pages ∙ words

Roark's advice helped Morgan get through the day. Pushing aside all thoughts about her work and her nightmares, she focused all of her attention on her studies. Her first class involved tromping through the woods learning which plants and herbs were safe to eat or use in medicine or potions, so she did not have to return to her dorm to bathe or change into fresh clothes until mid morning. Once clean and dressed in proper initiate's garb, she spent the rest of the day in lectures or laboratories devoted to the magic and psychic arts. Her afternoon was spent focusing on her primary course of study, the healing arts--one of the few colleges where magic and psychic ability were of equal importance.

Since this was technically only her fourth day of formal training, everything was still new and fascinating to her. She, in turn, seemed to fascinate her instructors. They knew that Morgan had no prior formal training. The ability she had displayed, when she had tested for admission to the academy, had proven her claim to have awakened to a former life. Which, while not unheard of, was fairly rare. Her instructors hoped to learn as much from studying her as she hoped to learn studying under them.

Among the things they were investigating was impact the training her prior incarnation received had on Morgan in her current life. The initial assumption was that the magic that Morgan had inherited had probably laid the foundation for her psychic ability. Normally, pronounced psychic abilities manifested as the result of studying magic for a decade or more. In Morgan's case, her latent magical aptitude had evolved into a natural, if modest, psychic ability in response to the traumatic experiences she had as a child, when she and Logan were abducted and taken deep into the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. After the death of her mother, Morgan and Logan had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare the two of them dead, and they had experienced things that no adult wanted to believe.

Things that still haunted Morgan in her dreams.

Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to.

Like her aptitude for magic, her psychic ability was not formally recognized during her childhood. The discipline to use it emerged under the influence of her athletic and academic training. Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her psychic abilities had been weak and quirky, evolving primarily into natural regeneration, telepathy and telekinesis.

When she first noticed her regeneration, she did not heal much faster than normal, but she healed completely without scarring and proved very resistant to disease and infection. It took several years for her to realize that she could accelerate her own healing through concentration. A similar effort, she went on to discover, allowed her to perceive or project thoughts and move small objects without touching them. An odd side effect of her psychic sensitivity, Morgan could perceive the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even the basic spells practiced by common folk.

It had actually proven easier to remember spells from her former life, though she was forced to do the mental equivalent of covering her eyes in order to cast spells. Intimidated by awesome and intricate psychic architecture harnessed by magic, she became wary of anyone proficient with magic--especially herself. When she discovered that her psychic abilities gave her an edge in protecting herself from--and dispelling--magic, she regained her confidence.

While Morgan lacked the level of magical training and discipline most of her classmates had, she had enough natural talent and inherited experience to qualify for the advanced classes. Being qualified, however, was not the same as being competent. She was only beginning to pick up the tools and habits needed to study magic. Only in her first week of studies, Morgan was becoming painfully aware of how difficult the year ahead was going to be. She was fortunate that her ambitions lay in the realm of healing. As an academy initiate and student of the College of Healing, Morgan finally had the opportunity to try and integrate her magic and psychic abilities. Because her training as a courtesan had included the study of certain aspects of healing magic, the college of magic that was the most compatible with psychic ability, she had been able to catch up and progress quickly in her chosen art.

If she had dared to pursue any other field of magic, she doubted she would be able to keep up. This observation came up at the end of her final class for the day, as she closed her book and rested her forehead on the cover.

"It's those early mornings, I'm telling you," Marga declared, stopping at Morgan's desk to gloat. "Or is it the late evenings? Either way, you're just not getting enough sleep, Morgan."

Morgan looked up at her and groaned. "I'm not tired, Mar. It's these books. Reading them gives me a headache!"

"That's because you're trying to make sense out of them. You're not supposed to understand any of it," her roommate advised cheerfully.

"I can't help it. I don't learn things until I've either done them myself or at least figured out what they are or how they work," Morgan protested.

"You don't need to know how magic works. That's what makes it magic… Unless you're planning to become a wizard," Marga pointed out, perching on the edge of Morgan's desk and studying her with false amazement.

"I'd settle for becoming a competent sorceress," Morgan grumbled, sitting back and gathering the rest of her books in a pile. "I know how it works, Mar. Believe me. I've seen it. The spells are just commands. 'Magic is performed without the encumbrance of conscious thought, utilizing the tools and techniques built up over time through practice. That is why all magical trades are referred to as practices.' "

"See, you are capable of rote learning," Marga grinned.

"I am so pleased," Morgan droned, standing up and sliding her books into a satchel. Slinging the bag of books over her shoulder, she nodded to her roommate and followed her out of the classroom. They both exchanged greetings and comments with acquaintances as they made their way down the hall, out of the building and across campus. On their way back to the dorm, Morgan allowed herself to become absorbed in her companion's friendly chatter, putting off the moment when she would have to come up with answers for Logan and Lloyd.

As a rule, Morgan was not particularly fond of gossip. Given the profession she had been forced to adopt, and especially given the interest her appearance tended to generate, Morgan lived in apprehension of becoming the subject of rumors. However, Marga was the sort who would let her know immediately if people were talking about her, which made it worthwhile to listen to her once she got going. So far, her peers had taken an interest in her recent affair with Kevin Niall and the unusual relationship that existed between Logan, Roark and herself. The full truth behind their rivalry had not gotten out yet, but it was only a matter of time before it did, or before someone pointed out that she had dated a number of other very well established men.

Morgan still did not know how she would respond if someone confronted her on that. Most of the student body had assembled for the week of the fall festival, settling in before the official start of classes in order to participate in the testing that established their aptitudes and determined which classes they would be enrolled in. More than a few of them had witnessed Kevin Niall's pursuit of her and most of the school knew about his tragic death the night she finally went out with him.

Being associated with the demise of a local hero had turned Morgan into an outcast and an object of curiosity at the same time. Half of the girls in the dorm would not even talk to her, and yet the same girls could not seem to stop talking about her--except when Morgan came within earshot. A group of those girls, gathered on the front steps of the dorm, spotted Morgan approaching with Marga and scattered. In spite of Marga's, or even Roark's, assurances, the silent accusation hit Morgan like a blow.

Bowing her head, to avoid making eye contact with any of the girls that lingered, Morgan pushed ahead, storming up the stairs ahead of her roommate and barging in through the main entrance to the dorm, almost colliding with a man who was coming out.

"Excuse me," the stranger protested politely, catching her by the shoulders before she slammed fully into him.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was…" Morgan apologized at once, feeling her face heat up in embarrassment. Her explanation died on her lips as she looked up and saw his face. Staring into his eyes in shock, she blurted out in surprise, "It's you!"

"Ah, Morgan! I was just looking for you." The stranger gently released her and stepped back, nodding to her in greeting.

"You know where I live?" Morgan demanded incredulously, tensing up and still staring at the man who had been stalking her, watching her from a distance for weeks.

"Well, I have been following you for a while…" he confirmed apologetically, with a wry smile.

"I noticed. Do you mind telling me why?" Morgan inquired sharply.

"That's part of what I came here for," the man replied, sounding perfectly reasonable. He cocked his head, taking in her stance and expression and realizing that she was liable to deck him at any moment. Taking a deep breath, and relaxing his posture to appear completely non-threatening, he proposed, "Listen, I know you have a lot of questions, but this really isn't the right place. I happen to know of a very good restaurant near here, however. Would you care to join me for dinner?"

Morgan studied him for a moment without blinking. She could feel Marga standing at her shoulder, staring at her expectantly hoping for an explanation, but Morgan was too busy considering the situation in her head. Whoever this man was, he had put a lot of time and effort into following her around. Whatever his reason, it was suspicious enough to make her skin crawl. However, he had obviously decided to stop simply following her, and come forward to confront her. She knew what Logan would say about her accepting his invitation, but she had not told him about her shadow.

"My treat." The stranger upped the ante with an encouraging smile.

"Sure, just give me a moment," Morgan finally responded, with a tight nod. Grabbing her roommate by the arm she led her up to their room and quickly explained the situation. Marga offered to go with her, but Morgan declined, assuring her friend she was more than capable of taking care of herself. "I'll be fine, Mar. I have to know what this guy wants from me."

"If you're sure. I could go and get your friends…" Marga suggested.

"No. I'm sure this guy wouldn't try anything in a public place. I'm not sure I can say the same about Logan," Morgan objected with a grin. Dropping her book bag on her bed and grabbing her cloak, she ran back down stairs to meet her dinner date.

"Ready?" he asked when she came back out the entrance.

"Let's go." Morgan clasped her cloak around her neck and gestured for him to lead the way.

\* \* \*

Morgan followed the stranger off campus, ignoring the stinging nettles of her conscience. One of the first things she learned, training to become a courtesan, was that it was never entirely safe for a girl to be alone with a man--especially a stranger. Of course, as a courtesan, the one thing she could count on was finding herself alone with a strange man. Hence, a true courtesan was trained in ways to incapacitate, cripple or even kill men who outweighed her three or four times over. When Morgan told Marga that she could take care of herself, she had certainly not been lying. But, common sense still nagged that she was being foolish, following this admitted stalker to an unfamiliar place.

It was just that she could not overcome her curiosity.

From the first time she had spotted him, watching her from afar, he had struck her as the shy and retiring sort. Whenever she had tried to confront him, he had immediately retreated, melting into the crowd or simply disappearing into the shadows. The way he had come right out and confronted her seemed out of character, or else implied that she had been wrong about his true demeanor. His reticence, prior to this, might in fact be nothing more than courtesy, since every other time she had seen him, she had been in the company of another man. For more than a week now, she had been seeing no one. That alone might explain why he had chosen to approach her.

Of course, there were less innocent reasons a man one or two decades older than her might be pursuing her. It was that concern, more than anything, that fueled her curiosity. From studying him, as he led her through the neighboring district, he seemed less like an enamored suitor than a cultured and well mannered household servant leading her in to meet with the lord or lady of the house. He was composed and attentive, without seeming curious or concerned, simply carrying out a familiar task.

Only when they arrived at their destination did he become more animated. He was obviously well known by the staff of the restaurant, greeted by the host with a smile and a nod and escorted to a table without a word wasted. Morgan did not have a chance to make any inquiries as they were surrounded initially by the efficient bustle of waitresses preparing the table, and their guests, for dining. At their quiet urging, Morgan washed her hands in a basin, selected a chilled house wine to go with the fresh cooked bread and a selection of sliced cheeses to tide her over while ordering and awaiting her meal. The silence, after she was handed a menu and the last waitress excused herself, was almost dizzying.

Her companion glanced up at her and smiled at her expression. Glancing once at his menu, and then setting it aside, he nodded to her and commented, "I think you'll like this place. They have the most delicious spiced meat pastries."

Taking that as a recommendation, Morgan studied the section of the menu devoted to baked dishes. A quick glance revealed that it would be worth the trouble to visit this establishment several times, if her meal this evening proved satisfactory. There were many tantalizing items on the menu, and Morgan felt she could hardly choose one by description alone. Picking at random from a selection featuring one of her preferred meats, she set her menu aside and returned her attention to her companion.

"So, what would you like?" he inquired, before she could speak.

"To start with," Morgan stated, with a reserved smile, "who are you and why have you been following me around?" She had hoped he would have introduced himself before now, and certainly she should have asked before accompanying him, but her thoughts had been focused more on his intentions.

"My name is Mann," he responded with a nod of the head that gave the impression of a bow. A glint in his eye revealed that he had been waiting for her to ask. As she cocked her head, he elaborated, "Brendan Mann, but most people just call me Mann."

"Go on." Morgan allowed her smile to warm a bit as she coaxed him to answer the question that had brought them there.

"Right. Let's see, how should I explain myself?" he asked himself aloud, looking up thoughtfully as he selected a roll and a couple of slices of cheese. He tilted his head side to side, ordering his thoughts, as he tore the roll in half. With a crisp nod, he returned his gaze to her and said, "As a favor to a friend of mine, I've been keeping an eye on you. I understand that you're new in the city. It should come as no surprise that you've drawn a lot of attention since you became acquainted with Hadrian Lloyd."

As he spoke, he lay the thinly sliced cheese on the hunk of bread he had torn from the roll. He punctuated his trailing statement with a gesture encouraging her to eat, before taking a bite.

"I've had a bit of exposure, yes." Morgan reached for a roll and some cheese at his silent urging, allowing her response to prompt him further. She felt her suspicions ease, hearing that his interest was not personal. It also fit what she had observed of him. It was fairly common for the sons of royalty and high nobility to have their chaperons investigate the girls who caught their eyes, to make sure they were suitable--or unsuitable, as the case might be--before approaching them. Considering this new angle, she took a modest bite and chewed thoughtfully.

A waitress appeared silently at Mann's elbow and quietly prompted them for their orders. She efficiently jotted down their requests, advised them that their meal would be proceeded by the soup designed to go with their selected dishes, and excused herself with professional poise.

"You've also been the focus of a lot of rumors," Mann noted, resuming the conversation as if there had been no interruption. He paused for another bite followed by a sip from his wine glass. Clearing his throat and leaning back comfortably, he continued. "There's been a lot of speculation among Lloyd's associates about why you've been meeting with him on a regular basis. The most popular opinion, at the moment, is that you're Lloyd's mistress."

"Are you kidding me?" Morgan heard her voice rise in disbelief. To cover herself, she took a quick drink from her own wine glass and brushed her lips with her napkin.

"No. As I said, it's just the popular rumor." He flashed a tiny grin and then waved it off. He took another bite and chewed for a moment, studying her. After clearing his palette again, he amended, "If you'll forgive me, I think you're a little too young and adventurous for Lloyd's tastes. It's pretty obvious that you're not with anyone in particular, however. But, that was not the rumor I was investigating."

"I'm not his daughter, if that's what you were curious about." Even as she denied it, she realized that such a relationship was plausible. The daughter of a courtesan usually grew up with no clue who her father was. Most courtesans were the product of selective breeding geared toward attaining or preserving a certain ideal. The selection process was in the hands of the courtesans themselves, as they allowed themselves to be impregnated by men possessing traits they wanted their daughters to inherit. It was not a perfect process, and the unwanted sons and unsuitable daughters were often abandoned or sent back to their fathers.

"Actually, there is a rumor along those lines," Mann confirmed, shrugging, "but no. I was following you to find out what sort of work you did for Lloyd." The look he gave her at that was rather pointed. It did not say anything by itself, but it indicated that he had finally touched on the meat of this discussion.

"Who said I worked for him?" Morgan inquired, with a disarming smile. On the surface, she showed only faint amusement at what he was suggesting, but it concealed a surge of panic. It was to be expected that a man in Mann's position would investigate every rumor concerning a girl his charge was interested in, including the one he was implying--and which happened to be the truth. Pursuing this matter directly with her, rather than taking it up with Lloyd, suggested that the person he represented had ambitions higher, or possibly deeper, than simply trying to bed her. Or, it suggested that it was just a suspicion, and he was hoping to startle her into confirming it before approaching Lloyd. Morgan was too well trained to betray herself, though.

"Are you saying you don't?" Mann challenged politely.

"I'm afraid not." Morgan allowed herself to blush and look down modestly, scandalized as any well-bred and mannered young lady would at such an outlandish suggestion. She also allowed a hint of coy amusement to color her retort. "Sounds like you're chasing a rumor after all."

Mann smiled broadly, looking at her as if she had said something particularly amusing. Something eager glinted in his eyes as he leaned forward just a touch and challenged, "Or maybe, the way you see it, he works for you."

"Excuse me?" Morgan did not have to feign sounding surprised.

"There's no need to be so coy, Morgan. I know what you are," he declared in a tone that was both casual and conspiratorial.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Morgan demanded, protesting her innocence in both tone and posture. Again, it was not necessary to pretend confusion. Searching her mind frantically, she could not think of anything she might have done or let slip that would have encouraged him to believe what he did or worse, confirm his suspicions entirely. If he was bluffing, his guesses were hitting far to close to the mark. Unfortunately, at this stage the only thing she could do was play innocent.

"He's your contact, isn't he? Lloyd finds work for you, so technically he works for you and you work for the client." There was a smugness in the way he spelled it out. A thread of strained patience as he corrected his assertion to leave no doubt about what he meant. At the same time, he restrained himself from openly declaring her a courtesan or escort--or prostitute.

Morgan struggled to contain her anger and alarm. If Mann, or the person he represented, had been interested in contracting her services, they could have approached Lloyd. By confronting her directly, they betrayed a specific interest in her, and this method of approaching her did not say anything good about their intentions. It occurred to her that Mann might actually be an inquisitor, but if he thought she could be spooked into implicating herself or Lloyd, he was an idiot. It sounded like the only thing he had at the moment was suspicions. If he had any real evidence, an inquisitor would have simply arrested her and had her interrogated, if there was anything else he really wanted to know.

"I'm afraid I don't have any idea what you're talking about," Morgan dismissed haughtily, raising her chin and closing her eyes. He had been too explicit for her to continue playing dumb. It was better to passively admit that she had caught on to what he was insinuating, and warn him that he was on the verge of insult. If he had solid proof, he could trump her with an open accusation, but anything less and she had grounds to challenge him to a duel for insulting her honor.

"No?" Mann contested, with an air of disappointment. He shrugged and glanced off behind her. When he frowned, Morgan glanced over her shoulder and noticed a server approaching with a loaded tray. As she turned back, Mann casually flipped his napkin open and laid it out in his lap. Giving her a straight look, he casually announced, "Well, it's an easy theory to test. You only have to send someone to Lloyd with a contract and then hang around the mark to see who comes along and takes care of him."

\* \* \*

Morgan sat across the table from Mann in open-mouthed shock as the server, followed by their waitress, arrived at the table and presented them with their soup. Mann thanked the staff, ordered a carafe of ice water for the both of them and inquired about the wait until their main course. Morgan responded quietly as needed to deal with the preparation of her soup, but her mind was racing. There was no question that Mann had already tested his theory. He had not been watching her to find out what she was, he had been watching her to prove it. He had not been bluffing at all!

After the staff excused themselves again, Mann allowed Morgan to recover her wits in silence, breaking another roll and soaking one half before taking a bite. He sighed in pleasure, and picked up his spoon, digging into his soup with gusto. Mechanically, Morgan copied him, tasting her soup and then sipping from her spoon until it was cool enough to eat comfortably.

They were both halfway through their servings when Morgan set her spoon aside and regarded him directly. Without preamble, she declared, "You set me up. Why?"

"Because I needed to be sure about you before I could approach you," he told her honestly, pausing between spoonfuls. The humor underlying his taunting had evaporated. His disposition had become serious and businesslike.

"Approach me about what?" Morgan asked hesitantly.

"I'll get to that in just a moment," he assured her, waving her question off. He piled some more cheese on a piece of bread, and then gestured at her with it. "First, I need to ask you a few more questions."

"What do you want to know?" Morgan swirled her spoon in her soup.

"Well, to start with, just how close are you and Lloyd? I don't recall ever seeing you before this summer," Mann noted. He soaked his bread and cheese in his soup and took a bite without taking his eyes off of her.

"We're not that close," Morgan confessed, taking a sip from her spoon. He gave her a nod of encouragement, taking another big bite from his sodden roll. Morgan grabbed a roll and soaked it in her own soup as she explained, "A friend of mine introduced us a couple of months ago." She popped the soaked bread into her mouth as she waited for him to finish chewing and swallowing.

"Do you mind if I ask what sort of relationship the two of you have?"

"You already know he's my contact," Morgan pointed out, glancing up to meet his gaze. He was dipping a fresh roll into what remained of his soup.

"Of course," Mann nodded, glancing down at his bowl for an instant before returning his attention to her. With his other hand he gestured for her to elaborate, stating, "I just need to know how intimate your relationship is."

"Well, we're not lovers, if that's what you're asking!" Morgan reasserted, responding to the unintentional stress he put on the word "intimate". She was still struggling to fathom the nature of Mann's--or Mann's associate's--interest in her. He seemed quite comfortable with the conversation, now that he had established his knowledge of her profession.

"No," he easily dismissed that notion. Cocking his head and regarding her directly, and allowing a note of irony, he reminded her, "I think we've established that already. Besides, Lloyd is not the type to mix business with pleasure." He resumed eating, allowing himself a snort of amusement at her reply.

"That's one of the reason's I like him," Morgan admitted offhandedly.

"So, what are you two?" he pressed, after swallowing hard.

"Friends, I guess." Morgan shrugged and then reconsidered. She took a small bite of drenched bread and a sip of water. Correcting herself, she grabbed another roll to sop up the dregs of her soup, "Well, more of a friend of a friend type of thing. I didn't have any family in the city when I arrived here, so as a favor to a friend of mine, Lloyd sponsored me for my debut. Since then he has introduced me to some important people and social circles. Occasionally, he'll call in a favor and set me up on a date with someone to win a favor from them or else pay one off."

"So, he's sort of a patron then?" Mann clarified.

"I suppose so." Morgan frowned at his choice of words, but silently admitted to herself that it was accurate enough. It bothered her that she needed to subordinate herself to a man even as a freelance escort. That prompted her to confide, unnecessarily, "I'd prefer to be independent, but I needed someone who knew people here in the city. Someone to find and screen clients for me. I was having no luck--and taking far too many risks--finding work on my own, until I was introduced to Lloyd. Things were a little touchy at first, but we were able to reach an agreement that satisfied both our needs."

He nodded thoughtfully and looked down to finish his first course. Morgan followed suit. The two of them ate in silence, finishing and pushing their bowls aside within minutes of each other. Morgan topped off her water glass and waited for Mann to resume the conversation. He did not make her wait long.

"Is Lloyd the only front you've established?" he asked her directly, while he refilled their wine glasses and settled back in his chair. Before she could answer, he clarified, "Is there anyone else you've arranged to do business with?"

"Yes and no, respectively." Morgan reached for her wine glass and took a sip, waiting to see what he would make of her answer. His questions were making it ever harder for her to guess at his intent.

"Well, let me ask you a hypothetical question," he redirected expansively. He frowned for a moment in thought, as he sorted something out in his head. With a nod, and a casual tone, he illustrated, "Say something has happened to Lloyd, either he's sick, injured or dead, and thus not available to find work for you. How would you feel about taking a job from who ever replaced him?"

"I don’t know that I would," Morgan answered suspiciously. She narrowed her eyes and studied him across the table. He was obviously fishing for something, but his hypothesis made her uncomfortable. "Trust is not something you can inherit. If something happens to Lloyd, I'll either stop working or I'll find a new agent on my own. I'm not going to assume that someone is discrete and reliable just because they stepped into Lloyd's shoes."

"Even if they already know all about you?" he prompted pointedly.

"Like you do?" Morgan challenged, leaning back in her chair.

"Sure." He shrugged and waved his hands generously.

"If that made a difference, then I'd already be obligated to work for you," she retorted sourly. Straightening in her chair and looking him in the eye, she advised him, "I'm not pleased that you know, but if you think that knowledge can be used to black mail me, think again."

"Who said anything about blackmail?" he asked, wide eyed.

Morgan scowled at his show of innocence. Crossing her arms and shifting back in her seat she declared, "You don't tell someone you know their secret and just leave it at that. You certainly don't put a lot of effort into discovering their secret if you aren't after something. I mean, if you're not planning to blackmail me, why bother confronting me? I've obviously already done a job for you. You already know my services can be obtained through Lloyd."

Mann glanced past her shoulder and waved her to silence. A moment later, the waitress and servers returned with their main course, clearing the used dishes and lingering to refresh their water, wine and bread basket. After a final inquiry if everything was satisfactory, the waitress excused herself, promising to return and check up on them later.

Morgan was still glaring at Mann when their privacy was restored. He gave her a hurt look, while he fussed with the seasonings for his meal, and encouraged her to start eating. Morgan was not thrilled, but it was obvious from his response to his first bite that he truly savored the food at this establishment. Shaking her head and trying a bite of her own meat pie, she had to admit his devotion was warranted.

Once he was satisfied with the preparation of his meal, he took a sip of water and returned to their discussion. With a hand over his heart, he implored, "Let me assure you, I am not here to blackmail you. My friend was very impressed with your work. He believes that you would be the perfect choice for a particularly delicate and demanding job that he needs to have done. Unfortunately, I'm afraid Lloyd has already turned him down."

That admission suddenly clarified things for Morgan. Setting down her fork she studied the man across from her carefully. She was still sorting everything out in her head as she spoke, reaching a startling conclusion out loud. "He asked for me specifically? You mean, he knows about me too?"

"He put up the contract to test you, so, yes, he knows what you do," Mann confirmed with gravity. For the first time, he offered her a look that hinted at apology. He did not offer to explain, however.

"Great. Anyone else?" Morgan demanded miserably.

"As I told you, there are rumors going around about you," Mann deferred, holding up his hands. "I can't tell you who believes what. It doesn’t take long to develop a reputation in this city. I’m not saying you haven't done a good job at keeping a low profile, but you're hardly invisible. People can't help but notice you, and there is no defense against gossip. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a few more questions."

"What else do you need to know?" Morgan asked, composing herself and picking up her fork as he dug back into his plate.

"I need to follow up on my last question. How would you respond if you were offered a lucrative contract to take out Lloyd?" he proposed.

"Well, obviously, I normally wouldn't be open to an offer like that." Morgan laughed. A mental image of Lloyd presenting her with such an assignment popped into her mind and she had to shake her head to dislodge it. With a smile, she took a bite of her food and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Yes, but hypothetically," Mann persisted, "what would you do? Say a few months have passed and you've found someone else to represent you, or say the pay off was good enough that you no longer needed Lloyd."

Morgan stopped chewing and swallowed, regarding her companion warily. She had thought she understood why he was curious about her loyalty to Lloyd. If he was interested in hiring her, or making some sort of arrangement on her behalf, it would mean going around her patron. It was possible he was just trying to figure out how expensive it would be to buy her off. This question was simply ridiculous, however. "Okay, just assuming something could cause me to leave him for another front man, I really don't think I'd be able to touch him. Pretty much for the same reason I couldn't be bought out from under him. The moment I tried to put the moves on him, he would suspect foul play. So, he's pretty much off limits for me--unless, say, he tried to put the moves on me first."

"And then?" Mann asked eagerly.

"Well, in that case it would be an entirely personal matter," Morgan pointed out. It was not inconceivable that even Lloyd could become obsessed with her. That was the curse of her breeding, to be what men wanted.

"That sounds very practical," Mann noted.

"Of course it does. Was there anything else?" Morgan prompted, hoping he was running out of weird questions and ready to get down to the point.

"One more question. Knowing, in this case, that I have no alternative but to come to you directly, would you make an exception? Would you at least be willing to hear my friend's offer?" Mann finally came out and asked.

"Do you know why Lloyd turned him down?" Morgan asked, nibbling on her fork thoughtfully.

"Yes." Mann nodded soberly, before resuming eating.

"Well? Can you tell me why?" Morgan prompted him after a long silence.

"Actually, no." Mann glanced up at her, then set his fork down to elaborate, "At least not before you've heard the proposal. I hope you understand. All I can tell you is that my friend is willing to pay anything in order to secure your services."

"Well, if Lloyd turned you down without consulting me, I have to assume that it is not in my best interest to hear it," Morgan answered cautiously. That, really, was the crux of the whole thing. The reason she had a front man in the first place was to ensure that she was never obligated to do something she was not willing or prepared to do. It bothered her that Lloyd had never consulted her about the job. Shaking her head, she confessed, "His judgment has proven pretty sound in that respect, and I've already given him my assurances that I would not go around his back."

"I see." Mann stopped eating and sighed deeply.

Morgan was surprised at how disappointed he seemed to be at her response. It was almost as if he was sad about it.

After a long moment, he picked up his fork and looked at her directly. "My friend will be very disappointed to hear that you're not interested." With a shake of his head he resumed eating, cutting each bite slowly and deliberately with his fork and chewing thoughtfully for a while before swallowing. After several such bites, he looked back up again and added, "Oh, one last thing. I would appreciate it if you didn't mention this meeting to Lloyd. As you said, he doesn't like to have people going around his back. Unfortunately, there was no other way to approach you."

Morgan studied him thoughtfully for a long moment. The resignation in his voice might be the product of all the time and effort he had gone to in order to try and recruit her, and his final request seemed reasonable on the surface. Morgan probably would have confided in Lloyd, and she would have to appraise him of the risks Mann's methods had made her aware of, but she could use his request to protect herself as well. Nodding, and contemplating the remains of her meal, she proposed, "Tell you what, I'll stay quiet as long as you and your friends do the same. That means, no telling what you know about me or how you exposed me to anyone else."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Mann assured her with a wan smile.

"I appreciate that," Morgan told him with a relieved smirk. She quietly worked her way through the last few bites, growing more uncomfortable sitting across from Mann each minute. Washing down her last bite with a half a glass of wine and a sip of water, she pushed back from the table. With a nod of appreciation, she made to excuse herself, "Well, thanks for dinner."

"My pleasure." Mann stood and helped her rise from her seat and then returned to his own seat. He had been finished eating for a while, but Morgan guessed he intended to stay for dessert. She did not blame him for not inviting her to stay for it with him. He did not have anything to celebrate, but he certainly loved his food. She allowed herself a smile at that thought and made her way out of the restaurant.