Recapitulation and Reunion - 1 - Threshold

On any other night, the storm would have lulled me to sleep. The restless, rhythmic rattle of the rain was very soothing. I’d close my eyes and listen to it tapping on the window, drumming on the windward walls and roof of the manor, punctuated by the rumble and roar of thunder and the steady pounding of an unsecured storm shutter. But, that was not what kept me awake. I could have slept through worse, if I had not been too anxious to sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

“Hush,” I hissed, straining to hear.

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

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

The other girl sighed, and sat up to watch.

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

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

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

I had never heard them ring with such terror before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Correct.” The demon sighed and examined Ember’s hands, “This is a nice vessel. I wonder if the master will let me keep it.” Without warning, the demon reached out and caught me by the arm, just as I was about to dart away. “Hold on. You said this is your mother’s body. That makes you the offshoot. If what they say about you is true, I should examine you before I kill you. No point wasting a spare body, if it comes as part of the package, right?”

At the words “spare body” I gasped and clenched my eyes shut. The only advice I had heard about fighting demons had been not to look them in the eye. I intended to follow it.

“Smart. But not effective. I only need eye contact to take you in the heat of combat. Since I don’t even need to possess you for this…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No!

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

Sleep.

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

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

My trauma, of course, had not.

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

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

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

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

I shook my head and tried to think about something else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It still made me feel weird though.

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

Another familiar face walked by.

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

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

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

“If I survive the trials.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The note of alarm in my voice made Amber pause.

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

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

“I understand.”

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

That was welcome news.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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