

Erin edged silently through the dark room. Tagroth was close; the demon's essence filled her nostrils with an almost unbearable stench. There was a human presence somewhere nearby, as well, but mortals were of no concern to her. And then the room was lighted, and she found the demon before her, his demonic servants off to either side of the hall.

"War," the demon smiled.

"Hellspawn," she growled.

"I hope you've reconciled with Death. You won't be seeing him again," Tagroth said amiably.

"You've nerve," she said. "You've not found yet a champion to best me."

"Besting you is irrelevant. Justine?"

The sword hit her low in the back, and the chill of the blow startled her. And then she realized what blade had hit her. She hurled her sword at the demon as she began to vaporize, smiling as it hit. And then she was gone.

Joshua sat silently in front of the fire in his room in the hall. He was hollow, empty. Very few things could kill an avatar, much less destroy a soul, and there had been no soul to collect, nothing. Erin was, quite simply, gone.

And so he was alone, yet not alone. Sean joined him after a while.

"No one's died for three days, Josh," he said quietly.

"So?"

"Do you want them to think all of us are gone?"

"For all I care they could think Vivian took Michael's place as our leader and that Life has become of greater power than even God."

"You have to go back to work."

"Why? There's no real reason anyone needs to die."

"Because Michael said so," Sean said.

"Michael isn't God," Joshua protested.

"No, but he's got more direct contact with him than we do."

"There's no point in it, Sean. There never has been, never will be. There is no purpose for the existence of *anything*."

"There's no way out for you, Josh. Death cannot end himself."

"I don't have to. Erin is not dead. She's *gone*. *Gone*. No soul left to take."

Sean was quiet for a moment. "You should have said that earlier. That changes a lot."

The demonic underlings of Tagroth were advancing rapidly across the Colnarish Plain, but they were not leaving the usual swath of dead. No one was dying. For almost a week, no one did.

And then Death was back, seemingly without mercy towards the Allied Armies of Felodar. But Death was not truly without mercy; rather, Felodar was without War. They could not see him weeping as he watched the battles progress, the spirit he had loved so vacant from their efforts. They could not know – and they could not win until they had a champion again. If there was anything left to defeat the demon.

Joshua went back to the hall, forsaking the mortal realm, leaving the subconscious part of his mind to collect souls. The others were all there, Celeste and Harry, Concord and Discord; Vivian, Life; and Sean, Peace. He settled at one corner of the meeting table. They were all

being extremely careful with him; he wasn't sure why. They didn't know who had killed Erin; he couldn't practically end his existence. He'd gone back to work; humans were mortal again.

Celeste was speaking at first, but he didn't really pay her any attention until he comprehended that she was speaking *to* him.

"Joshua? Joshua! We need your cooperation," she said.

"With what?"

"If we don't come up with a new avatar of War in about three weeks, Tagroth will be knocking on our door."

Joshua sat a moment, arms folded across his chest, and watched her. "For the patroness of compassion, you can be quite cold."

"We're in crisis, Joshua. I'm not asking you to replace Erin. I'm asking you to find a champion who can save Felodar."

"Why me?"

"Because you knew Erin better than anyone," Sean said. "So you know what kind of capabilities a new champion will need."

"Pick a new one just so Tagroth can destroy her? Do you know how hard it is to find a good woman warrior?"

"Doesn't have to be a woman," Harry said.

"No man can match a woman's fury, Harry," Joshua said. "Though I guess you wouldn't have that problem."

"Nope."

Joshua sighed. "Three weeks, you say?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to look into *what* destroyed her? Tagroth doesn't have that kind of power. It has to be an artifact. The question is which one, and who has it."

"We can, but that's generally done by War," Celeste said. "We're not go-out-in-the-world types."

Joshua ran his hands back through his hair. "Yeah. Well. They'll reach the Gorree'n Heights this evening. We'll see what I have to work with when they're entrenched. They have to ford the Colnar to get there, and this afternoon is likely going to be busy."

"This *afternoon* will be busy?" Vivian snorted. "I was working the volume of both our jobs for a week, damn it."

"Tsk, tsk. The housewives would reel if they could hear the patroness they entrust their children to," Harry said.

"Do you know how many 'miracles' I had to dole out?" Vivian said. "I'm going to be swamped with requests for months!"

"Oh, good. They'll stop asking me to get them out of this war," Joshua said. His eyes briefly faded to black. "I ought to go. It's getting thick, and I can't handle this much without being there."

"All right," Celeste said. "But keep your eyes open. We need to be six again."

Morgan frowned. The generals were pulling back quickly, almost too quickly. She had been put in charge of the rearguard, and they were taking unusually high losses. She couldn't understand it; they were just... off. As though their luck had run out. Except for her; she was still at her peak.

Her cavalry's horses were being hit hard, but she kept them at a controlled, steady

withdrawal. If they bolted, the entire army would fold. The loss of her cavalry wouldn't hit the army badly enough that they wouldn't recover.

So the dash ahead, stop, turn, and hold the line for five minutes continued.

They reached the ford at dusk. The losses had been heavy; her cavalry was down to about a score, and the infantry had barely four times that left.

"Go," she barked at the infantry captain.

"But—"

"Cavalry are useless in trenches. Go!" Her men had formed up across the width of the ford; the demonic forces had just arrived at the top of the ridge overlooking them. The infantry turned and ran. Morgan glanced up the line on either side of her. None were uninjured; the tired apathy of the past year's war sat heavily on them all.

The forces at the top of the hill were demonic servants, the lesser demons who were Tagroth's strongest troops. Morgan had lost four horses to them already; that she was still alive shocked most of the generals. She was mostly an atheist; war did not fit into what she had once understood to be God. The sheer existence of the demons, though, had proven that there was at least a Hell. If there were a God, he had no place in war.

The charge was fierce, though they actually managed to hold for the first few minutes. The demonic forces surrounded them, though, pushed them into the shallows of the Colnar. The screams of dying horses rent the air; Morgan suddenly locked eyes with Velnor, Tagroth's lieutenant, and a full demon in his own right. The ground between them was open; Morgan put her spurs to her horse's flanks. Even if it killed her, the loss of Velnor would hurt Tagroth far more than their little stand at the Colnar ford.

The demon laughed as she bore down upon him; that annoyed her. She was purely in tune with herself, and she had little doubt that a demon would die just as normally as one of its human minions.

"Foolish mortal," he laughed as she drew up opposite him. "War is dead. You cannot win."

"Anything is possible that I make possible by mine own hand," Morgan growled. She raised her blade. The demon obligingly drew his own, and the battle was enjoined.

The last of her cavalry had fallen; the demonic forces were entering the ford. Then the first of the catapults cut loose, scattering the ford with horse-sized boulders. Morgan was fighting a duel atop the ridge; the fallout missed her. Velnor was fighting with both sword and claws; finally he threw aside his blade and fell to his instinctive weapons, the sickle-like claws that extended from either hand.

He caught her off her horse, the claws digging into her back and stomach as he lifted her in one hand.

"Foolish mortal," he hissed again.

"Life, and death, mean nothing to me," Morgan replied, then drove her blade up through his throat and into his brain.

Morgan had been wrong. Demons did not die normally. They exploded.

Some part of her was conscious as she landed about halfway up one of the hills on the far side of the river. She was looking out over the plain; the dead and dying were strewn in a visible path to the ford. And over the plain, a misty apparition flitted, greeting the misty apparitions that were rising from the shattered bodies of the Allied Armies' martyrs. Seemingly everywhere at once, and yet one and the same. Morgan waited, watching what she knew must

be Death, waited to see if he would approach her.

Velnor was dead. She smiled. If she accomplished nothing else, she had at least caused the demon that much trouble. Not that it mattered. Her face faded back to apathy. Nothing truly mattered, but that Tagroth be defeated. In five thousand years, they would all be forgotten, so long as the demon was defeated now. The individual human existence meant nothing, really.

Suddenly, a greenish light was before her. A misty figure, but not Death. A wash of warmth, a brief whisper of a breeze, the faint scent of spring, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Joshua went back to the hall that night. Despite the immortality of avatars, they had never lost their human habits. He settled onto his bed tiredly. The day had been trying, but still... he smiled. Velnor was dead. Tagroth's younger brother was most certainly a welcome response to Erin's loss. Not quiet enough, but a welcome beginning.

"Josh?" Vivian was suddenly in his doorway.

"Hm?"

"Have you ever had someone be... aware of you?"

"Aware? What do you mean?"

"There was one today whose time had not yet come... and I could feel her watching me."

His brow furrowed. "I don't recall there being any. But they're always dead when I meet them, so it's not often I see anyone on the borderline."

"Oh."

"They didn't lose as many as I expected them to today."

Vivian shrugged. "I don't know anything of it, Josh."

"Yeah." He sighed.

"Go browse tomorrow. See what your options are."

Morgan walked into the cavalry encampment around noon the next day. Her clothes were mostly in shreds, the angry red scars from the demon's claws plainly visible. Most of the surviving men just stared. It took the cavalry generals a moment to comprehend her arrival.

"Captain Hawke? Why aren't you dead?" one finally stammered.

She just shrugged. "I don't know, sir. I was waiting for it. It didn't happen."

"Velnor..."

Her face remained its normal mask of tired apathy. The generals were silent for a moment.

"Go find the quartermaster and get some new clothes," the senior general said finally.

"You'll be reassigned tomorrow morning."

Morgan nodded slightly, then turned to go.

"Morgan?" The voice came from off to her right; she turned her head tiredly to pick out its source. A brown-robed man was hurrying in her direction. She started towards him, and he joined her as she sought out the quartermaster.

"What's wrong, Dan?" she asked as she dug through the stacks of clothing for something that might fit.

"I'm just glad to see you alive. The angel brought me news last night, and you are usually the one who helps me solve his riddles."

"Heh. Maybe if you weren't drunk when he showed up, they wouldn't be riddles."

He frowned. "I've been clean for two months. You, of all people, should know that."

“Two months? Really?” her face lightened slightly. “Finally, some good news.” She changed clothes in his tent while he stood guard outside, letting him in when she had finished.

“The hand of the damned has destroyed the soul of war,” Dan said. Morgan was silent for a moment, leaning back against the folded blanket on his pallet.

“Velnor said something about War being dead,” Morgan said finally.

“What?”

“What?”

“The avatars can’t be killed,” Dan said. “Only... destroyed.”

Morgan didn’t answer. Dan’s brows furrowed.

“No statement of disbelief?” he asked. “You’ve always made it clear to me that you think I’m a madman and that you don’t believe any of my religion.”

Morgan shrugged slightly. “I was raised by monks until I was twelve, Dan. When the knights claimed me, and I met war and death, God died for me.”

“But you still know the history of every religious artifact...”

“I don’t know which Hell is worse – war, or the rote memorization,” she said, laying back and closing her eyes.

“Probably war,” Dan said. “Memorization won’t kill you.”

“I was waiting for it last night,” she said quietly. “The hand of the damned is the Sword of the Damned. It’s one of about a half a dozen soul collecting artifacts in the world. But destruction of it should release all the souls it’s collected and let them go wherever they should.”

“If War is dead, I guess that would explain the deathless week,” Dan said.

“How’s that?”

“Death and War were lovers. The same goes for Concord and Discord, and Life and Peace.”

“If Tagroth has the Sword of the Damned, why hasn’t he vanquished us? It doesn’t have to be a killing blow to take the soul.”

“He may be aiming higher,” Dan said. “The rest of the avatars, or the angel.”

Morgan was quiet for a while. “I’ve got enough seeking magic I should be able to detect an object that powerful.”

“Be careful, hm?”

Morgan nodded slightly, then stood and left the prophet alone.

Morgan had never excelled in magic, though the army’s mages told her it was strongly within her. The monks had stunted her training, and by the time she was trained for war, she was too old to fluidly learn. Still, she had picked up enough to pick out enchanted items, to see in the blackest night, to start a campfire in the rain.

She walked through the encampments, head down, thinking on the apparitions she had seen the night before. Were they just the products of her pain? Or did the avatars truly exist? If the avatars, then the angels? If the angels, then God? She stopped sharply. The sword was within fifty yards... She blinked, looking around briefly. She was in the middle of the general’s encampment.

“Is something wrong, Captain?”

Morgan straightened slightly. “No, ma’am. I suppose I’m still somewhat out of it from last night’s encounter with Velnor.”

General Justine D’Ambrose stopped in front of her. “The cavalry is back that way,” she

said flatly, pointing back down the slope.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

Morgan turned and left. D’Ambrose had been leading the retreat. *Why* they were retreating was beyond the cavalry captain’s comprehension; they had been close to routing the demonic hordes. And then they were retreating a deathless weak...

She stopped outside Dan’s tent. Did the avatars truly exist? The tent flap opened suddenly, and she went inside.

“It’s here,” she said quietly to Dan. “In the command camp somewhere. I couldn’t pin it down.”

“*Here?*” Dan said. “But that would mean—”

“Yeah. It’s not implausible. The demon is glib with promises.”

He put an arm around her. “And you?”

“I was ready to die last night. Velnor is dead. If they’ll hold these heights...”

“Few left have your confidence.”

“Am I the only one who believes that my accomplishments are my own and not the acts of an invisible being?”

“I don’t know,” Dan said. “But maybe you’re the only one for whom it’s true.”

Morgan sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. Dan had always been her refuge when the empty meaninglessness of war started to get to her.

“He wants you, doesn’t he?” Morgan said quietly.

“Perhaps, but I’m easily replaced,” Dan said.

“Not for me,” Morgan replied.

He pulled her a little closer. “Sleep. You’ll have a new assignment in the morning, and your surviving the confrontation with Velnor has made the generals jealous.”

Her eyelids drooped, and her breathing slowly slowed.

“The lady of green light bade me live,” she breathed finally. She was mostly asleep; Dan let her be, despite his concern. One didn’t normally *see* avatars. Hell, he rarely even glimpsed the angel that gave him messages. To have *seen* Vivian... but she didn’t believe, did she?

The afternoon was warm; there was little fighting that day. Dan guessed Velnor’s death had come as a great surprise to Tagroth. But if Morgan was capable of that on her *own*, what could she do when War was in existence?

Towards evening there was a knock on the tent post, and Dan eased free of the sleeping woman and went outside. General D’Ambrose was waiting with a man Dan did not recognize.

“I’ve been told Velnor’s killer is here,” the man said.

“She’s sleeping,” Dan said. “She had a difficult night.”

“Doesn’t keep you from taking what you want, hm?” the General said. Dan frowned.

“I’ve been celibate my entire life,” Dan said. “So if you’re implying that I want something physical from her, you’re mistaken. Why don’t you concern yourself more with the fact that the Sword of the Damned has surfaced in camp somewhere, according to the angel, and not with the mental exhaustion of a cavalry captain whose entire command is strewn from here to the Durgar Gorge?”

The General frowned. “You’ve become pert, prophet.”

“War is dead,” Dan said. “Now is not the time to doubt ourselves.”

“I’d like to speak to her when she wakes,” the man said.

“You’re welcome to wait here,” Dan shrugged.

“I have things to attend to,” the General said edgily. “I cannot wait around for her.”

“I can take care of myself, Justine,” the man said quietly.

“All right,” she replied after a moment. “Come see me before you leave.” She turned and stalked off.

“My name is Joshua,” he introduced himself quietly to Dan.

“Dan.” He opened the tent flap. After a moment Joshua ducked and went inside.

Morgan was asleep when he entered, but her eyes flicked open when he sat down opposite her. The recognition in her eyes startled him slightly; he would have to question Vivian more closely when he went back.

“Morgan, this is Joshua. Joshua, Captain Morgan Hawke,” Dan introduced them upon seeing she was awake. His brow furrowed at her expression. “Have you met?”

Morgan shook her head slightly. Dan sat back down next to her, and she leaned tiredly against him.

“I understand you killed Velnor,” Joshua said to Morgan.

“Someone had to,” she said quietly. Was she truly seeing Death incarnate, or was the resemblance purely coincidence? “I don’t recognize you as having been here long. Why are you here?”

A shadow fell across his face. “I’ve been here the entire war. My job just isn’t a highly visible one.”

She let the vagueness pass for the moment. “So why did you come seek me out?”

“Someone dear to me died through Tagroth’s influence a couple weeks ago, and I wanted to thank you for so fittingly bringing him some kind of pain.”

“Had I the men with the nerve to hold off his guard, I’d go after Tagroth himself, just to get this damned war over with. They call it a good war, because we’re fighting evil, and a holy war, because we’re fighting the spawn of Hell. But war is neither good nor holy, only necessary to keep humanity free of this demon’s grasp.”

“And if fighting Tagroth kills you?”

“I expected to die fighting Velnor. My life has very little meaning left, beyond ending the demon’s existence.”

“Why?”

“In a hundred years, in a thousand, all that anyone is going to remember of this war is that we were saved from a demon’s greed – assuming we are. They will have forgotten the men who lie rotting on the Colnarish plain, the genius of the feint that had the demons so close to rout, the danger that our failure will destroy mankind.” She sighed slightly, settling back.

“Given a good horse, I could probably get through to Tagroth tonight,” she said, looking up at Dan. “Do you think you could...”

“No,” he said firmly. “If you’re caught going out, it’ll be more pointless than if you’re caught across the lines.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“Does the death of War not concern you?” Joshua asked. Morgan didn’t answer, so Dan did for her.

“She’s a rather devout atheist,” he said quietly.

“Ah.”

“Gads, you all treat it like it’s wrong or something,” she muttered.

“Better an atheist than an opponent of God, I suppose,” Joshua said. She was growing visibly tired again; he stood. “Can I speak to you a moment?” he asked Dan. A nod, and the

two men stepped out of the tent.

“What happened to make her so bitter?” Joshua asked. Dan shrugged slightly.

“Beyond seeing most of the people she knew killed? The demons held her prisoner for four days about six months ago. She’s never really recovered from that.”

Joshua sighed slightly. “And yet she seems to be the only one who’s continued normally since War died.”

“Because she never believed that her actions were anything but her own.”

“They may not have been.” He paused. “I may be back to see her again. Will that be a problem?”

“I shouldn’t think so,” Dan said. Joshua nodded.

“All right.”

Justine wasn’t there when he went back, so he left her a note and went back to the hall.

“What’s wrong?” Vivian asked upon finding him.

“The one who could see you... What was she like?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because if she could see you, you’re probably not the only one she saw.”

“Oh. She had wounds from demon claws, burns, impact fractures.”

He paused a moment. “Do you identify everyone by their wounds?”

“Hm? Not usually, but they were unique last night.”

“Consistent with Velnor’s death?”

“I suppose they could be,” she said after a moment’s thought.

“An atheist?”

“I...” Vivian closed her eyes, digging through her mind’s subconscious store of information. She opened them when she’d found what she sought. “That *is* odd.”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you ask?”

“She recognized me, I think.”

“How? I thought you hadn’t seen her.”

“I was all over last night. If she was aware of us at some point, she could have picked me out easily.”

“So how did the hunting go?”

Joshua shrugged. “There’s only two women left in the entire army who aren’t mages or nurses. The one who killed Velnor, and a general.”

“A general?” Vivian’s brows rose. “That takes much skill, no?”

“Yeah.”

“You like one of them,” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“Celeste can’t keep her paws out of it,” Joshua said. “I need at least a week to delve their capabilities. In some ways her involvement is tolerable; otherwise, I’d have a Hell of an eternity of loneliness.”

“Perhaps.”

Morgan was given a division of the reorganized cavalry under the youngest general of the cavalry command. Still, there was nothing for them to do; the fighting had stalemated for the moment, the infantry penned on the heights, the cavalry behind, and there wasn’t even speculation of a maneuver involving the horsed soldiers on the table.

Joshua’s visitations over the next week puzzled her. He made no advances, for she was

not open to them. But he asked her so much about tactics and strategy... And it seemed he was doing the same with General D'Ambrose.

One evening after he'd visited, she went back to Dan's tent troubled. The prophet had been a monk most of his life, and he'd served to counsel probably thousands. But theology had always been his passion.

"Dan, what would the avatars do if one of their number were destroyed?" she asked. He glanced at her, worried. She had never brought up religion first in the months he had known her.

"I suppose they would replace her."

"Her?"

"War was a woman."

"Replace how?"

"Choose a new human to instill with the powers of an avatar."

"And who would do the choosing?"

"This is an unusual line of questioning for you."

She sighed. "Have you ever seen Death?"

"Me? No." He paused. "You have?"

"I don't know."

"Has something happened?"

"I don't know."

"How is your command?"

"Restless. My being in charge probably doesn't help."

"Why?"

"They *know* I killed Velnor. And they doubt the generals' decision to dig in. They want to fight. Cavalry are useless in a siege."

"And the Sword of the Damned?"

"No one's allowed in the command camp now. Whoever has it is being careful to cover their tracks."

"You don't say 'he.'"

"I don't trust D'Ambrose," Morgan shrugged. "There was no reason for us to retreat. But she may just have other motives. She's been open in her conquest of the other generals."

Dan sat down next to her. "You're thinking a lot more than you used to about this, hm?"

"Maybe." She leaned against him. "We shouldn't be giving them respite."

"Even if we needed it?"

She growled softly. "Tagroth needs to die. The demons cannot be allowed to win this."

"You still seem confident that we can win."

"Demons can die. Why do avatars have to be destroyed?"

"Demons can be killed in the mortal realm. So can avatars. It's just difficult. In the mortal realm, anything less than God can die." He paused. "You seem poised to recant your atheism."

"Well, when faced with proof... I don't know. I'm not completely sure what I saw."

"You think you saw what?"

She glanced at him. "Death collecting souls."

Dan swallowed, but with difficulty, for his mouth had suddenly gone dry. "That's all?"

"And the shimmering green lady."

"Life," Dan said. Morgan was quiet for a while. He stroked her hair back once, and

she sighed heavily.

“Why did I see them?”

“I don’t know,” Dan said. “I wish I did. I’ve never heard of anyone seeing the avatars without them actually being visited personally.”

“For a reason.”

“Yes.”

“And not just being able to see them.”

“Exactly.”

She stood, pacing. Dan sat back and wait a while before speaking again.

“Why does this one man so fascinate you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“A month ago you’d have ignored him.”

*He looks like Death*, Morgan thought. But she couldn’t say it. She just shrugged.

“I’m going to assume you have no interest in him.”

“I take interest in no one,” Morgan said quietly. Dan nodded slightly.

“Then why don’t you just ignore him?”

“I *can*’t.”

Dan folded his arms across his chest. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say he *did* interest you.”

Morgan frowned. “We’re in the middle of a war, Dan.”

“I know, I know. And I know that men hold no interest for you right now, at least not consciously. But you’re young, Morgan.”

“I don’t need distractions like that right now, hm?”

“So it’s crossed your mind?”

“I can’t truly rule out everything.”

He watched her as she paced. “So don’t be so cold towards him, and see what happens.”

“Why?”

“Hm?”

“Why bother? Just increase the pain in the world when I get myself killed.”

“That hasn’t kept you from me.”

She glanced at him, then sighed. “There are times I wish it had.”

“Sit, hm?”

“I’m too wound up. I want to be fighting. The longer we sit here, the more Tagroth can rebuild. And if he manages to rebuild enough, then what? We can’t possibly match his recruitment. Felodar only has so many who can fight.”

Dan was quiet for a long while before he spoke again. “It is said,” he began, “that every land has its own set of avatars under a different one of God’s angels. Even were one region to fall, the others would still have some form of defense.”

“Felodar’s conquest is *not* an option, even if I have to fight the rest of the war alone with a toothpick.”

“My, but isn’t someone stubborn tonight.”

Morgan turned to find D’Ambrose in the opening of the tent.

“Good even, General,” she said coolly.

“If you could call it that,” the General replied. Her eyes shifted to Dan. “Inciting revolt, prophet?”

“I’m a channel, not a source,” Dan said. “I do not start anything, merely pass on what I

have been given.”

“Considering breaking ranks again, Captain?” the General asked.

“Not at the moment.”

“The stranger seeks you out often.”

“What of it?”

“Is he a spy?”

“I doubt it. He’s too open to be working against us.”

D’Ambrose was silent for several moments. “He speaks often of you.”

“Odd. All he ever mentions to me are hypothetical battles and random theories of tactics.”

“He seems to admire your strategy.”

“I studied under knights,” Morgan shrugged.

“But did not join them?”

“Atheists have no place in religious orders.”

“Ah.” The general relaxed somewhat. “I see. Good even, Captain.” She turned and left.

Morgan sat back down next to Dan. She was still agitated, uncertain.

“Well?” Dan asked.

“Now I’m really curious who he actually is. If my atheism cheers *her* up...”

“Well, now. If you believe, you’re not an atheist.”

“Enh. I haven’t decided yet.” She was quiet for a moment. “They’ll move in the morning.”

“Who will?”

“Tagroth’s forces. I’ve a feeling he’s gotten a new batch of his winged spawn.”

“Why do you say that?”

Morgan shrugged. “One of those gut instincts.”

Dan frowned. “Be ready to move tomorrow, then. If the infantry folds...”

“Hell, I’m not letting them retreat off these hills. They *will* hold.”

“You won’t *let* them?” Dan said.

“I’ll drive them back at sword point if I have to.”

“You’re thinking grandiosely tonight.”

“I don’t want to see what happens when they hit the Lodar valley.”

Dan was silent for a moment. “All right. But you can’t simply carry this entire army by sheer force of will.”

“We’ll see.”

Dan reached up and put out the lamp, knowing she wouldn’t sleep much that night.

Dan was alone when the camp around him erupted in furor. He collapsed his tent and packed his mule as the infantry was pulling out around him. And then the entirety of the Felodarian cavalry charged through them. Dan sighed. He didn’t doubt Morgan was somewhere among them. The infantry slowed as the cavalry passed through them, then turned to follow.

Joshua was suddenly beside Dan as the two forces collided on the other side of the ridge. The scream of horses drifted back to them, and he noted the worry in Dan’s eyes.

“Where are they?”

“Who?” Dan asked.

“Morgan, Justine.”

“I’d assume Morgan is over the ridge. She didn’t intend to let the demons get across it. I don’t know where the general is.”

Joshua frowned. “All right. Stay here and keep your head down. Don’t want Michael to have to wait for a new prophet to get credit.”

Joshua left, and Dan stood a moment, somewhat startled. He had never told anyone *which* angel he got his visions from. How did Joshua know? And who *was* he? Morgan’s concern became somewhat clearer to him.

Joshua found Justine directing the retreat of the troops who still were, so he moved to the top of the ridge, where he could see the battle. The cavalry had pushed the fighting to the riverbanks, and he picked Morgan out after a bit; most of the cavalry had unhorsed, letting the horses flee to safety, but she was still mounted, bareback, unarmored, her hair loosely pulled back. She was leading the push to force the demons back across the river.

He stood a moment, concerned. Erin was dead. Why was she having success? He put part of his mind within her own, seeking understanding, and was startled by her awareness of his presence – and that she ignored it. She was aware, furthermore, of that part of him that was flitting around, guiding souls to the immortal realms – and she was ignoring that, as well. She was acutely aware of herself and of the currents in the fighting around her – And then Tagroth appeared on the ridge.

Joshua swallowed hard. Even he, an avatar, Death incarnate for Felodar, trembled at the sight of a full demon. The demonic forces pulled back across the river, behind him, and the human forces stopped on the river’s edge. Morgan settled opposite Tagroth, sword across her thighs, horse restless. Tagroth was a greater demon, one of the most powerful beings to come out of Hell and into the mortal realms. Humans were a full two tiers below his power, yet this one human female was causing him problems.

“Who are you, mortal?” he demanded. He glided down to the river’s edge opposite her. “How do you defy War’s death?”

“They say an atheist has no soul,” Morgan replied dryly. “I am my own master.”

“Oh, so you’re not here for God.”

“I’m here solely to stop you,” Morgan said. She urged her horse a step forward, into the shallows of the river. Joshua blinked. She was *challenging* Tagroth? Was she *mad*? No mortal could kill a greater demon – could they? She sensed his doubt; he, her resolve. She truly did not care if she survived the fight, so long as Tagroth didn’t.

And then he found her memories of her capture – the pain, the shame, the anger. Life truly meant nothing to her.

Tagroth hadn’t moved. He was aware of Death’s presence, but uncertain *why* he was there. And the woman before him... She truly seemed to be free of the avatars’ touch. And that made her far more dangerous to him than an angel of equal strength to his own. A mortal untouched by divine will...

“Our time has not yet come,” Tagroth growled, then turned and retreated over the ridge, and the demon horde followed, to being laying earthworks. Morgan drew back cautiously, then pulled the army back to the heights, starting the reorganization of the fortification that had been partly completed in the previous week. Joshua withdrew from her mind, the agitation and anger too much for him to handle. He left her alone; she had much work to do.

That evening he finally went looking for Justine. He needed to tell her he would not be

seeing her again; it was fairly clear which of the two women had the kind of personality that would make an avatar of war.

She wasn't in her tent. He couldn't find her in the entirety of camp. He frowned. Tracking people had been Erin's job, but the technicalities of it weren't hard...

Tracking her soul brought Joshua to a realm he had never actually visited, and after a moment, he realized that he had translocated to Hell. He blinked once in disbelief. Why – And then Tagroth was before him.

“Curious today, aren't we, Death? Seeking War's killer, or me?”

“Ah – whatever.” He returned to the mortal realm before the demon could do anything. Seeking War's killer? Justine? But – The sword. Where *was* the sword?

Tagroth returned to his bed, and the woman in it.

“Kill her,” he growled. “She's becoming dangerous to us, especially if Death has taken an interest in her.”

“Of course, love.”

Morgan was sleeping restlessly, Dan awake beside her. She had stared down a demon, or so it seemed. Michael had visited him during the day, but for some reason it seemed it was more out of concern for him than the vague urging to find the sword, and quickly. But with the disarray of the camp, he'd been unable to.

And suddenly Joshua was there.

“Do you know where the sword is?” he asked, evidently pressed for time.

“No. Why?”

“D'Ambrose sleeps with the demon,” Joshua said quietly. Morgan didn't open her eyes, but she answered before Dan could.

“Is that why she's made his progression so easy?” she said. “The generals are already openly perturbed about today; I'll go see if she has it tomorrow, then. Before they decide to arrest me for insubordination.”

“But you saved the line,” Joshua said. “No?”

“The generals seem convinced that the high priests in the temple in Lodar can banish Tagroth back to Hell. I don't want to gamble on a ritual that, according to the monks who raised me, is based solely on myth and doesn't actually work.”

“Monks raised an atheist?” he said. Morgan didn't answer, so after a moment, Dan stood and left them alone. “Do you truly believe what you told him today?”

“About what? I believe that I am my own master. Whether or not I have a soul is mostly irrelevant to me at this point. Eternity holds little promise for me.”

“Do you truly hold yourself an atheist?”

She sighed. “You would ask that. I did at one time. But I know who you are, and in admitting that, I cannot deny the existence of other beings.”

“And you dislike the admission.”

“It's a change that will take me a while to get used to.”

He nodded slightly. “It's been almost three weeks since War died. The army should have collapsed by now.”

“It's something I will not allow.”

“Your sense of duty is truly that great, or your hatred of Tagroth?”

“Neither. I simply would not see Felodar committed to a fate worse than death – the overlordship of a demon.”

“So for the benefit of mankind...”

She shrugged slightly. “Hell is welcome to stay in Hell.”

Joshua was agitated when he returned to the hall that evening. There was much commotion amongst the other four, but he bypassed the main room and went to his study. He had been Death long enough that he was able to perform most of his duties subconsciously, so he could actually make use of the room accorded him.

Why did this bitter, apathetic woman draw him so? How much was Celeste interfering, and how much was his own callousness to death taking him beyond Erin? He was brooding in front of the fireplace when Michael entered.

“You’re taking this rather difficultly,” the angel said.

“Hm?”

“Do you really expect that any woman suit to War wouldn’t be suited to you as well?” He shrugged slightly. “I don’t know if that’s what’s bothering me.”

“That she knows?”

“Maybe that is.”

“And your interest in her has her just as perplexed.”

“Why?”

“Why would Death come to the mortal realm and seek out a living human woman?”

“Why can she see us?”

Michael shrugged. “I’m not sure. It may have to do with her self-control.”

“How’s that?”

“She’s capable of defying all wills but her own. It’s kind of weird, but she somehow manages it.”

“How high up does that carry?”

“Well, no one can defy God. If He bothers to get involved.”

Joshua turned back to the fire. “It was never truly my choice, was it?”

“Well... I suppose not. But it helps if you’re reconciled to it first.”

Joshua nodded slightly. “I’ll adapt. But will she?”

The angel just shrugged again. “I suppose we’ll see.”

Morgan was up early. Justine would likely push to have her arrested if Tagroth was concerned enough about her that he would not face her. Dan was still asleep; hopefully the task at hand would be over before he was awake.

The general’s camp was eerily quiet; the demons would not attack that morning. She was homing in on the sword, fairly certain that she would find D’Ambrose with it. The General was waiting for her.

“Well, well. The pesky, insubordinate bitch has stuck her nose too deeply into matters she should have left alone,” the General said as Morgan backed out of her tent, blade drawn.

“And is Tagroth so afraid of a mortal that he’ll have you do his dirty work?” Morgan growled. The Sword of the Damned glowed a menacing red in D’Ambrose’s grip. “Have to have a soul to lose it, hm?”

“You’re the one being courted by Death, not I,” the General returned.

“And did you discern that on your own, or did your lover have to tell you?” Morgan said smoothly. “Life and death mean nothing to me. You should know that by now.”

A crowd was starting to gather, though they had not yet exchanged blows. Justine

moved first, and Morgan dodged. Then the fight began in earnest. Both had been given extensive sword training in their younger years, and in the process of moving up through the ranks, both had vastly improved on everything they had learned. Morgan could feel Joshua somewhere nearby, and the disposition of the army was as tangible to her as the sword in her hand. There was a surging of confidence that had been lacking in the past several weeks, and yet they were held in check by the hostilities of the generals towards her.

The sensations her mind was processing during the fight were mostly subconscious. She was, as she usually was, acutely aware of the fight at hand. The other generals were threatening to interfere, but Justine was barking negations to their orders for men to intercede.

And then D'Ambrose's lieutenants dragged Dan to the edge of the circle and threw him into the fight between them. Morgan moved instinctively, pulling Dan back as Justine struck, briefly turning her back to the general. The blade found its mark in her lower back, and Morgan turned quickly, thrusting her blade through the plate armor over D'Ambrose's stomach. The general blinked in disbelief as the captain wrenched the sword from her hand instead of vaporizing.

"You have to have a soul to lose it," Morgan repeated quietly. She snapped the blade across her knee as the general collapsed, and the resulting explosion as the Sword of the Damned was shattered knocked everyone in the vicinity to the ground.

Dan was beside Morgan suddenly as she sheathed her blade. She didn't try to stand yet, knowing the wound in her lower back was probably fatal. The crowd was staying back out of distrust of the explosion.

"You didn't have to do that," he said quietly.

"I've more confidence in them replacing me than you," she replied. An unearthly howl arose from the demon encampment about two miles off. "Oh, someone just comprehended what happened."

"How bad is it?"

"Not as bad as Velnor's claws, I suppose, but it's still likely to kill me, hm?"

Two of the general staff's guards arrived and pulled her to her feet, leaving Dan alone in the dissipating circle of spectators. A burial detail came for the general's body after a few minutes. The brown-robed monk sat, his eyes welling with tears. Is this why Michael had come seen him the day before? Was this the reason for Morgan's visions of Death, of her apparent abandonment of her atheism?

And yet the Sword of the Damned had not taken her. Did she truly have no soul? Or was it that she was so in tune with herself that her soul could not so easily be separated from her physical being?

A nagging in the back of his mind drew him to follow the drifting soldiers towards the ad hoc trial that was being set up. One of the generals had just finished yelling at her; her face was tired, her complexion blanched by the wound in her back.

"You directly disobeyed an order to keep your men at the rear and got over a thousand men killed yesterday. What have you to say to that?" one finally said.

"Discouraging victory leads only to defeat. The demons are godless, and will likely be unaffected by any religious act. And there can be no war without death. Death without War, yes, but not the other way around. If you wish to save Felodar, you must be willing to sacrifice the lives of men willing to die that their families might live on."

Dan sank to his knees. She was dying. It was in her eyes. And she didn't care. The generals continued to throw their accusations at her, but she knew that her responses were being

ignored. Though the currents in the army supported her, they feared the generals' power to sway kings' opinions and potentially have them killed for insurrection.

As the generals pronounced their verdict – death at dawn the next day – a blinding, scintillating light appeared in front of Morgan. The opalescent beams lit up the tent; at first Dan thought only he could see the winged figure in its center, but then he realized that Morgan had met the angel's gaze. A sudden gust of wind blew the tent off its framework, exposing them to the drizzling rain that had begun.

The angel reached forward, placing a hand on Morgan's head, and an ethereal mist rose from the ground amongst the surrounding crowd. It spiraled inward, seemingly caressing the men as it moved, slowly at first, and then suddenly converging upon Morgan. It hit her like an arrow in the back, a shock of sudden pain, but her face relaxed as she faded into the mist, or it faded into her, and briefly she was but mist. And then she was back, collapsed upon her side, and the light was gone.

Dan blinked in sudden realization. Morgan had guessed correctly – the avatars were seeking to replace War. And she, the ostensibly soulless atheist, had been chosen. There was no sign of Joshua as the crowd slowly recovered. The wound in her back was gone now; with much prodding from the generals, Morgan was carried off to a tent to be confined until morning.

Joshua walked silently through the camp late that night. Tagroth had held off that day; likely he would continue to until after the generals had tried to execute Morgan. He stopped briefly outside the supply tent she was being held in; the guards were asleep, so he slipped inside.

She was manacled to the center pole of the tent, against which she was leaning. She was mostly asleep, still weak from the wound she had received that morning, though it had been healed by the angel's touch.

Joshua brushed her cheek softly, and she jerked awake, lunging to the extent of her chains, shaking the tent violently. She relaxed when she recognized him. He smiled slightly.

"No man can match a woman's fury."

"Why are you here?" she asked quietly. The guards hadn't awakened; she was somewhat surprised.

"I – well—" he stopped, shrugging slightly, then sat down in front of her. "If you stay in this realm, they *can* kill you."

"And how can I leave now? Tagroth will move in the morning, and the army won't defy its generals on its own."

"And if you die, who will replace you?"

Morgan shrugged slightly. "As long as you're around, they can still kill."

"You were the only one who had the will to continue when War was dead."

"And why should War just not stay dead?"

"War is more than just violence," Joshua said. "War is justice, and freedom, and freedom of will."

She looked away. "And?"

"Without War, the world will fall into oppression, and tyranny."

Morgan sighed.

"You are all that holds them here against the demons," Joshua said.

"And so what am I to do? Just disappear?"

"Tagroth is most easily killed in this realm. And if he leaves this realm, the army can

overrun his demons. He can't lead them from Hell."

"So why are you here?"

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes were growing amused. "How difficult a question is that?"

He muttered something under his breath. "Do you know *who* you are?"

"Vaguely."

He leaned forward, close to her ear. "War," he murmured.

"Dan said War and Death were lovers."

"Something along those lines," he replied, sitting back slightly. "Celeste has been messing with my head recently, so I'm not sure how much of it is me."

"Concord?" Morgan asked quizzically.

"Concord encompasses harmony and mediation and compassion and mercy, in addition to love."

"Ah."

"But you're apparently immune to the will of the avatars," he said.

"Hence apathy." She paused. "Do I truly have no soul?"

"I don't know. The sword should've taken you."

"Hm. Odd."

He brushed her cheek softly again. "Will you come back and meet them tonight?"

"Why not wait until Tagroth's dead, hm? I'm not comfortable leaving him alone in this world."

"I supposed..."

She laughed suddenly, quietly, and lunged again before he could back off, collapsing the tent. Her chains now free of the tent pole, Joshua found them wrapped around his arms, he himself pinned face down beneath the fallen canvas.

"You expect me to replace her," Morgan said quietly in his ear.

"I – well – maybe."

"You expect much of me, hm?"

The guards had awoken, and they were trying to decide what to do about the tent.

"I'd rather they didn't find me here," Joshua breathed.

"The closest I've ever come to loving a man, he's a monk. If you want to go, go."

"Come with me."

"I can't leave here yet. Not until Tagroth is dead."

"Fine. My arms are going numb."

"And the problem with that is?"

He struggled briefly, but she didn't let him up. The guards were pulling on the canvas; Joshua rolled over. Morgan released his arms, flipping the chain around in front of him.

"What?" he asked.

"Can you get these off?"

"You can't?"

"I wouldn't know how," she replied.

"Hm. Well..." He rolled over again. She kneed him in the groin. "Ow."

The canvas came off, and the guards were silent for a moment. Then they put it back. Joshua smiled slightly.

"What?" Morgan asked.

"That won't be all over in the morning," he said. She growled softly. He sighed.

“You said yourself that War cannot exist without Death.”

“I meant existence.”

“Oh.” His face fell, and he turned his eyes away from hers. Morgan rolled him onto his side.

“The chains, hm?”

He sprung the locks, then rolled over to put his back to her. Morgan shook the chains free, then withdrew her arms and relaxed against him. He edged away a little, and she sighed, then sat up and reset the tent pole.

“I may’s well just go face him tonight so you can stop moping, hm?” she said.

“What?”

“What?”

“Head into his army’s camp alone in the mortal realms?”

“What?”

“Are you insane?”

She shrugged slightly. He looked around a minute, then sat up and spread out several blankets and lay back down.

“Why did it hurt?” he asked.

“How’s that?”

“None of the others felt it when the mist hit them.”

“How often do you have someone else’s will forced upon you?”

“Oh, so you *can*’t defy God?”

“Who can?”

“Do you want to sit down again?”

Morgan just shrugged slightly. Joshua rolled onto his back.

“You really don’t realize how difficult it is to replace you, do you?”

“Why should it be?”

“Beyond that women warriors are rare enough? I’ve never met *anyone* who could defy avatars’ wills.”

Morgan stood a moment. “You poor thing.”

“Men just don’t appeal to you, hm?”

“Whatever.” She left. The guards weren’t there. Joshua was beside her suddenly.

“Where are you going?”

“To find a horse and a blade.”

“Tagroth will die no differently from Velnor.”

“And?” She turned her eyes to meet his. Her face was tired, emotionless. Joshua sighed.

“I was hoping that avatarhood would have taken some of the apathy out of you.”

“You call the resignation to the cessation of my existence apathy?”

“We can’t afford for you to die again, all right? There are demons besides Tagroth. If we lose War again, it will take much longer to replace you. And then we’ll be overrun, and Felodar truly *will* fall to demons.”

Morgan didn’t answer, heading for Dan’s tent. Joshua caught her arm.

“Don’t. You’ll only hurt him more.”

She stopped, turning to look at him. “More?”

“Dan cares a good deal about you, enough that this is going to hurt him.”

She growled softly. “Damn.” She turned and headed for the cavalry’s supply depot.

Joshua hurried to catch up with her.

“Now what?” she asked.

“You can’t just go kill Tagroth without an army with you,” he said.

“And why not?”

“That would be excessively interfering.”

She frowned, folding her arms across her chest. “And how am I to know you’re not just bullshitting because of whatever Celeste is doing in your head?”

He sighed. “If I’d had six months, this probably would’ve gone more smoothly. Fine. I’ll give you the knowledge. But it’ll be disorienting.”

She shrugged slightly. He put his hand on her forehead and closed his eyes briefly; Morgan caught his shoulder as the knowledge hit her mind. It took her a moment to get her wind back.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said after a moment. She started back towards the tent she had come from.

“Now where are you going?” Joshua asked.

“I need to sort this all out once.”

“Well... okay.”

“Hm?”

He shrugged slightly. The guards were asleep when they got there; Morgan frowned. Joshua pulled her inside.

“Let them sleep.”

She kicked her boots off and sat down on the blankets, cradling her head in her hands. Joshua hesitated.

“Are you going to be all right?”

“Let me think a little,” she said. He lay down behind her to wait. After a while he fell asleep. When he woke, Morgan had gotten her hands on a blade and was running through basic maneuvers. Joshua guessed he had only slept about an hour.

“Why don’t you lie down for a while?” he asked finally, sitting up.

“Because I’m restless.”

“Tagroth—”

“I’ll wait till the morning so they know that he’s dead.”

“There’s no other way to do this? No one else who can?”

“We are not gods, not angels, but avatars, Joshua. We were created to interact. I know I have a chance of killing Tagroth. And I’ve always been able to feel the currents in a fight. No one else will approach him.”

“Will you come lie down, please?”

“You have hands, if you’re that desperate,” she frowned, sheathing her blade.

“You really are something of a bitch, hm?” he said. He stood. “Why do you assume that’s all I want of you?”

She folded her arms across her chest, deciding not to answer.

“I loved Erin for a long time; Celeste has effectively erased that from me. I’m lonely. But I can wait till you get used to it.”

“Get *used* to it?”

He caught her wrists before she could hit him. Her frown deepened.

“Provoking me turns you on.”

“And the adrenaline rush of risking death makes you—”

She broke a hand free and hit him before he could finish. He pulled her close, pinning her arms between them.

“Don’t. Please. Just try to get some rest if you’re adamant about facing him.”

She pulled away, turning her back to him.

“Death is attracted to War,” he said finally, quietly. “Dan can survive without you, hm? Can you get along without him?”

“Yeah.” She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He put a hand on her shoulder, and she let him lead her back to the blankets. He kept space between them, not sure she’d tolerate anything more.

Joshua woke sharply about an hour before dawn. Morgan was awake beside him, her head on his shoulder, using his arm as a pillow.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No. The demons are up and about.”

He brushed her cheek softly. “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes were lonely. Morgan sighed. They were a shade of blue she hadn’t seen in several years, the shade of blue of those of a man long dead. Joshua held her tightly for a moment.

“They’ll come for you soon, won’t they?” he said.

“Probably.”

“And how did you intend to get out of this?”

“What? You think they can actually get a blade away from me when I’m not bleeding to death?”

“Heh. Great. I need to go soon. I’ve been seen enough here.”

She was silent for several moments. “I need you here.”

“How’s that?”

She shrugged slightly. “If it’s possible. Not *here*, here. But somewhere in the area.”

His eyes were concerned. “Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Why is this suddenly tolerable?”

“What do you mean, suddenly?”

“You say that as though I should remember something.”

Her eyes flashed red, and Joshua shrank down a little.

“Dare I ask what?”

“If you really sleep through it that often—”

His eyes widened. “*What?*”

Laughter tinkled through the tent, and a faint flash of blue light was there and gone. Morgan’s face softened.

“Oh. I take it that would be Celeste.”

Joshua rolled onto his back. “I hate women.”

Morgan rolled over on top of him. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“And what changed your mind?”

“Changed?”

He reached up and stroked her cheek. “Be careful, hm?”

“If I were careful, it’d be no fun.”

He pulled her down and kissed her. She locked the shackles around his wrists, chaining him to the tent pole.

“I’m going to go find a horse now.”

She left, and it took Joshua a moment to free himself to follow. He balked at the tent door; there were people awake outside. She was determined to do things *her* way.

Morgan headed for the corrals, looking for the horse she’d had earlier. It came to her when it saw her.

“Hello,” she said to it quietly. “And how are you today?”

The horse nickered. She pulled herself onto its back. The army was just really waking up around her. She started for the top of the ridge. The generals would be looking for her soon, and the demons would move at about the same time. She stopped atop the ridge, away from any emplacements. The demon army was moving. She frowned. They were starting early.

She rode back, faster now, bearing down upon the first bugler she found and accosting his bugle, then headed back up to the ridge. Once certain they weren’t just shifting a little, she sounded the call for the cavalry to form up. For a moment the army behind her was startled into silence, and then everyone was moving at once. She rode along the top of the ridge until she was opposite the ford, roughly in the center of the lines, halted on a bald outcrop of rock. Joshua had been looking for her; now, as the sun was rising, he froze, eyes fixed upon her.

“Behold War,” he breathed, addressing no one in particular, “in all her glory.”

Dan was beside him suddenly. “Take care of her, huh?”

“You’re not staying?”

“I’m headed back to Lodar. The royal house is about to undergo a messy coup, and I need to get one of the heirs out so he can overthrow it again in twenty years or so.”

Joshua nodded slightly, his eyes still on the woman atop the ridge. She raised the horn again, blowing this time for the infantry to ready pikes. The generals and staff reached her finally, stopping at the base of the promontory she was atop.

“What do you think you’re doing?” one of the generals barked. She turned her gaze to meet his, her eyes a fiery red.

“What does it look like?” she asked. Across the river, the demon army crested the ridge.

“Go. You’re not helpless. There is much to be done yet. But Tagroth dies today.”

A faint hint of pride was on Joshua’s face at the red nimbus that was growing around Morgan.

“She’s going to declare herself openly in Tagroth’s face,” he said to Dan.

“That means more to you than me,” Dan replied. Death glanced at him.

“I suppose so.”

Then Tagroth spoke, and Joshua shrank down slightly. Dan put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“And do you truly come to face me alone, mortal?” the demon roared. Morgan turned her eyes back to Tagroth as the cavalry crested the ridge, and the air around her burst into open flame.

“Of course not,” she replied quietly, knowing the demon would hear. She raised the horn to her lips to sound the charge as the demons started for the river. Tagroth’s winged legions arose from behind the ridge, and she swore. Along the hillside she heard the orders for archers ring out, and she continued for the ford, where Tagroth was waiting for her.

“War,” he growled. She didn’t stop on the edge of the river, riding straight into the ford.

She would not waste time on his banter. His first blow was at the horse, which, to his surprise, was immune to it. That confused both demon and avatar, and Morgan drew sharply back to the river's edge.

"What the hell... Why couldn't I have gotten a horse like this ten months ago?" she said.

She put her free hand on its neck briefly as she dodged Tagroth's charge out of the water, then blinked. "Oh. Because it's already dead."

She parried Tagroth's blow, ignoring the phenomenon of the horse for the moment. They moved through the surging battle on the plain below the heights, the demonic horde and Allied Armies opening before and closing behind them as they went. Joshua had moved to the top of the ridge to watch. The winged demons were wreaking havoc on the cavalry, but the archers were wreaking equal havoc on the demons, and the pikemen were holding off the ground assault. The demon, twice the height of a bull elephant, was fighting furiously; Morgan was a competent match for him. The air around her glowed red; the air was thick with her fury. Joshua smiled weakly, then entered her mind where she would ignore him. She was herding Tagroth away from the human soldiers. He would explode upon death, and she wanted him to take out as few humans as possible.

Tagroth raked her left arm, and Joshua winced. Before he truly realized it, the other four avatars were suddenly beside him, apparently to watch the new War.

"Do you bloody *mind*?" he asked. Celeste laughed.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. We'll see you later."

They disappeared, and Joshua focused on the fight again. Tagroth and Morgan were atop the ridge on the far side of the river, backed by the newly risen sun. Tagroth's claws found home once – *twice* – and Joshua sat down, unable to take his eyes away. She drove her blade angrily into the demon's chest, and for the first time, Joshua glimpsed the memory of the man that the demon had taken from her years before. His face softened. It wasn't Dan. It wasn't him. It was a memory she couldn't let go till Tagroth had paid for her pain.

The explosion threw her and the horse back across the river. The horse picked itself up and shook itself off, trotting over to where Morgan had landed on the lower part of the hillside. The nimbus still glowed; as a victorious yell went up, the generals resumed command of the army, beginning a drive to push the demonic horde back to Hell.

Joshua appeared beside her as the army disappeared over the ridge on the far side of the river. The apology was unspoken within the worry in his eyes. Morgan smiled slightly.

"Well, what fun is it for me if I don't flirt with Death?" she asked dryly.

"Sometimes I think you overdo it."

"Enh. Enough of this for now, hm?"

He stroked her hair softly. "All right. Will you come back now?"

"Yeah. They can manage alone now." She paused. "I'm bringing the horse."

"What? But—"

"He's dead, hm?"

"Oh." Joshua blinked. "That's odd."

"I'm not questioning it at the moment. He's a good horse."

"All right. Close your eyes, hm?"

When she opened them again, they were on a large bed. The other four avatars were waiting.

"*Must* you always bring her back bleeding?" Vivian snapped at Joshua. He muttered something. Morgan fixed her eyes on her toes, breathing shallowly, trying to calm the fury in

her blood so that Life's touch wouldn't burn. Vivian wasn't that patient. Sean briefly took the hand that wasn't clutched in Joshua's, sluicing out much of the fury and, with it, the pain that was created when it mingled with Life. She turned her gaze to meet his, and after a moment he left, taking Vivian with him.

Celeste began speaking, but Morgan wasn't paying her much attention. There were other things on her mind. After several minutes of the cheerful chatter with no sign of stopping, Harry took the horse's reins and pulled it and Celeste out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Death is attracted to War," Joshua said finally.

"As is War to Death."

He brushed her cheek softly.

"Do you want to see your room?" he asked. She pulled him down and kissed him.

"Later."

## Avatars of Good

Concord (Celeste) (Blue) – harmony, democracy, amiability, love, “can’t everyone just get along?”, mediation, compassion, mercy

Discord (Harry) (Brown) – individuality, “have it your way”, innovation, irrational argumentation, apathy

Life (Vivian) (Green) – life, fertility, healing, plentitude, birth and development

Death (Joshua) (Black) – death, pestilence, famine, pain, suffering, illness, insanity, apathy

Peace (Sean) (White) – rational negotiation, logic, nonviolence, pursuit of truth

War (Erin) (Red) – violence, blind justice, freedom, freedom of spirit, pure fury

Angel of Righteousness, Justice, and Truth (Michael)

Demon of Profane, Tyranny, Falsehood, and Evil (Tagroth)

The solitary captain in the army supported by “good” (Morgan Hawke)

The corrupt general of the same army (Justine D’Ambrose)

The prophet – the mouthpiece for the Angel; the Avatars often learn of the Angel’s messages through him, instead of from the Angel directly (Dan)

The demon’s full demon lieutenant (Velnor)

Sword of the Damned – sword which destroys souls (by absorbing them), circumventing death; possessed by Justine; used against Erin

## Hierarchy

God	Angels	Avatars	Humans
	Demons	Demonic Servants	Human Underlings

1. Erin killed by Justine
2. Death’s reaction
3. Army supported by good suffering massive losses to demonic forces
4. Planning by Avatars – they must find a new champion of War – Death’s reaction
5. Introduction to Morgan – death of Velnor
6. The prophet – Angelic appearance reveals the sword’s existence, but location is hidden
7. Morgan discover’s sword’s presence, but not its ownership
8. Death begins looking for a new War
9. Morgan vs. Justine
10. Continuation of War against demons
11. Critical battle; Death is flitting in and out of mortal realm, happens to come back to witness this battle – one in which Tagroth makes an appearance; Justine lets the army wilt in the demon’s presence; Morgan doesn’t give ground
12. Justine and Tagroth
13. Discovery of the Sword of the Damned
14. Morgan vs. Justine
15. Death and War
16. War vs. Tagroth
17. Death and War