiden of the goddess became an even greater priority. This came directly into conflict with her betrothal to Kevin, arranged before either was born.

It certainly did not help that Morgan had become something of a protégé to her mother’s patron. Impressed with the girl’s potential, her quick and open mind, and feline amorality, he had taken Morgan under his wing, hoping to instill enough practical wisdom and discipline in her to permit her to succeed in the service of the goddess. Unfortunately, he had quickly become a surrogate father figure for her, and the object of forbidden desire. Angus never counted on Morgan falling in love with him and lusting after him. Although the ring granted him eternal youth, he was ancient in his own mind. It never occurred to him how she would respond to his guidance and nurturing, particularly during the onslaught of puberty. Angus had unwittingly compounded the issue by educating her about sex, explaining the risks and instructing her in the essential precautions against pregnancy, disease, injury and entanglements, particularly legal entanglements. Angus found himself responding to her after several planned, close encounters with her in the nude—whether bathing, swimming or in some aspect of her physical training—forced him to recognize that she was becoming a desirable young woman. To deflect her, he had encouraged her to explore her relationship with Kevin, but found himself forced to act as her confidant and adviser as it became evident that her moral compass aligned itself with shameless sensuality.

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To earn her keep, Morgan often worked as a muse—modeling, dancing, acting or singing and engaging her patrons in philosophical debates. Older men, she had learned with Angus, challenged her wit and intellect far more than boys her own age could. Roark found himself drawn into one of her debates and became intrigued by her. He was far from alone. In her free time, Morgan was frequently drawn to the parks and sacred forest to explore, swim and work out. Mornings or evenings often found her at a park or pool or exploring Avon Lea where she was born. Logan found himself drawn to her after several close encounters with her in his tiger form. When he confronted her in human form, he discovered she was poised and confident in herself around strange men as she had been around wild predators. When Angus confronted her about her behavior, he discovered she really was as shameless as she was fearless. She was relentless in her efforts to seduce him, but he refused to compromise his integrity. One night he returned to his room to find her naked in his bed, determined to lose her virginity to him. With strained patience and self-restraint, he told her they could never know each other as a man and a woman while he was her family’s patron—especially not when she was his protégé. Hurt by his rejection, she turned to Kevin, finally submitting to his romantic overtures. Once they learned about this evolution of their friendship, their parents assumed there was little remaining risk of Morgan and Kevin resisting their engagement.

Roark seduced her gradually over time, progressing from their philosophical discussions to a working relationship as an artist and muse. He paid her to pose for paintings and sculptures, assuming the roles of master, mentor, conspirator and confidant, exploiting the sexual tension without exploiting her sexually. In Roark, Morgan found the kind of relationship her mother had with Angus. Logan, on the other hand, integrated himself into her life as the positive contrast to the negative influences of Lloyd. Where Lloyd was her guardian in the streets of the city and guide to the underworld, Logan was her guardian in the ruins and guide to the wilderness. Logan taught her how to live off the land, how to fend for herself and survive in the wild. He was the one who taught her how to hunt and how to kill. He also shielded her from discovering things she, as a mortal, was forbidden to know while teaching her enough to understand the true dangers of the ruins and wilds. Both immortals strained to resist temptation, but matured into a young woman their resolve was beginning to crumble. Logan could not resist sleeping with her, and Roark exploited their intimate moments to drink from her. Ironically, the tragedy to come resulted from the fact that they both kept her a secret. They had a long and intimate history together, and when one smelled the other on her, each assumed he had transferred the others scent to her.

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At one point, Morgan began to suspect that her mother was more than a courtesan. Her curiosity led her to discover that she was a member of a house in exile, a house that turned her mother into a spy and assassin. Her mother had fought fiercely to keep her daughter from being forced down the same path. It did not take Morgan long to realize that her house was at war with a rival house. Because her mother had kept her out of the conspiracy, Morgan did not know which bloodline feuded against her own—or that Kevin belonged to the opposing house. When the pair became first rank initiates facing their final year of training and testing, their parents finally confronted them with fact of their betrothal and a formal engagement. It was a tragic miscalculation. Ironically, the news of their engagement that caused Kevin to break up with Morgan. He loved her, and certainly would have liked to have married her, but not just as they were ready to begin their careers and adventures. For one thing, marriage would deny Morgan the chance to become a maiden of the goddess, but more importantly, she was not in love with Kevin, in spite of becoming his lover. She had only embraced him because he was her closest, most trusted male friend. He knew he had taken advantage of Angus’s rejection to become intimate with her, and to be perfectly honest, she was not the girl of his dreams. The girl he would truly kill for, or willingly die for, existed only in his mind.

Their families did not take their reaction well. They increased the pressure on the couple, invoking the honor of both families, and hosting a grand engagement party. The increasing obligation to embrace the union only made things worse, stirring rebellious feelings in both. Fortunately, their friendship endured as they conspired together to find some way to break the engagement. It was imperative that they end their intimacy, so they shared one last moment together before putting their plan in motion. They pretended to have reconciled and proposed a minor adjustment to the wedding plans. They insisted that it would be an insult to the goddess for either of them to abandon their training, so they were resolved to complete their initiations and seek the blessings of the goddess for their union. This bought them a few months to come up with a permanent solution. Feeling betrayed by the way her friendship and affections had been exploited by her father, she turned automatically to her mentor for comfort and advice. While her feelings for him had not changed, she had amended her behavior well enough to be open and explicit about her thoughts and feelings. She described her predicament to Angus, and he observed that there were always other ways for an objective to be realized. With that hint, Morgan focused on the point of the marriage, to foster unity between estranged families. In her search for other members of both families with an amiable relationship, she unearthed the relationship of her parents.

It did not take Morgan long to discover the truth of her parent’s relationship, to finally identify her father, and realize that her betrothed was actually her half-brother. As such, Morgan was not allowed to marry him. At the same time, Morgan herself was the fruit of House Avon’s ambitions, a child of both houses. When she confronted her parents about their relationship, desperate to know how they could allow her engagement to be made knowing the truth about her and her intended, they explained that they had obscured her paternity to protect her. They had believed she would have been in danger from both their families if the truth had been known about her. If not for the risk to her, her parents might have openly defied their families and married—and at one point they had intended just that. Unfortunately, her father had been forced into an arranged marriage to a girl from his own house. Her parents had attempted to end their relationship then, but when he realized his wife did not love him, that she too had been torn from the one she loved to uphold her family duty, the couple had reached an agreement freeing both to keep their lovers. Technically, conceiving Morgan had been a breach of their agreement, but by that time her father had been a widow. His wife had died in child birth, bearing the son Morgan had been engaged to. Her parents had toyed with the idea of marriage, having worked for years to ease tension between their families, only to discover their efforts had failed.

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A confrontational approach unfolds on the premise of Morgan unwittingly provoking the rivals.

Her friends, hoping to distract her from what they assumed must be a traumatic disappointment, came up with the idea of taking her out to a party. It was a spur of the moment decision, sparked by the arrival of an invitation. The message had come from a man named Lloyd, publicly known as a wealthy entrepreneur. He was that, but his enterprise operated in some shady areas. Morgan's life and ties in the underworld were always a point of contention between her and Angus. Partly, it was because Angus had not wanted her to discover his own arguably criminal activities and reputation, so he had quietly helped extract her from a life of crime as soon as she got in over her head. It was the one area where he seemed to be irrationally overprotective of her, so it was no surprise she got into a fight with Angus when she announced her intention to accept Lloyd's invitation. Morgan could not really explain to him why she would. While he had clearly been a bad influence on her, he had also been something of a mentor to her. However they were obtained, the skills she gained under his influence were still valuable. Together, they had come up with the idea of selling her services as a guide to the ruins, and the invitation implied that she might finally have a client. She was not prepared for her mentor to effectively dismiss her, practically throwing her out of his chambers before rushing off into the night—or as she feared, the arms of another woman.

Angus had been distracted by his concern about the risks and traumas Morgan faced, as well as the implications of the invitation, when Morgan disclosed her plans for the night. He was painfully aware that Lloyd and his patron had enough leverage against Morgan to make her do almost anything or risk being brought up on charges of murder and seeing her hopes for the future destroyed. As a member of the order, Angus had learned of the expedition into the ruins. The paladin who led the expedition was a champion of the One God, and Angus feared that his mission was to complete what his predecessors had begun by forcing the god and goddess into exile within the ruins. Morgan was exactly what he was looking for. He had hoped, with a few more years of training and experience, to promote Morgan into the ranks of the wardens. Unfortunately, her impatience and ambition was certain to goad her into this venture, and the thought of her risking the depths once more before completing the most critical aspects of her training upset him. Granted, her ring offered some protection, but Morgan had never been appraised of the risks and costs that came with wielding it. In spite of the memories the action dredged up, Angus decided it was time to exploit the flip side of the ring in order to watch over Morgan. The one advantage he had, with his history, was that no one was familiar with his alternate form and anyone who knew him would never expect him to adopt it.

During the party, Morgan had a private audience with Lloyd, where she was told that her talents and training had intrigued his patron. It had become his patron’s opinion that that Morgan would make an exceptional spy or assassin. That would make her a far more valuable asset than a mere guide or tomb raider. It was only a matter of time before she would find herself forced to decide whether it was wiser to expand her professional horizons or sacrifice all she had worked for to refuse his patron’s proposal. With the usual coercion out of the way, Lloyd introduce her to her prospective clients. Shaken by this revelation, Morgan returned to the party in a daze where Lloyd's servants had no difficulty slipping her a drugged drink. Logan and Roark homed in on her as she rejoined the party. They introduced themselves as retainers of Lloyd’s, and encouraged her to stay and let them take her mind of her problems for the night, slipping into their well practiced seduction routine. The drug and drink lowered her inhibitions and aroused her, making it easier for the rivals to seduce her. At times, it had seemed there was nothing safe she could do with her hands, and she had to pay strict attention to what they were doing at all times. Unnerved by the feelings they set off in her, she used several excuses to distance herself from her admirers and collect her wits as best as she could. The fact that she kept running away—often from one of them to the other—only encouraged their interest, adding to the thrill of the hunt.

A simple, natural approach to the wager unfolds on the premise of the rivals being drawn to Morgan as a prospective mate.

On the next morning, when the first light of the sun touched her, she unexpectedly revived, gripped by crippling hunger and thirst. Oddly, just bathing in the light took the edge off, opening a floodgate of psychic energy. After a few moments, the power began to overwhelm her, threatening to consume her if she did not find a way to discharge it. Retreating from the light, her hunger and thirst gripped her again, and nothing she ate or drank could fully appease it. It was a craving for fresh meat and blood.

Roark and Logan had been careful, in their intimate moments, to avoid infecting Morgan. The curse each possessed was most effectively transmitted through a venom that laced his saliva and had to be transmitted to the bloodstream to have any significant effect. The principle effects of the venom was to incapacitate and influence their prey. A healthy victim was in no danger of being converted, and would even fight off the latent infection over time. A mortally ill or wounded victim, however, was almost certain to be turned. Morgan had been in no danger from either of them, exclusively. Because she was exposed to both, however, she had been in mortal peril from the moment she became intimate with both of them. That line was crossed when she was subjected to bites from both of them in a single morning. Roark had indulged while bidding her farewell at dawn, as always carefully healing her wounds with his own blood. Logan had surprised Morgan at one of their favorite swimming holes an hour or so later, seducing her and biting her in the midst of passion. Morgan hardly even noticed it in the throes of ecstasy, but as the day progressed she began to feel drained and feverish. As her illness worsened, she retired to her apartments with her worried mother to tend to her. After a few days, Roark grew impatient at her absences and went to her home to chastise her. One look at her was enough to rouse his fear.

Over the course of the day, her illness became worse. As someone who had been virtually immune to disease and infection, Morgan became suspicious about her condition, concluding she had been poisoned or worse. Straining her brain to remember what happened to her after she was drugged, she picked worse. The men who had tried to seduce her, had attacked and bitten her when she had turned her attention to someone else. Unfortunately, she had no idea if that meant they had been vampires or weres. As she reconstructed the previous evening, she remembered the interview she had with Lloyd, the warming he had given her and how quickly she had become intoxicated afterwards. Certainly, the whole evening had been a set up, so Morgan collected herself and returned to Lloyd's mansion to confront him about it. Lloyd was waiting for her, and dismissed her outrage to demand her response to the proposal he had made the night before. She retorted that it was evident that he had never intended to give her a choice, or else why would he have resorted to poisoning her? To her shock, Lloyd assured her that he had not arranged for her to be bitten by the immortals. He certainly did not have some kind of antidote to buy her with. Lloyd had only learned about what the immortals had done second hand, though no clear report had been made to explain her disappearance from the party. As she was collapsing from her illness, he was struck by an inspiration.

After Morgan was overwhelmed by her infections, he sent a summons to the rivals, the proposal already forming in his mind. As a retired adventurer, a well established lord in the underworld, and a member of the order of the ruins, Lloyd had multiple interests in the ruins. He had been aware of the conflict between the weres and vampires for some time. In particular, the vampire, Roark, and the were-tiger, Logan, had been rivals since they were mortal, in an era when the favored sons of the god and goddess were still the lords and masters of Ar Doen. They were the bastard sons of bastard twin sisters who had been seduced by the proud young heir of their domain's lord. The two had been turned in their nineteenth year when their rivalry brought them into the ancient conflict between immortal factions. As years turned into decades, and decades finally turned into centuries, their rivalry mellowed a bit as they each became the other's only link to the past. Over time they both became more powerful and eventually became lords over their kind. This friendly rivalry was strained by their attempts to claim dominion over Ruin's Deep for their people. No compromise was acceptable to their followers, and a blood feud followed. This had been a matter of great concern to the entire order, but it had also created upset throughout the ranks of the underworld. It had been a tremendous burden for the criminal element of Avon to have a literal underground to conduct its business in, until chaos erupted in the greater depths.

The longer it went on, the more unexplained deaths occurred, and the greater the risk of drawing the attention of the greater mortal community became. Most people, like Morgan, were unaware that the ruins were a highly coveted and disputed territory in the underworld. Most of the killings reported while Morgan was growing up were the result of the territorial dispute between the were clans and the vampires of the city. The slain were a mix of were casualties, mauled vampire retainers and the remains of an occasional interrupted meal--prey that no predator lived long enough to properly dispose of. The turf war between the were-tigers and the vampires was fought covertly, a deadly chess game of ambushes and assassinations in an ever mounting feud. Normal routines and habits became disrupted, producing a trail of bodies. Morgan had unwittingly stumbled into the middle of it. Simply catching the eye of the rival immortals had been dangerous, but then she had provoked them both by playing intimate with their common enemy. One of the reasons they had chosen to destroy her, had been to avoid the risk of resurrecting the rivalry of their mortal feud just when they were struggling to minimize the conflict between their breeds. But at the same time, their interest in Morgan could be exploited to settle the dispute over Ruins’ Deep.

Roark roused Morgan and questioned her firmly, dismissing the assumptions he had made regarding the lover she had mentioned to protest his advances. He knew he should have suspected it all along, but when she named Logan, Roark cursed all three of them for damned fools. He wasted no time in confronting Logan, pointing out how very slim Morgan’s chances of survival were, and what she was likely to become even if she did survive. On the verge of resurrecting their ancient feud, and punishing each other for their folly, the naked facts presented a practical solution to a larger problem they faced. As the wager presented itself, Morgan was presented a grim diagnosis. Once she was told the cause of her illness, she understood what must have happened, but something compelled her to protect the rival immortals. She invented a story to account for her infections, and turned her attention to the only possibility of salvation available. Recently, a paladin had come to the order seeking a guide into the ruins. Morgan, learned of it third hand, and accepted the order’s reasons for refusing the request. Faced with the prospect of a slow, agonizing death, and knowing there was an entity in the ruins who could cure her, she made a contract with the paladin to deliver her to her goal if she guided him to his. For the first time in years, the ring she had found in the ruins was going to serve a useful purpose holding her death at bay while she sought out the crypt of the goddess.

Roark and Logan approached Morgan to deliver the bad news, only to discover she was already aware of her situation and what she planned to do about it. Neither was very optimistic about her chances, even after she disclosed the secret of the ring’s regenerative properties. While the ring granted her a temporary reprieve, the obstacles Morgan faced in reaching the goddess were extreme and there was no guarantee the goddess could or would help Morgan. The objections of Morgan’s family and the order were even more strenuous, but Morgan stood her ground. She was going into the ruins. Roark and Logan were just as adamant about being included in the expedition. The paladin accepted them as the mortal men they posed as and welcomed their assistance. Because of Morgan’s situation, he urged the party that formed to make haste. Morgan was taken aside and advised about the possible nature of the paladin’s mission. He was a champion of the faith that had been responsible for driving the god and goddess into exile in the ruins. Leading him to the goddess’s resting place might be the gravest mistake of her life, a threat and insult that would damn her in the eyes of the goddess and cost her any hope of a cure. Morgan did not hesitate to confront the paladin, who swore he had no hostile intentions toward the fallen deities. His quest was motivated by a prophecy foretelling the end of the world.

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It was not difficult to establish himself as a neutral party, and eventually a mediator in the conflict. Lloyd pointed out that her strong constitution made her suitable for resolving a conflict that had been raging out of control in the city's underworld. Very few individuals survived a dual infection, but those who did eventually succumbed to the stronger infection. He suggested they waited to see which of their bites Morgan succumbed to--winner take all. They managed to rouse her long enough to determine that she had contacted no one since she had disappeared the night before. He carefully explained the wager to her, detailing her options. She could not resist the combined effects of their bites, which were fatal, but she could fight off one of their infections, determining which of them would win the wager and become the lord of Avon's underworld. Even more important, since it was obvious their nemesis had sacrificed himself doing something to help his lover survive their bites, the corruption of Morgan served to sweeten their revenge against Logan, against whom both had personal grudges. She, in turn, would become an immortal one way or the other. Morgan could not believe that Lloyd thought he had done her a favor by choosing her as the object of the wager, and accused him of deceiving her.

As she slipped back into her death-like torpor, they staged her death to sever her ties with the mortal world. All three expected her to die, but there was always a slim chance she was strong enough to survive the warring infections and make one of them the master of Ruins’ Deep. With her unusual history and demonstrated constitution, it was easy to believe that she could survive the ravages of a dual infection. They were gambling on it, since, in the event she died, by virtue of the careful phrasing of the wager, the underworld’s claim to the ruin would technically prevail. They left her body, the posed victim of a brutal slaying giving no hint of their involvement, to be found by her friends. She was trapped in a deathlike paralysis, in a heightened state of conscious awareness she had never achieved through meditation. She helplessly endured her post-mortem evisceration and embalmment, followed by the perfect, excruciating reconstitution of her flesh, and the awakening of her hunger. The rival sires returned to the morgue as they sensed the conclusion of her turning, eager to find out which way she had turned. She sensed them approaching her temporary crypt, but even with her hunger raging, could not shake off the repose of death. She realized they were the only ones who could save her from being buried alive, and made a desperate effort to show she was still alive. They realized, once she signaled them, that she was still in the throes of the struggle between their rival powers of corruption.

As was common in fledging new wares and vampires, Morgan's sires had intended to exploit her ignorance of her new condition to strengthen their hold over her, though in her case neither was certain of what to expect. Assessing her limits and abilities demanded a level of cooperation unheard of between a vampire and a were who were not bound in a master-servant relationship. The initial result of her turning left Morgan on the cusp of life and death. The gestalt effect granted her greater resistance to the unique vulnerabilities of weres and vampires, as tests with silver and fire proved, revealing unparalleled powers of regeneration. Mental probing revealed her immunity to either sire's thrall, and the enhancement of her natural psychic talents. These benefits did not console Morgan for the loss of volition, vitality and humanity. Summoning the vampires and weres together, the rivals called for a truce, arguing that open conflict between them endangered all immortals. As an alternative to the ongoing feud, the rivals presented Morgan and the wager as a means to determine who would claim dominion over the ruins.. Initially, those who objected to the wager resolved simply to eliminate Morgan. Exposure to the sun presented itself as the most obvious and certain way to eliminate her. Even Morgan believed that, having once witnessed the execution of a vampire—not knowing that it was the victim's ignorance and experience that made such exposure fatal.

She was discovered by rivals to her sires’ authority who conspired to foil the wager through her destruction by exposing her to the sun. Even though she offered no resistance, she proved difficult to destroy. Contrary to expectations, the sunlight suddenly restored her vitality, swiftly restoring her to a perfect semblance of her former life. While the sunlight seemed to be the key to her transformation, Morgan realized that the power that flooded her did not actually come from the sun. The light was a catalyst, but the power came from within herself. It was not just power, either, but untapped potential that bathed her psyche in a flood of insight and information. Vampires shunned the sunlight because even the faintest of starlight was sufficient to sustain them, to grant them their inhuman powers. Standing in raw sunlight opened a floodgate of power, accelerating the process of physical refinement every vampire went through, the firing of damp, mortal clay into crystal fine, immortal ceramic. Something a new-fledged vampire could not possibly endure, lacking the training and discipline to harness and channel the power unleashed by the sun. Ironically, weres seemed capable of exploiting the power surge so deadly to a vampire. Light was a vital catalyst for their powers of regeneration and reconfiguration. More light made things happen swiftly and smoothly, and in the absence of light they were trapped in their current state.

The rival sires discovered her absence, learned of the plot, but the absence of her ashes prompted a general search. Morgan wasted no time wondering at her return to life, setting out at once for the aid and counsel of her instructors. Naturally, she sought out the paladin first. She was desperate to disprove the report of his death. It was obvious from the condition of his chambers that he had died. She considered the ring, the last thing he had given her. It obviously had done something to her, even turned her into a boy if she remembered right. On testing the ring she made the frightening discovery that she shared her body with the paladin, and that her soul was bound, along with his and that of a demon, to it. Then he revealed that, while the regenerative powers the ring granted had allowed her to survive the bites, it could not truly cure her of their effects. She felt grateful for the presence of her only true friend and ally, but both of them wished they had not been ripped from the lives they had known. The paladin revealed that he was once a god slayer, a man trained to kill demons, angels and immortals—and if he was right, there was one chance for her. Morgan had almost reached the haven he directed her to when night fell, and her vitality began to drain away, until she literally dropped dead in the street.

The rival sires followed the rumors back to the morgue where she had been delivered after her body was found in the street and abducted her again. Morgan could do nothing but listen to their arguments and speculation until the next morning when an experiment was conducted. She revived once more in sunlight where she was confronted by the were-tiger, but an explanation for her condition was not reached. Depending on her level of arousal, her altered body could take on a perfect semblance of life or death. As Morgan adjusted to her ability to become morbid or vital, she confronted her lust for flesh and blood, her hunger and thirst. While normal food and drink were enough to sustain her the way she was, nothing she was accustomed to consuming would satisfy those cravings. The regenerative and metamorphic powers of the spirit had a price. While the spirit could create or alter flesh, those actions created a debt for immortals and eternals alike. In immortals, that price was evinced by the thirst of a vampire and the hunger of a were—as means of assimilating raw material. A vampire was essentially a spiritual entity that utilized its physical potential as an instrument to manifest its powers, while a were was a physical entity that utilized its spiritual potential as an instrument to manifest its powers. Eternals also paid a price to manifest themselves, but they could exploit a wider range of methods to pay the debt of their powers. For some, they required worship and offerings. Others required sacrifices and hosts.

She was a prisoner, by virtue of her condition and for knowing the truth about her sires and their subordinates. They kept her “alive” by keeping her in a brightly lit room when night fell and continued to study her. A vampire derived its sustenance from the proteins, nutrients and trace elements found in the blood stream, possessing a specialized metabolism capable of sustaining what amounted to an animated corpse. While a vampire could simulate life perfectly, the nature of the powers it developed required the material component of a vampire to function as more and less than a body. Living, technically, was not essential to a vampire. A were derived its sustenance from living flesh. Anything else imposed a drain on its metabolism. A were had an accelerated metabolism that could convert matter to energy and vice versa. Transformation and regeneration made more extreme demands on a were, so it had to consume more raw material to perform at peak efficiency. She discovered she could take the edge off her hunger through normal food and drink, preferring fruits, vegetables and water. They probed at her until she was forced to relive her death, discovering the paladin’s last desperate attempt to save her by giving her a ring of regeneration. She discovered she could leave her body during her nightly death, and roam like a ghost—and that her death lingered if no light touched her during the day.

Morgan discovered that nothing could completely alleviate her hunger and thirst, which afflicted her even when she separated from her body completely. The waxing of her hunger and thirst was the price of her gradual transformation asserting itself. Her sires continued to brood over her, expecting to have seen some definitive sign of her turning into a vampire or a were. They deduced that her odd condition might be the result of Morgan failing to feed properly, so they limited her to a choice of blood or raw meat. She was expected to reveal what she had become by the nature of what her hunger compelled her to consume, but she was drawn to both offerings. She tried to resist the meat and blood, but they kept her locked in the light with no way to escape her hunger and thirst.

- They thought she was deliberately trying to spite them by consuming both offerings when she finally broke down.

She discovered that she was able to command her dead body after feeding, and that by feeding it was undergoing new changes.

She also discovered that feeding only increased her hunger and thirst and light seemed to accelerate the changes she experienced.

- They discovered, once she was feeding regularly, that her sensitivity to sunlight was increasing, that she might slowly be succumbing to vampirism.

She found herself shying more and more from intense light, particularly direct sunlight, but drawn to low light, especially moonlight.

She discovered that her powers of regeneration were growing, she could literally watch her wounds erase themselves.

- They concluded that the interference of her desperate magic was finally wearing off, sufficing only to sustain her through the worst of the conflict.

She realized that her desperate attempt to heal herself had tapped into something dormant within herself, or some aspect of their infections.

She was encouraged in her plans to escape by the same dissidents who first exposed her to the sun.

When her need to hunt became overpowering, Morgan began to fall prey to the influence of the demon. The rivals discovered her escape and pursued her, only to witness as she succumbed to her need to hunt and finally expressed her true nature. First her vampiric nature took over, and she set out into the night in pursuit of prey. As she stalked through the forest, her metamorphic nature came into play, her body and senses shifting gradually to those of a feline predator. Somewhere in the dead of night, she took down a stag and began feeding, gaining warmth and vitality from the blood she drank, and then devouring her prey's flesh to fill the aching void that had evolved somewhere within her. By indulging her need to hunt, Morgan had deviated from her determined path. Morgan's prey had lured her deep within the sacred forest. From there it was possible to approach the sanctuary without passing through the city. Because she was a mess from hunting and feeding, she stopped along her way to rest and bathe at a natural pool. Exhausted and sated on blood and meat, she slipped into a deep sleep, during which her transformation reached its penultimate conclusion. In the early hours of the morning, Morgan awoke to discover what she had changed into during her hunt. She was startled by the melding of her vampirism and transformation into a tiger, sating her hunger for flesh and blood all at the same time. It was at this point that her pursuing sires caught up to her.

Her escape was an abysmal failure and the only thing she accomplished was to turn herself into a hybrid vampire-were-tiger. In spite of this, she continued to resist, trying to preserve her humanity while her sires debated over the significance of the outcome of their wager and instructed her in what she had become.

- They were forced to accept that she had somehow melded their infections into one, and gained certain benefits as a result.

She was immune to the normal enthralling influence of her sires, and capable of seeming more alive or more dead than any other vampire.

She was more sensitive to sunlight and silver, but could endure exposure to either longer than a normal vampire or were before taking damage.

- She still depended on light for true vitality, and feeding to retain it and fuel her hybrid powers, but too much light, or not enough fuel were dangerous.

Morgan's condition troubled them, as it left the conclusion of their wager indeterminate. It never occurred to them that rival infections could produce a hybrid. Contrary to the implied acceptance of her transformation, once Morgan was coached through the transition back to human form, she refused to return with either of her sires. The vampire dragged Morgan to shelter reminding her of the impending dawn, while the tiger simply observed in silence, waiting to see what Morgan would do with her new immortality.

- They concluded that the initial wager was a draw, modifying it so that he who succeeded in dominating her would dominate the ruins.

She was severely disciplined for her attempt to escape, warned that she would not be allowed to roam the surface until she was lost to human memory.

She clung to the new hope the paladin had revealed to her, once again plotting to escape and seek out the aid of the goddess.

As she became aware of the seductiveness of human prey, she decided it would be better to end her unnatural existence before she damned herself by succumbing to them. It did not take long for Morgan to realize that she had no choice but to feed, though she found she could exploit her new animal form to hunt and feed on forest stags. Once she seemed to have adjusted to her new life, she was permitted to venture out into the ruins with a chaperone… but she faced obstacles … For one, she could no longer venture out into full daylight, but more annoyingly, she found herself being set up as the embodiment of Ruin's Deep. It was not so much that she had been chosen to rule, as she had become the symbol of rule. Thus, to claim Ruin's Deep, it was necessary to conquer her.

- They summoned their elders to reveal what she had accomplished, in herself and with the help of the man who had become a part of her.

She was brought before the elders to testify about her unique accomplishments, and face judgment.

The elders were shocked by her hybrid transformation, and she was forced to reveal part of the truth while obscuring the rest.

- They realized that their elders might well seek her destruction as an abomination, or worse, if the reaction of one of them was fully considered.

She was approached by the one elder excited by her and her accomplishments, offered certain insights and promises if she submitted to him.

She learned some stunning secrets about weres and vampires from her companion, including the purpose of his former vocation.

Once again, her only option was to escape and her thoughts turned back to the prospect of a cure. Which she found much easier to do in her new state. The only problem was, a party of brigands with a score to settle caught her alone in the pale of night and tried to gang rape her. The fight aroused Morgan's hunger and thirst, and the next thing she knew she was standing naked over the scraps of her feeding frenzy. Traumatized by what she had done, she wandered to an isolated spot and stood there waiting for the sun to rise.

It had not been Morgan who had capitulated to the hunger and thirst. In her transformation into a tiger, the demon had somehow taken control and sated itself on the flesh and blood of Morgan’s assailants. Morgan had not given in to her appetites. She had not abandoned her humanity. However, because she had expended herself trying to stop what was happening, she experienced everything virtually first hand. It was as if she had lost control of herself. It never occurred to her that the demon could insinuate itself so subtly, take over so seamlessly, that she would not notice its ascendancy. The shock and horror of the event overwhelmed her, believing herself responsible she consigned herself to oblivion. Confronted by what she had become, what she thought she had done, Morgan wished for death and Logan could not discourage her. Logan, a more distanced observer, suspected the truth, and reasoned desperately against her suicidal impulse. As the paladin of the goddess, she argued, they both had an obligation to destroy creatures like what they had become. Logan could not refute that, but he felt obligated to point out the consequences. The destruction of her corrupted body would be no different than simply passing on the ring. It would ultimately burden some innocent with both their souls. Instead, he proposed, they should finish what she had started, seek out the goddess and be cured of the two curses.

As horrible as her actions were to her, she did not want to die so much as she believed it was necessary for her to die, while she could still possessed enough humanity to understand her crime. It took everything she had to stand there waiting for the sun to engulf her.

Only her reluctance to destroy Logan along with herself, and the wait for the sun to rise, had prevented her from acting already. She did not feel that any sort of cure could redeem her for what she thought she had done, but at least he deserved a chance. Before reversing the ring, she begged him to take permanent possession, trusting him to withstand the hunger and thirst, urging him to find some cure or escape for himself before returning control to her. Morgan threatened to destroy herself, rather than risk another moment of weakness, if he granted her possession again. Unfortunately, while they argued, the demon seized the opportunity to intercept the ring, assert its own dominant form and banish both of them from possession of Morgan’s body. Neither Logan or Morgan had ever taken notice of the intermediate form that manifested when the ring was not worn, but merely in contact with the flesh. With neither side invoked, the ring caused a body to manifest the sex of the demon. The demon considered its options and devised a way to expel their souls to free itself from the risk of becoming trapped in the ring again. Through parthenogenesis, their souls could be reborn, hopefully oblivious to their former lives. The demon had to allow their reincarnation or it could not fully discharge the ring and be free of it, and by taking a simple precaution with each there was little chance either would be a threat to it any time soon.

The precautions the demon had to take involved a bit of special preparation to ensure the demon could assume male or female form without granting Logan or Morgan possession, which took almost two years to complete.

Freed at last, Morduin went straight to Aeslyn Tear, determined to probe the ruins to determine the strength and availability of the forces slumbering there. If he could raise the army of demons trapped in the ruins they could complete the mission they had embarked on during the war of the gods. He quickly ran into an obstacle, the war over Ruin's Deep. While the vampires and weres at war over dominion over the ruins, both sides were hostile to any efforts to free even a single demon of the depths. Knowing he could not make allies on either side, Morduin's options were limited to encouraging their mutual destruction or forming an alliance against a common enemy like Logan, and somehow parlaying that into a way to seize control of the ruins.

Morduin was once one of those trapped in the ruins, escaping by virtue of sealing its soul in the ring. The exploration and looting of the ruins had been a recurring event, so it had only been a matter of time before an adventurer found the ring and removed it from the ruins. Again, it was only a matter of time before the demon would awaken and find a way to claim the body of a ring wielder, and merely a minor setback that, because Logan and Morgan remained trapped in the ring, Morduin remained bound to it. Because of that, and the use Logan made of the powers he gained from the ring, Morduin had a score to settle with Logan.

Revenge against Logan was merely a side note to his plot to seize control over the ruins. The communities of weres and vampires that had settled the ruins presented a major obstacle to the demon's plans to raise the legions of demons and undead necessary to resume his mission of annihilation. Fortunately, Logan and Roark had long been at war over the rule of Ruin's Deep, and their personal interests in Morgan had brought their rivalry to a peak. It would be easy to pose as her host and convince them to wager everything on a gamble to claim the ruins through her.

An unfortunate girl slain by a vampire and a were-tiger

- She was training to become a maiden of the goddess.

She had become the protégé of the paladin of the goddess, fixating on him as a father figure and object of desire.

She was dragged out for a night of fun during the autumn festival by her friends, oblivious to the immortals that crashed the party

- The paladin arrived later, stalking a pair of rival immortals that had decided to crash the party.

They were from Ruins’ Deep, immortal enemies by nature but respectful rivals in light of their mortal relationship

She had unwittingly caught the eye of the rival immortals, becoming a focus for their relentless rivalry

- They both flirted with her, luring her aside where they could coax or seduce her into playing her part in the hunt

She spotted the paladin, and being somewhat inebriated, threw herself at him—unwittingly bringing them both to the attention to the predators in their midst.

She had been slipped spiked drinks to lower her guard and arouse her, but even drugged she sensed a deadly undercurrent

- Tempted in spite of himself, he responded enough to convince the rivals that she was his lover.

In the ensuing confrontation, she leapt to the paladin’s aid.

The immortals concluded that the most effective way to hurt and incapacitate the paladin was to destroy his lover before his eyes.

- She sensed she was in mortal danger, but found herself unable to resist the consummation of their desires

For all her talent and skill, she was not ready to fight such foes, and she fell quickly and helplessly into their hands.

As one, they bit her, and threw her back to the paladin.

- Alone, neither bite would have been a threat, but because of the antagonistic nature of vampires and weres, they became a lethal combination.

She knew a victim had to be on the verge of death to be turned by the bites of a vampire or a were

She knew a victim of both bites never survived, unless one bite proved far more potent than the other

- The paladin had only one hope of saving her life, and only at the cost of his own.

Taking the ring that granted him immortality so long as he possessed it, he placed it on her finger.

In passing on the ring, he was ripped from his own body as the ring lay claim to his soul, transferring his psyche into her body

- She would be forced to share her body with him or surrender to full possession.

Worse, the ring sufficed only to allow her to survive the bites.

It could not truly cure her of their effects.

- The paladin quickly sorted out what had happened upon reawakening, realizing who paid the price for his resurrection

He tried to communicate with Morgan, to warn her about what had happened, but she failed to read the message he left for her

The wager was proposed after Morgan confronted Lloyd the next day.

An ordeal of hunger and thirst

- They left her body, the posed victim of a brutal slaying giving no hint of their involvement, to be found by her friends

She was trapped in a deathlike paralysis, in a heightened state of conscious awareness she had never achieved through meditation

She helplessly endured her post-mortem evisceration and embalmment, the perfect reconstitution of her flesh, and the awakening of her hunger

- They returned to the morgue as they sensed the conclusion of her turning, eager to find out which way she had turned

She sensed them approaching her temporary crypt, but even with her hunger raging, could not shake off the repose of death

She realized they were the only ones who could save her from being buried alive, and made a desperate effort to show she was still “alive”

- They realized, once she signaled them, that she was still in the throes of the struggle between their rival powers of corruption

She was discovered by rivals to her sires’ authority who conspired to foil the wager through her destruction by exposing her to the sun

She was startled when the sunlight suddenly restored her vitality, swiftly restoring her to a perfect semblance of her former life

- They discovered her absence, learned of the plot, but the absence of her ashes prompted a general search

She had wasted no time wondering at her return to life, setting out at once for the aid and counsel of her instructors

She had almost reached the haven she sought when night fell, and her vitality began to drain away, until she literally dropped dead in the street

- They followed the rumors back to the morgue where she had been delivered after her body was found in the street and abducted her again

She could do nothing but listen to their arguments and speculation until the next morning when an experiment was conducted

She revived once more in sunlight where she was confronted by the were-tiger, but an explanation for her condition was not reached

- They kept her “alive” by keeping her in a brightly lit room when night fell and continued to study her

She discovered she could take the edge off her hunger through normal food and drink, preferring fruits, vegetables and water

She was a prisoner, by virtue of her condition and knowing the truth about her sires and their subordinates

- They probed at her until she was forced to relive her death, discovering her last desperate attempt to save herself by calling on healing magic

She discovered she could leave her body during her nightly death, and roam like a ghost—and that her death lingered if no light touched her during the day

She discovered that nothing could completely alleviate her hunger and thirst, which afflicted her even when she separated from her body completely

- They deduced that her odd condition might be the result of failing to feed properly, so they limited her to a choice of blood or raw meat

She was expected to reveal what she had become by the nature of what her hunger compelled her to consume, but she was drawn to both offerings

She tried to resist the meat and blood, but they kept her locked in the light with no way to escape her hunger and thirst

- They thought she was deliberately trying to spite them by consuming both offerings when she finally broke down

She discovered that she was able to command her dead body after feeding, and that by feeding it was undergoing new changes

She also discovered that feeding only increased her hunger and thirst and light seemed to accelerate the changes she experienced

- They discovered, once she was feeding regularly, that her sensitivity to sunlight was increasing, that she might slowly be succumbing to vampirism

She found herself shying more and more from intense light, particularly direct sunlight, but drawn to low light, especially moonlight

She discovered that her powers of regeneration were growing, she could literally watch her wounds erase themselves

- They concluded that the interference of her desperate magic was finally wearing off, sufficing only to sustain her through the worst of the conflict

She realized that her desperate attempt to heal herself had tapped into something dormant within herself, or some aspect of their infections

She was encouraged in her plans to escape by the same dissidents who first exposed her to the sun

- They discovered her escape and pursued her, only to witness as she succumbed to her need to hunt and finally expressed her true nature

She was startled by the melding of her vampirism and transformation into a tiger, sating her hunger for flesh and blood all at the same time

She still depended on light for true vitality, and feeding to retain it and fuel her hybrid powers, but too much light, or not enough fuel were dangerous

- They were forced to accept that she had somehow melded their infections into one, and gained certain benefits as a result

She was immune to the normal enthralling influence of her sires, and capable of seeming more alive or more dead than any other vampire

She was more sensitive to sunlight and silver, but could endure exposure to either longer than a normal vampire or were before taking damage

- They concluded that the initial wager was a draw, modifying it so that he who succeeded in dominating her would dominate the ruins

She was severely disciplined for her attempt to escape, warned that she would not be allowed to roam the surface until she was lost to human memory

She discovered that she shared her cell with another victim of dual infection, a living corpse, forever trapped in the death struggle it provoked

- They were shocked by her success at reviving her cellmate, a soul long since written off as an unfortunate victim of some past quarrel

She found her new companion her only true friend and ally, and like him, ached to somehow return to her old life

She learned her companion was once a mage hunter, a man trained to slay immortals and gods, and according to him, there was one chance for them

- They summoned their elders to reveal what she had accomplished, in herself and with the man who had been condemned to a living death

She clung to the new hope her companion had revealed to her, once again plotting to escape and seek out the aid of the goddess

She was brought before the elders to testify about her unique accomplishments, and face judgment

- They realized that their elders might well seek her destruction as an abomination, or worse, if the reaction of one of them was fully considered

She was approached by the one elder excited by her and her accomplishments, offered certain insights and promises if she submitted to him

She learned some stunning secrets about weres and vampires from her companion, including the purpose of his former vocation

Two Years Later…

A normal girl dispossessed by the resurrection of a man, reborn as a boy

A demon unleashed, eighteen years of exile begins

- The paladin had initially intended to use the girl only as a means to be reborn, but the demon had other ideas

Instead of fathering a new incarnation of himself, the demon forced the conception of the girl as his son

The paladin, believing he had accomplished his goal, yielded possession of the girl’s body unaware that he was surrendering it to the demon

- The demon was finally in the dominant position, taking the final step to break the hold of the ring by expelling the paladin’s soul

It struck the demon as more convenient, and suitably ironic, to cause the paladin to be reborn as a girl, finding it easier to adopt female form anyway

Uninterested in raising her daughter, the demon married the man the maiden had been engaged to, faking her death once the child was born

Note: Existing notes support the maiden and paladin remaining merged for ten years, passing on at twenty-seven. Some adjustments are necessary to make it work.

- While in the ring, the demon’s powers had been limited, so it had been forced to tap the potential of its hosts to influence them

Combined with the time their souls spent in captivity with the demon, the potential innate to the paladin and the maiden was imprinted with certain powers

Each gained deeper access to their psychic potential, gaining regenerative, parthenogenic, and limited metamorphic powers

- While the maiden and the paladin started their lives over, the demon set about building a power base, starting a war for control of the ruins of Aeslyn Tear

The prisons of many demons lay in the forgotten city, but the immortals that had laid claim to the ruins presented an obstacle to resurrecting her kin

The demon’s adopted humanity limited her powers, and while more than a match for any individual immortal, she could not risk confronting too many at once

- The demon targeted immortals carefully to set them against one another, intending for them to eliminate each other for her or be driven from the deep

Inevitably, the demon’s interference was recognized, when two among the opposing factions held true to their mortal ties

The vampire and the were-tiger deduced enough of the truth and set a trap for the demon, eventually succeeding in unmasking her

- In that time, the maiden and the paladin had grown up, troubled by dreams of their former lives and the transformations they experienced at seventeen

The boy had turned back into a girl at seven, when the maiden’s spirit first tried to reassert itself, but he fought the change and suppressed her

The girl the paladin became initially exploited the change, until it got her into trouble and abandoned it without creating any obstacles to her former identity

- As the pair approached the age when the maiden was displaced, he experienced symptoms of her reawakening

He dreamt, remembering her life but experiencing difficulty remembering the dreams when awake

He experienced a shocking transformation into a girl upon reaching the age of her displacement

Twenty Years Later…

A shocking pair of resurrections

- The catalyst for his transformation was his first sexual encounter, ironically with the demon herself

A chance encounter with the girl of his dreams, and curious indulgence on the demon’s part, resulted in an unbearable personal crisis

On an unconscious level he recognized he did not want to be with the girl he slept with; he did not want her, he wanted to be her

- The encounter with the reborn maiden prompted the demon to seek out the reborn paladin, adopting male form for the purpose of seducing her

The experience, catalyzed by a mocking innuendo from the demon, triggered a total recall of her life as the paladin

The paladin realized what the demon had done and resolved to hunt it down to prevent it from doing anything worse to anyone, or everyone, else

- The boy was swimming with his friends when the first spontaneous change hit him, prompting him to seek his mentor’s aid and advice

The mentor examined the boy-turned-girl and discovered the change was somehow innate, and within the boy’s power to reverse

The mentor concluded that the change was a manifestation of some former life as a girl, as further evidenced by the dreams he described

- Expecting the demon to be in the form it had seduced her in, the paladin’s hunt led to a confrontation with the reborn maiden

The boy fell into the trap the demon unwittingly created by identifying the paladin with the girl he had been intimate with

He was not prepared for her to try to kill him, and fled for his life, aided by a transformation initiated by the wounds she inflicted

- His mentor received him once again, to be dragged along as his mentor investigated a possible lead to discover the boy’s former identity

The mentor had noted the impossible resemblance between the boy’s female form and that of a girl he had met once about twenty years ago

The female boy was mistaken for the paladin by her family, who openly commented on the girl’s uncanny resemblance to her dead mother

- The maiden and the paladin confront one another again when she arrives home after a fruitless search for the demon

Playing coy, she waits until they are alone to accuse her new twin of being the demon, only to be shocked when she speaks first

In anger and fear, the female boy asks why she would sleep with him one day, then try to kill him the next while venting her confusion over her transformations

- The paladin, after deducing the true identity of the boy, was forced to explain cause of the boy’s dreams and transformations

She demonstrated her own transformation, confiding the thoughts and intentions she’d had before and after the demon thwarted her

She attempted to convince her twin that their ordeal, the choice it imposed, was a unique and special opportunity few people were granted

- As the girl awakened, she confronted the boy she became, able to recognize him as part of herself but at the same time as a person in his own right

She confronted the full scope of her displacement from her old life, and the disorienting context of her new, or rather his, life

She weighed the advantages of the combined training and experience of her two lives against the difficulties implicit in their differences

- The maiden and the paladin work together to integrate themselves into their new lives, embracing a natural rapport with intimate intensity

In spite of being reflections of each other, each could hope for no better compliment than the other

Apart from sorting themselves out, their first priority was to deal with the demon they had unwittingly unleashed

- Unfortunately, they were ignorant of the fact that others were hunting the demon, and calamity struck when those predators mistook the maiden for the demon

By virtue of the fact that they had identified the demon—without realizing she was a demon—by stealth, they did not expect their prey to recognize them

They were not put off by the character of their prey when they closed on her, memory and suspicion suggesting an explanation for all of her behavior

Source Notes

See

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In the Pursuit of Options, The Turning Point

Development following the notion that the god and goddess were forced to retreat to crypts in the ruins during the purge, Morgan comes across the goddess as she delves deeper into the ruins as access to the surface is denied to her.

Night, Day Nine

The argument made no sense to Morgan, until they reached a sudden agreement that disturbed her. Morgan found the situation particularly ridiculous and frustrating when she realized that she had become the focus of a wager. That her presence had increased the stakes of the contest the vampire and were-tiger were engaged in. Morgan was hardly delighted by this, but she had also heard clearly as they both revealed the fate of any human caught trespassing in this little underworld, and understood that her options were severely limited. What she had not grasped was their intention to settle both disputes by infecting Morgan at the same time, a test of the powers of a vampire and a ware to turn their victims. With an odd look they decide to "share" her and proceed to kiss and caress her together. Before Morgan could resist the attention, the pair of them sank their fangs into her.

Her mind was invaded with thoughts and images from both of them, rehashing their earlier debate in disturbing flashes. After fighting at her side, the two men had finally recognized that their respective interest in her was great enough to endanger the truce under which they had been negotiating an end to the war. Ironically, their dispute over her suggested a way to settle the conflict. Because of her psychic abilities, Morgan possessed a degree of immunity to vampire or were infection, but if her system was overtaxed by joint infections--normally a fatal proposition--there was a fair chance that she might be overwhelmed and thus be turned by one of them. Morgan fell into their trap, helpless as her body and soul became the battle ground to determine the outcome of the were-vampire war.

To speed her transformation, she was bled to the brink of death while receiving their corrupting kisses, the venomous bites of the vampire and the were. Because weres and vampires were immune to each others venom, the possibility of producing a were-vampire never occurred to them. It was more probable that she would simply perish from the conflicting infections.

Day Twelve—Day Twenty

Following her infection, Morgan was locked away to suffer through the transformation that would claim her. Morgan was contacted mentally by the demon in her ring, tempted by it as she lay dying. Only her natural regeneration, a facet of her innate psychic ability, made it plausible for her to endure the battle for dominance of her flesh and spirit. At some point during her molestation, she had blacked out, and on awakening she was not clear on what exactly happened to her. Her assumption was that both men had been vampires, and they had been arguing over the right to sire her. This belief made her confident her powers would resist the infection, so she concentrated on making her escape.

At first it seemed that Morgan had fought off both infections, unaware that her system had been forced to assimilate the infections to prevent their combined effect from annihilating her. Her sires were sensitive to the subtle changes afflicting her, her conversion proving slow but inevitable. Faced with this unexpected result, Morgan remains the focus of the wager for Ruin's Deep--the sire to conquer her conquers all. As was common in fledging new wares and vampires, Morgan's sires exploited her ignorance of her new condition to strengthen their hold over her, though in her case neither was certain of what to expect. Their initial assumptions had not supported the possibility of Morgan becoming a hybrid. Assessing her limits and abilities demanded a level of cooperation unheard of between a vampire and a were who were not bound in a master-servant relationship. The gestalt effect of her dual conversion granted her greater resistance to the unique vulnerabilities of weres and vampires, immunity to either sire's thrall, unparalleled powers of regeneration and the enhancement of her natural psychic talents. Playing along with her belief that she had resisted their corruption, the sires treated her as the slave her other option allowed her to be. In that way, she was introduced to the vampire and were communities. She possessed a kind of status, as the symbol of victory to either side. The subjects of her sires possessed a role of their own in her seduction, embodying the community Morgan would be joining when she submitted to one of her sires. Through observation, she was introduced to the customs of vampires and weres, their culture, their society, their justice. She was also made conscious of what her fate was to be if she rejected both of her suitors. Her choice was a favored existence under a powerful patron as a pet, or endless abuse at the hands of anonymous predators seeking to sate their inhuman appetites. Morgan was hardly surprised to find herself too sickened by it all to eat. It took her some time to realize that the food itself made her sick, when her body proved it would only tolerate water, the rarest meat, and the merest traces of anything else. When the nausea passed, and she found herself able to eat again, she was disturbed to discover it would not satisfy her hunger.

Morgan was stunned to discover what her sires had both already realized, as the hunger seized her. Aware that the greatest danger now was feeding, for if she did it would no longer be possible to cure her of vampirism, Morgan resisted the temptations presented to her. But as the hunger continued to grow, she transformed into a tiger, proving that she had been turned simultaneously into a blood-drinker and a man-eater. She did not know if the same rules applied to were infections as vampire infections, but the change alerted her to the fact that she had run out of time. She had to escape and reach help before the hunger drove her to feed. Her new form aided her escape, however, and she did not hesitate to exploit it. Guessing her remaining companions had been turned or slain, she did not concern herself with their fate. The last time she came to their rescue, they left her in the lurch. That was their last chance from her. Without the extra baggage, Morgan was able to make her escape and return to the surface. All the way, she could feel the strain on her system from the infection. Emerging into daylight, she was disturbed to discover a painful sensitivity to sunlight. The shock and agony triggered a transformation back to her normal form. The occurrence also made her aware of the improvement of her regenerative abilities, as the burns healed before her eyes. According to her training, a vampire only regenerated from burns at a normal human rate, if with inhuman perfection over time. Her rapid healing had to be due to her own ability or came from also being a were. Which was supposed to be impossible. Not that she cared, since all she wanted was to be cured of being either. There was only one place she could even appeal for that kind of aid, and technically, she had no need to go to the temple to seek it. Forced to wait out the day in the ruins, she prayed to the goddess, opening her mind for true communion.

Morning—Evening, Day Twenty

To her relief, the goddess deigned to respond to her supplication, and Morgan explained her situation, how she had been bitten by the pair and her fear that it would overcome her immunity. The goddess advised her on what to do to prevent the change from becoming permanent if it took full hold. She assured Morgan that she could cure her if she did not succumb to the thirst first.

As night fell, Morgan realized she would be hard pressed to resist the growing hunger and thirst, not sure if it was caused by the drain of fighting the infection, or if the change was complete. She had no idea how long it would take for the infections to completely overwhelm her immunity. She had to make haste and avoid all distractions in reaching the temple. Unfortunately, distractions did not avoid her. As she raced along, still naked after reverting to human form, she caught the attention of a band of brigands. The highwaymen pursued her, and eventually cut her off.

Midnight, Day Twenty

Morgan was stunned. She had come this far, only to be gang raped by a rag-tag band of thieves. She was not going to let that happen! Naked and alone, she was still armed and dangerous. She tore into her assailants, astonished by the rush that seized her, turning her bare handed onslaught into a blood bath, and once that blood splashed her, the instincts of what she was becoming took hold. What happened next was a blur, as Morgan lashed out passionately, her body changing into something even more lethal, and an appetite for raw flesh and blood consumed her.

Sated, she fell asleep, reverting to her former self in the early morning light.

It was much later that she regained her senses to confront what she had done. The pleasure and satisfaction of sated hungers was unmistakable, as were the remains of her feeding. Whatever she had become, it was worse than she could have imagined. Images of what she had been and done started to trickle back into her brain, and the horror caused Morgan to flee the scene. Morgan confronted what she had become and without so much as thinking of it, set out to expose herself to the dawn. Dwelling on the seductiveness of human prey, unaware of having already made a decision, she became absorbed in an internal debate over the need to end her unnatural existence before she damned herself by succumbing to it.

Dawn, Day Twenty-One

She had no idea where she was going or what her intentions were until the goddess suddenly appeared to confront her. Once questioned, Morgan realized she had sought out a place where the sun would find her instantly, and from where she could not reach any shelter before its light consumed her. Her conscience, gibbering and shattered, was driving her to her death, to absolute atonement. Upon reflection, she decided it was for the best. Exposure to the sun seemed the most obvious and certain way out, as she had been forced to witness such an execution--never realizing that it was the victim's ignorance that made such exposure fatal. She was too honest to deny that, if she did not end her unearthly existence immediately, she would be tempted by her hungers again, and having submitted once, there was no salvation. To go on would inevitably mean surrendering to what she had become. The goddess could not talk her out of it, nor could Logan. Unable to sway her, they waited with her as she waited for the sun. When dawn broke, the pain overwhelmed Morgan in seconds, and then she began to burn. Oddly, the flame did not consume her or else her flesh was renewing itself as swiftly as the fire ate at her. It was as if the light pouring into her turned into power and that power fed itself into regeneration, rallying her psychic defenses, allowing her to assimilate the vampire and were venom.

Morgan, plagued by the feeling that there was something incomplete about her transformation even though it had progressed past the point where it was reversible, found herself riveted by the approaching sun.

After an inner struggle, she resolved to face the dawn, to accept her fate and do the only thing she could to ensure she would never feed on human prey.

Morgan was confronted by her goddess when she attempted to expose herself to the sun. Whatever hope she had of accepting her transformation into a vampire were-tiger were dashed that night, when she succumbed to the hungers that suddenly drove her during her escape from her sires. In spite of the fact that the brigands that ambushed and attempted to rape her deserved their bloody demise, it was the loss of her humanity as she was feeding that drove her to commit suicide. Even the thought of avenging herself on her sires for what they had done to her was flushed from her mind by the fear that confronting them would only hasten her corruption. Besides, given what they were, their actions were perfectly reasonable compared to the fact that her goddess had spoken through Morgan, perhaps in an effort to prevent them from slaying her outright, inspiring the feuding immortals to wager the outcome of their feud on the result of an attempt to turn Morgan into one of their own. Rationally, the dual infection should have resulted in certain and unpleasant death, but her sires had confided, after her resurrection as both vampire and were, that the goddess must have suspected that Morgan would survive the ordeal when she goaded them into making the wager. Any attempt, then, to avenge herself on the true author of her damnation could only be more damning. The only salvation Morgan could hope for was to destroy herself while she still possessed enough humanity to see the necessity. Yet her goddess begged her to reconsider, to return to the temple for new instruction that would change Morgan's opinion about what she had become. Morgan refused to listen, facing the horizon and fighting the instinct to flee from the pre-dawn light. Her mind tried to comprehend the meaning of Arden's warning, that she was not ready to discover the truth. Even more frightening, as the sun emerged from the ocean, was Arden's sorrowful apology that neither of them could revoke the promises they had made to each other--a reminder of Morgan's promise to serve the goddess, and her promise to protect Morgan.

It will be dawn soon.

I can't remember the last time I watched the sun rise.

You don't have enough time. I was afraid you would not make it. If we hurry, there's still time to reach shelter.

It doesn't matter anymore.

I understand this was a difficult time for you, but I promised I would help you. And I will, but you have to work with me, Morgan.

You don't understand. It's already too late.

Don't be so pessimistic. Put this on.

I am not going to need it.

Morgan.

What? Don't tell me I need to explain it to you. You must have seen. You have to know it's already too late.

It's never too late.

No. I thought, maybe… I mean, why wouldn't you forgive me? It's your fault after all. What, you didn't think they wouldn't tell me, did you?

Morgan, if I had not intervened, they would have killed you outright.

They killed me anyway. Now, I am damned as well as dead.

Those men deserved to die.

This isn't about them.

I know what this was about.

Then you know why I have to do this.

I know you think that.

It is my purpose to destroy monsters when I find them. That is the purpose you gave me, the purpose I was raised and trained for.

This is not the time, Morgan. You have so much yet to learn.

They were right.

What?

You knew this was going to happen. You wanted this to happen.

My reasons are my own. I do not need to explain myself to you. Nor is it necessary for me to ask you to come. As a courtesy, I am not ordering you to return to the sanctuary.

What good is courtesy after you betrayed me?

You speak as if I have forsaken you.

You speak as if there is still salvation. You speak as if I had not forfeited my humanity.

You sound human enough.

For the moment.

What happened to you…

Stop it. There is nothing natural about what I did. I fed on them. I devoured their flesh. There wasn't anything human about me when I did that. I thrilled in it, I enjoyed it. I hunger to do it again. I can't even understand how I survived that. The thought, the memory… it's so obscene I want to tear myself to pieces. I can never allow it to happen again.

You can overcome these impulses. I told you…

Before, I could agree with you. When I was innocent, the hunger was terrifying. I could have fought it, you could have helped me. But now, there is no chance. I've tasted it. I know what I am, now. I have only one choice, now. I have to destroy it before it destroys me.

There are better ways.

I can't take the chance. It is taking everything I've got to just stand here! I don't know if I could do it tomorrow!

So.

So. Why are you even fighting me on this?

The promises binding us to each other are irrevocable.

If that is true, you have a strange notion of what it means to protect someone.

No stranger than your notion of what it means to serve.

Why are you making this harder than it already is?

That is not my intention. I only want to spare you unnecessary suffering.

Then let me end this, while I can. While I can still see the necessity.

Your integrity is admirable. I have to respect that.

Then you are done? You are not going to interfere?

I do not think you are ready for the truth, but I can not prevent you from confronting it. I just wish you had allowed me time to prepare you for it.

The truth? What are you talking about?

It is too late. Just remember, I tried to make it easy for you.

The sun is seconds away! How can you be cryptic at a time like this!?

There's no time like the present.

Just tell me what you mean!

And now, there is no time.

Arden!!!

And so it begins.

To her surprise, after overcoming the shock of waking up naked under a sunlit sky, Morgan discovered that she was back to normal. The sunlight did not stir up flames within her flesh. She was not slipping into a deathlike state when distracted or morose. She did not have to work herself up to remain lively. She tried to return to her former life, but as the day progressed, the hunger and thirst gradually resurfaced.

Morgan was surprised to awaken at mid-morning, the trauma of her resurrection shed instantly in the realization that she was truly alive. In the moment of realization, she spots evidence of the previous night and concluded that the memory of her ordeal was not some nightmare. Examining the weapon in her hands, she confronts the sacrifice she had made in growing horror. Twice she had cheated death, each time at an increasingly terrible price her conscience could not accept. Her goddess might have purged her body of contamination, but the corruption of her soul weighed even heavier upon her mortal mind. She was guilty of murder and cannibalism, for which crimes she ought to be condemned to death. As a paladin, she could not deny this, nor could she deny the temptation to ignore her conscience and embrace her resurrection. It was as hard to resist as immortality, and possibly even more damning. The only encouraging thought was that mortality could be sacrificed with far less pain and trauma than she had suffered at dawn. As she moved to spit herself on the brigand's sword, a maiden of the goddess entered to check on her and raised an alarm. In haste, she awkwardly thrust the blade through her heart, collapsing in shock as death clawed at her brain. The last thing she was aware of was the hand of her goddess prying her fingers from the hilt and taking hold to withdraw the blade. When she woke moments later, she could feel the wound knitting closed and vitality returning to her rapidly. Crying out against this healing, cursing herself inwardly for attempting such a thing in the midst of a temple of healing--among other things--the goddess retorts that no one could go through what Morgan had without their natural abilities becoming enhanced. In truth, Morgan had always had amazing powers of regeneration. They were what had allowed her to survive the dual corruption of were and vampire venom. She also knew she gained that ability as the result of a terrible childhood trauma. She should have known her power might increase in response to dying twice. What she did not know was if this evolution of her own power might grant as real an immortality as the powers that had been purged from her.

Will these nightmares never end?

…

It wasn't a dream.

Oh, you're awake. Let me fetch you a robe. Oh, Goddess! What are you doing!? Quick, someone! Help!

What's going on?

Send for a healer! She's impaled herself!

Goddess!

Oh, Morgan. Why are you doing this to yourself? [Book Break]

I need to die. Can't you see that?

I see nothing of the sort.

Why? You know what I did. Do you think you can resurrect me and my crimes will just vanish!?

No.

They why did you?

It was not I who healed you, Morgan.

What?

Think of the powers you gained as a child, Morgan. Did you imagine you could endure even greater trauma and not gain more potent powers?

You can't be…

Oh, I am quite serious.

I don't understand.

I know. Nor can I truly explain it to you.

This doesn't change anything.

I was afraid you would think that.

Is… is this what you were hoping for?

You want to know why I suggested it.

They told me I should have died. They never expected me to survive… but you did.

You want to know why you did survive. I meant to explain what happened to you, I was ready to show you the truth about what you became. Now we are well past that. Now there are no easy answers.

Tell me what you can, then.

You should already know part of it. There is a great deal of truth about the legends concerning the origin of weres and vampires. Because of the power you possessed, neither alone could have turned you. Your own gifts would have allowed you to fight off the infection. Acting together, your sires forced you to divide your resources in order to survive.

I did not survive, though.

No one does, technically. Death is part of the change for both weres and vampires. To put it properly, you were not destroyed in the process. Their venom is equally potent and mutually exclusive. A single drop of either venom would incapacitate human prey. It takes at least a pint of venom to turn a human into a full were or vampire. Now, a small dose of mixed venom is terribly lethal. The amount of venom that mixed in your blood should have produced enough poison to kill an entire nation. You should have been destroyed before the transformation process could even begin.

That can't be right. It took days for the bites to begin taking effect.

Why do you think that was so?

The venom did not mix in my blood?

That would protect you from the worst effect, but how do you think that could have been managed?

I don't know. My body heals itself automatically.

Regeneration. It was the one power common to vampires and weres, Morgan. A power you already possessed.

And that is why it has become so much stronger?

Just so.

Strong enough to purge the infections from my body?

Strong enough to do even more than that. Now do you understand why I asked you to wait?

But, it still doesn't change anything.

Morgan ends up confined to her quarters under a death watch after proving her determination to kill herself. It took very little time for her ingenuity at exploiting the fatal properties of any object she got her hands on to force her wardens to strip Morgan and her room entirely bare. Even naked, she was far from harmless, especially since the increase in her strength and power mandated her guards and chaperones be formidable men, lest she easily overpower her wardens and escape. Unable to subdue them, she resorted to seducing them, thinking to earn the displeasure of the goddess by violating their vows of celibacy. The poor men could hardly be blamed for succumbing to her advances, of course. Even a dead man would have found it difficult to refuse her, as she had already learned. Ironically, her rebellious indulgence also served to prove that there was so much to live for, making her intentions even more bitter. The problem remained figuring out a way to end her life and then finding an opportunity to execute each method she devised. She attempted to drown herself during her bath, and later wove the stuffing of her sleeping pallet into a rope to hang herself. The drowning did not work, and the rope took time to braid. By the time she was ready to hang herself, Arden's patience had been exhausted. The goddess intruded just as Morgan was preparing the rope, confronting Morgan for their least civil conversation to date. Even as Arden forgave Morgan's indiscretions and appealed to the girl to remember her obligations, Morgan slipped the noose around her neck and kicked away the stool she perched on. To Morgan's horror, not even breaking her neck and severing her spinal cord was sufficient, nor was suffocation any more effective than drowning. As soon as she lost consciousness, her body swiftly restored itself to perfect health aided by her telekinetic gift. Arden repeated her claim that Morgan was saving herself. Regardless of whatever guilt or blame she tried to damn herself with, deep down she clearly did not wish to die. Morgan retorts that she knew that, that the problem was her desire to live, no matter what the cost. Wanting to live did not change the fact that she deserved to die.

The immortals told Morgan that there was an assassin responsible for the mysterious deaths that had been occurring in the port and city, and they had reason to believe she might be targeted for assassination. They presented a strong case, revealing that everyone who had been slain had been involved or held interests or investments in the exploration of the ruins. People were being killed because of something they might have seen or discovered in the ruins. Morgan had been involved in exploring the ruins since she was a child in her first life, and her claim to remember virtually nothing of her ordeal implied she might be hiding valuable knowledge about the ruins or her experiences there. Morgan initially refused their offer of protection, but Roark and Logan were not the only ones to be dreaming up conspiracy theories, and Morgan was targeted by agents of the underworld for capture and interrogation. Following an intense couple of confrontations, Morgan returned to Roark and Logan, accepting their protection but demanding more of an explanation about what was going on. In response, Morgan was introduced to the underworld and told of the war that had been instigated by assassins, and their theory that there was something of great value to someone hidden in the ruins and this someone was willing to slaughter the entire population of Ruin's Deep in order to obtain it. They told her that it was imperative for Morgan to overcome her mental blocks in order for them to find out what that something was. For the first few days, they simply took Morgan to a number of different places, above and below, where they asked all sorts of odd questions. Had she been there before? Did she remember anything about anyone or anything in particular associated with each location? It alarmed her because she had dreams, nightmares set in those places, many of which she had never visited before in person. When she confided this, they asked her if there were other places she visited in her dreams that stood out in her mind

Morduin would assassinate individuals on one side setting up individuals on the other side to take the blame. It only took an occasional hit to keep escalating the feud. Unfortunately, Morduin did not count on Roark and Logan, a vampire and a were with a history of friendship and rivalry coming into power and working together to end the war. Suspicious of the assassinations that started and fueled the conflict, they set a trap for the presumed assassin and Morduin was barely able to escape. The encounter put Roark and Logan on Morgan's tail, and there was little the demon could do to warn or protect Morgan since she remained the dominant entity. Roark and Logan quickly identified Morgan working at the Sword & Sorcerer, but when the confronted her they detected no sign of recognition, animosity or apprehension from her at all. There was no question that she was the assassin, but the did not betray herself in the slightest. Conversely, Morgan was someone each of them had gotten to know, so when they unmasked the assassin their shock was enough to allow Morduin to escape, and when they confronted Morgan she seemed as innocent and ignorant as ever.

After their falling out, Logan realized it was a mistake to try and prevent Morgan from going after Morduin. Conscious of the debt he owed Morgan, he followed, determined to see that his fears for her did not come true. Thus, Morgan and Logan both played right into Morduin's hands. Morgan was led easily into a trap, captured to bait Logan. All Morduin had needed to do was catch her eye and lead her to his contentious allies. Logan and Roark both became entranced by Morgan, contemplating her conversion into a consort. Of course Morduin had demanded certain considerations for leading her to them, an unstated claim to her he was able to assert once his rivals were nudged into staking their claims to the ruins on a wager over her.

Morgan was descended from a long line of courtesans, although her mother had tried to rebel against that calling. She set out to become a priestess only to end up in a whirlwind romance with a soldier. Worse, the man she fell helplessly in love—and conceived a child—with was already married. To legitimize her daughter, she was forced to resume the mantle of a courtesan. Morgan ended up being her mother’s eldest, her father’s youngest—but the only child of both. Her father, a former mercenary turned officer in the Avon Guard, settled with his wife and her sons, opening the Orchard Inn in Avon Lea.

She had trained to become a maiden of the goddess. She had become the protégé of the paladin of the goddess, fixating on him as a father figure and object of desire.

On a night of the autumn festival, she was dragged to a party by her friends, and he arrived later, stalking a pair of rival immortals that had decided to crash the party. She spotted him, and being somewhat inebriated, threw herself at him—unwittingly bringing them both to the attention to the predators in their midst. Tempted in spite of himself, he responded enough to convince the rivals that she was his lover.

The paladin had only one hope of saving her life, and only at the cost of his own. Taking the ring that granted him immortality so long as he possessed it, he placed it on her finger. In passing on the ring, he was ripped from his own body as the ring lay claim to his soul, transferring his psyche into her body which she would now be forced to share with him or surrender to full possession. Worse, the ring sufficed only to allow her to survive the bites. It could not truly cure her of their effects.

As the result of her childhood adventures and misadventures, she acquired an unusual knowledge of the ruins of Aeslyn Tear—the underworld known more commonly as Ruins’ Deep, as well as skills more suited to a thief. Among those who lured her into crime, her unique mix of abilities suggested that she would make an exceptional spy or assassin. Only with great difficulty did Morgan elude the designs of her mentor in crime and the desires of her underworld patron.

The paladin had taken note of the pair of rival immortals the instant they had decided to crash the party. Morgan spotted him, and being somewhat aroused and intoxicated by the tainted drinks, threw herself at him in the hopes that it would discourage her admirers—unwittingly provoking the rage of the two predators. Tempted in spite of himself, the paladin responded enough to convince the rivals that there was something between them. In the ensuing confrontation, Morgan leapt to the paladin’s aid. An old nemesis, the two immortals knew better than to engage him in public, but their primary objective of depriving their enemy of a guide to their territory would also suffice to strike a blow at their nemesis. Morgan sensed that there was more going on, even that she was in over her head, but she would never have guessed that they would do what they did. For all her talent and skill, she was not ready to fight such foes, and she fell quickly and helplessly into their hands. In the heat of the moment, they bit her as one, releasing their venom simultaneously into her blood. Morgan nearly passed out from the erotic, euphoric wave that eclipsed the pain of their piercing bites. Their venom sent Morgan over the edge into bliss and disorientation. Too late, she realized what her assailants were, as the pleasure and poison left her helpless as they threw her back to the paladin. Alone, neither bite would have been a threat, but because of the antagonistic nature of vampires and weres, they became a lethal combination.

Angus saw only one chance of saving her life. At his prompting, she carefully reversed her ring. He was gambling that the transformation would boost the ring’s regenerative powers enough to allow her to survive the dual infection. She barely responded to the change before she blacked out. Angus carried Morgan home, pausing to compose a message to explain the situation, then a note to direct her to where the message was hidden, before he took her back to her quarters and put her to bed. He prodded her back to consciousness and prompted her to reverse the ring before retiring. There was nothing more he could do. Either the ring would be enough to fight off the infections, or she would slip gradually into death’s grip. The only possible cure lay where she had been bound. He wasted no time in beginning his descent into the ruins. Morgan woke to discover herself in her own bed, summoning a stray memory of a man talking to her as he carried her senseless body home. She rose briefly to fetch Angus’s note, only to lay it aside unread when she crawled back into the warmth of her bed The immediate evidence of the bites had been erased, but it did not take Morgan long to realize that she was sick from more than drugs and drink. Drained and disoriented, Morgan slipped in and out of consciousness, memories of the night before surfacing in fragmented dreams. Her wandering mind was easily distracted from the note Angus had left her.