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The sun was edging its way down toward the horizon as Morgan traced her steps back to the academy. The slanting light brought out the details of stone wrought and white washed buildings lining the city streets, and highlighted the edges of emerald green leaves flourishing on the trees and bushes flanking homes and businesses. The fluff of foliage created a pleasing contrast to the soft grey piles of cloud cover high overhead. Morgan allowed the sight to soothe her eyes as she drifted along in a partial daze. It had not been difficult to decline Mann's offer to work for someone new when she was still undecided about going back to work for Lloyd. The question Logan had raised loomed large in her mind again, so she allowed any lingering questions or concerns about her meeting with Mann to fall by the wayside.

The one concern that did linger was the troubling prospect of being discovered and confronted by a stranger. From the day she started moonlighting as an escort, she had worried about the prospect of being exposed. Now that she knew how easy it was for someone to expose her, she was forced to reconsider all of her assumptions about how much of a risk she was taking.

In the three kingdoms, there still remained a healthy tolerance for female promiscuity, particularly in larger towns and in cities. Men liked to sleep around, so it did not pay to stigmatize women too much for being willing to accommodate them. Thus, Morgan had been safe as long as people only thought she was dating adventurously.

Prostitution, however, was a disreputable enterprise, and anything that bordered on an exchange of sexual favors for money was scandalous. If Morgan was publicly exposed, the academy would become indirectly involved in the scandal, and Morgan could find herself expelled as a result.

Ironically, that was a danger only because she was not licensed. A license granted a concubine or courtesan certain legal rights and legitimacy--technically, she was a muse or an advisor, a personal companion paid as a retainer and a respected member of her patron's entourage or household staff. An escort had similar status, except instead of providing her services to her patron, she was a liaison providing comfort and services for his personal and professional associates. Morgan was more than qualified for her license, but to get it she had to make one sacrifice too many; a licensed escort, courtesan or concubine could not legally marry.

That little clause was supposed to protect the courtesan from any jealousy or possessiveness on the part of her--or occasionally his--partners. A courtesan, while totally accessible, was utterly unobtainable--and that was part of her charm. That prohibition had also resulted in Morgan growing up without even once meeting her own father. Having been wounded by that clause, Morgan had been wary of inflicting the same harm upon her own children, and, in spite of her stubborn independence and determination to prove herself the equal or better of any man, she had long harbored a normal girl's dream of being a bride.

Her hopes of marriage had waned, but she still held on to them.

She had other objections to embracing her family legacy, as well. Not, as Logan assumed, an aversion to having sex with strange men. An acceptance of casual intimacy had been bred and trained into her. Put simply, a very healthy appetite for sex was the one piece of common ground she could expect to share with any man--and more than a few women. In most cases, neither she nor the person she was entertaining, expected more than a few moments of bliss. It bothered her, sometimes, that she was paid so much to do something she loved and was willing and eager to do--most of the time for free. Of course, the reason she was paid so much was because she looked good on a man's arm and was sophisticated enough to make him look good in front of his peers. The part she really hated, however, was how the money dictated her actions. She abhorred the need to subordinate herself, to surrender her own initiative, her own integrity, and sometimes her own identity in order to comply with the demands and expectations of whoever paid her.

That was a component of many jobs, being at the beck and call of someone else. Morgan understood that. However, given the intimate nature of her calling, it was more difficult to bear. It made her feel more like an object than a person--a tool or a toy in someone else's hands.

In the short term, Morgan could put how she felt aside and focus on what she wanted or needed to do. She wanted to become a healer, and she needed the money to pay for tuition, room and board. So, she did what she had to do to make money. But, that was a useless sacrifice if it caused her to be kicked out of school. Maybe it was time to stop arguing with Logan about selling herself, and start talking with him about other ways to earn money.

Morgan sighed. The first problem would be telling him that without having to explain why she had changed her mind. The only person Mann had asked her not to tell about their meeting was Lloyd, but Logan was the person who would give her the most grief over it.

Not sure how she would explain herself, she changed her course in mid-stride. Mann had taken the simplest route to the restaurant, and she had retraced her steps automatically, but the shortest path back to the dorms required her to take a short cut down a long, narrow alley. In her distraction, she did not notice when a man stepped out of the flow of traffic behind her and turned down the alley as well.

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It was a commonly held assumption that it was impossible to sneak up on or surprise a telepath. Under certain conditions, this was true, but there were many things about telepathy that the general public did not know. For one thing, telepathy had two distinct measures of proximity. The first could be defined spatially as either inside or outside a psychic's sphere of perception. Normally, that was an area around the psychic herself, but it could also be an area surrounding a remote point she was focusing on. In either case, it normally took two telepaths, or one telepath disciplined enough to focus internally and externally at the same time, to triangulate for the true range and bearing of a specific individual. The second measure was defined in terms of familiarity. If a telepath knew the subject well enough, she could sense them or reach out to them at any range.

The man who treaded softly in Morgan's wake was within her sphere of perception, but because he was unfamiliar to her, his mental presence was obscured by the background noise that stormed ceaselessly around the eye of calm within her mind. It was only as he closed to within a few paces of her that she picked up the sensation of attention focused intensely upon her. As soon as his consciousness intruded on her own, a link was forged that her awareness automatically flowed across. Because the stranger had unwittingly initiated the contact, he was oblivious to her mind penetrating and suddenly overlapping his. Morgan was startled as she became consciously aware of his sphere of perception--of sights and sounds that echoed her own perceptions, but from a few paces behind herself.

In the blink of an eye, she felt like she had another body, another personality--both masculine--and strong commitment to slipping the knife in his hand into her own unprotected back.

Morgan's first instinct was to whip around and confirm the presence of someone behind her. The implicit threat triggered reflexes that had been trained over a decade of rigorous exercises to tighten her right hand into a fist and sweep her hardened forearm through the area behind her as she turned, while bringing her other hand up into a guard position. Her turn pivoted on her right foot, allowing her left foot to sweep out and slide back, widening her stance and increasing her mobility. Her automatic denial of the assassin's impulse to strike echoed back into his mind and caused his hand to relax its grip ever so slightly.

Morgan's fast turn brought her eyes in line with those of the stranger, just as her right arm intercepted his knife thrust. His momentum carried him forward, following the blade she had knocked out of line; passing through the spot she had occupied a second before.

His eyes had been wide with shock.

Morgan continued turning to her right, keeping the stranger in front of her as he stumbled forward in surprise. Without thinking, Morgan had braced her right foot, and increased the momentum of her turn. As the assassin shifted, pivoting on both feet to turn back in her direction for another charge, Morgan's left foot swept out in front of her, at just above waist level, and knocked the knife--once again extending in front for a lunging thrust--out of the assassin's weakened grasp.

As her kick forced her body to keep spinning to the right, she dropped her weight onto her left foot, bending forward and accelerating her spin, she snapped her right foot up in a back kick, catching the assassin on the jaw when his charge brought it into her range. The torque transferred by her spinning double kick sent him flying off to his left, to crash into the alley wall.

He collided with bruising force and a grunt of shock and pain. His arms had come up at the last second to help absorb the impact, and now pushed him back from the wall. Glaring at Morgan while trying to right himself, he shook his right hand vigorously for a moment and then began opening and closing his fist with a curse, "Damn it!"

"You tried to kill me…" babbled Morgan in wide eyed disbelief.

"Figured that out all by yourself, did you?" he spat with a sarcastic grin.

"What do you want?" she demanded, voice rising in pitch. "Money? Me?"

"Then again, maybe not," the roguish looking assailant deadpanned, answering his own question. He drifted back toward the middle of the alley without advancing on her, slapping the dust from his pants and shirt absently, while glaring at her. A glance told him his knife was out of reach, so he twisted his left arm and a fresh one appeared in his outstretched hand. Shaking his head, he baited, "Do I look like I'm trying to rob or rape you?"

Morgan ignored his sarcasm, tasting his mind for confirmation of his intentions. What he intended was clear enough, but as hard as she tried, she could not place him. She had no idea how she could have provoked him, and his thoughts were not giving him away. She was certain she had never seen him before. He was of average height and build, only a few inches taller than Morgan. The waning light was not good enough to see his exact coloring, but he had dark hair, dark eyes and plain features. Hoping to stir up an answer, she demanded angrily, "Then why did you attack me?"

"What? You want me to spell it out?" he retorted with a disparaging laugh. With a rueful shake of his head, he brought his weapon up and commented, "I've got to hand it to them, you do play innocent to the hilt."

"Who are you? What have I done to you?" Morgan persisted, growing even more alarmed as her probing brought up nothing substantial. Apart from debating how best to slip past her guard and which vulnerable spot would bring the quickest results, he did not seem to have anything on his mind. He was angry, at himself as well as her, for the way she had foiled his ambush, but there was no hint of rage or jealousy or insulted pride to account for his murderous impulse. That truly scared Morgan.

"Sorry, Red," he sketched a bow with his head, dismissing her inquiry. His thoughts narrowed down to the primitive level of instinct and trained reflexes, as he declared, "No time for chit-chat I've got a bit of killing to do, yet."

"I'm not even armed!" Morgan cried, dodging out of the way of his sudden lunge. He pressed her for a couple of steps, forcing her to back away.

"Well, this isn't a duel," he countered, fitting his comments into the rhythm of his attacks. Morgan dodged, evaded or blocked as necessary to keep the weapon at bay. His killing grin grew with excitement with each slash and stab, especially whenever the tip of his blade bit into her, or a lucky slash cut a bloody line across her flesh. Morgan lashed out with a sudden punch or kick whenever an opening presented itself. Few of her strikes made solid contact, but the ones that did forced him to back off for a brief moment.

But still, he kept coming at her.

When she finally trapped his arm and managed to disarm him again, he retreated and observed ruefully, "Damn, girl! You're dangerous enough without a weapon. I should've listened to them about that." As he dropped a hand to the hilt of his sword, which had been left in its scabbard untouched until now, he praised, "Nice moves, by the way."

"Wait!" Morgan pled, paling as he drew his long sword.

"Nice everything, really," he continued with a long, appraising look that started at her feet and traced every line and curve of her body before pausing to study her face. Meeting her eyes, he shrugged in resignation. "It's too bad you have to die."

"Why?" Morgan demanded. "Why are you doing this?"

"Nothing personal, Red," he told her helplessly and hefted his sword. There was no remorse on his face as he took up a stance any normal person would be helpless against without a sword or staff to defend herself with.

Morgan swallowed hard and reminded herself that this was precisely what she had been trained to face. She had sparred empty handed against Logan's sword a thousand times or more. That fact did not change just because this was the first time she would be called on to use that training, and just because, outside of dueling, she had never fought anyone intent on killing her.

Mobility was essential in fighting an armed opponent. Morgan's training in dance and gymnastics had emphasized that. Even a swordsman who made his weapon an extension of his body could not match her speed and agility, because he was forced to contend with the weight and momentum of his blade. However, the weapon gave him a reach advantage she could only respond to by getting inside his guard and which she could only evade well by keeping herself at a distance. Morgan reminded herself that an edged weapon was particularly difficult to face; if she tried to block or deflect it with a bare hand or arm, she was almost certain to get cut or lose a finger, her hand or even her arm, if she did not catch the flat of the blade perfectly.

Morgan bit her lip as he began to swing his sword, weaving a pattern that kept his blade in motion and made it more difficult to anticipate an attack. She was already backing off, probing the area around her telekinetically to determine how much room she had to maneuver and search for makeshift weapons or shields.

It was risky to unleash her psychic abilities in combat. Whatever advantages telepathy or telekinesis might give her, calling on them left her naked to the disruptive effect of magic being cast and vulnerable to psychic attacks if her foe turned out to have similar abilities. But, a split-second warning before his attacks, and the ability to telekinetically blunt or block a strike she could not evade might be critical to her survival, so Morgan took the risk. It was tempting to just try and jerk the sword out of his hands with her mental might, but that would reveal her powers instantly and she was not sure if she could generate enough psychic force to overcome his physical strength.

The assassin sprung forward at last, closing too fast for the red-haired girl to back out of the way of the diagonal slice. He cut down and across from his right to his left, forcing Morgan to dart to her left, ducking away to evade the swing. He tried to hem her in against the wall, by charging on, flanking her on her right.

Morgan surprised him by diving into a forward handspring along the ally wall, gaining incredible distance by making use of her total body length and leaving him to cut in behind her out of range to attack. Adding a few more cartwheels to rapidly increase the space between them, she brought up her guard and faced him from the center of the alley again.

He shook his head and advanced on her slowly, until he was close enough to threaten her with the tip of his sword. Morgan stood her ground until she was forced to retreat to evade the sweeping and thrusting blade. As she faded back and surrendered ground, she wished she could do something to take the initiative. Her mental fingers had not managed to find anything she could use to defend herself with, short of prying up heavy cobblestones. The two daggers she had stripped off of her opponent were now somewhere behind him, and not worth the cut's she had already received trying to slip past him to get to them.

Morgan could not grab them telekinetically, because the assassin was pressing her too hard for her to concentrate the task.

Nor, could she escape. The one time she had turned and tried to run, thinking to sprint to the end of the long alley and lose him in the crowded main streets, he had cut a nasty gash across her back. She was fortunate that her cloak and shirt had absorbed enough of the blow to keep the edge of this blade from slicing through muscle as well as skin.

Eventually, he would back her to the end of the alley, but she doubted she would have the endurance to keep dodging for that long. Her breathing was already getting ragged and a frightening amount of blood was seeping from her wounds. She had to find a way to get around that sword. If she could just get her hands on him, she could cripple him, but he was not giving her any such chance.

Morgan wanted to scream in frustration.

How many times had her grandfather had told her that it was not possible to make an attack on someone without creating an opening they might exploit? He had repeated that claim until it was etched into her mind. Bobbing and weaving to stay away from the thirsty edge of his sword, Morgan could see the openings he was leaving, but she would have needed a sword to cancel out his reach advantage and exploit them.

Or did she?

Morgan frowned in concentration, trying to see what her intuition told her was right in front of her eyes. Watching as he slowly advanced behind his dancing sword, she suddenly saw a viable target. When attacking from her left or overhead, he kept both hands on his hilt, but when he cut from his left or tried to thrust, he dropped his left hand. Since he led each cut with the same edge of his sword, he was forced to rotate his hand during the follow through of each lateral swing to bring the forward edge to bear for the next strike. There was a moment, instantly after the most dangerous part of reverse sweep, when she had a clear shot at the flat of his blade.

On the next reverse sweep, a snap cut from his left to his right at neck level on her, she lunged in, sliding her left foot forward and leaning back to glide in under his swing. The instant after the sword passed over her, her left hand snapped up and out, slapping the knife-edge of her palm against the flat of the rotating blade. The force added to the weapon's momentum, swinging his right arm way back. Her lunge continued to propel her forward, so she leaned in, shifting her weight onto her left leg as her right knee snapped up to catch him square in the diaphragm. The last of her forward momentum carried her right up into his face, her left hand snaking up his arm to seize the hilt of his sword while her right hand exploded forward in a palm strike to his jaw.

As Morgan's body recoiled back from her combined attacks, she rolled her left hand forward, rotating the hilt in his hand just enough to break his grip, rolling back onto her right foot with his sword secure in her grip. Before she could think, she sprang forward again, driving the sword--already pointed at its target--straight through the center of his chest.

His mouth opened in shock, and he looked down at hilt of his sword protruding from his chest and gasped, "Not… possible…"

"No! What have… I done?" Morgan gasped, scrambling back, pulling the sword out as she recoiled in horror. She had only intended to disarm him when she exploded into motion. If he died, he could not explain why he had tried to kill her. She stared at his disbelieving face, dropping the sword and jumping forward to catch him as he collapsed to his knees.

"Just… a girl…" he panted, with blood bubbling on his lips.

"Who… are you?" Morgan begged, holding him upright in her arms, her chest heaving. She was oblivious to the blood pumping from the wound in his chest and soaking into her shirt and pants, obscuring many bloodstains created by the cuts she had received. Even the hem of her cloak became soaked as the blood pooled around their knees. Morgan was already probing his wounds mentally, trying to stop the bleeding and begin healing him, but deep down she knew she did not have the power to undo this.

"Damn…" he coughed, choking on his own blood.

Whatever else he might have said was drowned out, as his eyes finally met hers. Morgan had already withdrawn from his mind, to protect herself from sharing the experience of his death. She held on to him, holding his gaze, until his eyes glazed over and his head flopped back. As she was laying him down on his back, she heard footsteps approaching cautiously.

"Hey, are you all right?" a familiar voice inquired.

"He's dead…" Morgan declared absently, between gasps for air and without bothering to look at the man who had come up beside her. She was stunned by her own reflexes, and what they had made her do. In spite of her horror and disbelief, she could not help staring at her hands and the man they had slain. The shock was so great she did not seem to even notice her own injuries.

"I saw. Here. Let me see," the man said, gently pulling her away from the slain assassin. She wobbled unsteadily as she came up on her feet, but his strong arms kept her from toppling over. He caught her left hand at the wrist and hissed at the gash along the edge of her palm. Holding out her arms and turning her this way and that, he took note of the other cuts and scraps she had collected.

Morgan paid no attention to his manhandling, her eyes still glued to the body at her feet. Shaking his head, he peeled her cloak off and tore a strip from the cleanest part to bandage her hand. The rest of her cuts, especially the one across her back, could not be quickly bandaged, so he removed his own cloak and draped it over her shoulders to conceal the rest. When he grabbed her by the elbow and started to lead her away from scene, her knees gave out, causing her to yelp in surprise.

"I've got you," he reassured her, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her arm over his shoulder. Morgan struggled to get her feet under her as he resumed walking. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

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As they neared the end of the alley, Morgan had recovered enough wind and equilibrium to walk on her own and pushed gently away from the man. Taking a good look at him, she relaxed in recognition. After the ambush, she did not think she could trust a complete stranger to help her. Noticing that he kept a firm grasp on her arm, and remembering that he was, at best, a passing acquaintance--and one she had argued with during all of their brief encounters, she glared at him uncertainly. "I know you. Who…? What do I…?" she fumbled, trying to prompt him for a name.

"You can call me Ash," he informed her, catching on immediately. Anticipating her next question, he added, "I noticed you coming up the street, but you didn’t see me before you turned off into this alley. When I saw that guy turn down the alley after you, I thought it might be a good idea to see what he was up to. I saw most of the fight, mostly from a distance. I was planning to sneak up behind him and help you out, but it turned out that you didn't need me. Pretty fast reflexes you have there. Can't say the same for him."

"I didn't… I didn't want to kill him…" she protested, glancing back down the way they had come. Her breathing, already too fast and shallow, quickened with anxiety.

"It didn't look you had an option. It was you or him," he observed practically. He was carefully scanning the alley, and searching the windows and doors that opened on to it to either side and above. Glancing behind them, he noticed the trail of blood she was leaving and frowned.

"He wouldn't… tell me… why…" Morgan murmured, deeply troubled by the fact that her assassin had given her no explanation at all. Walking and talking was taxing what was left of her reserves.

"He was probably sent to avenge Niall," Ash responded grimly, with the assurance of a man who knew what he was talking about. Morgan gave him an alarmed and confused look, and he noticed how dangerously pale her face was. She had always been extremely fair, but now she looked ghastly.

"Wait. I ca… I can't… breathe…" Morgan protested, realizing that it was getting harder and harder to get a decent breath.

"Stay with me, Morgan," he begged her, taking her arm again and supporting her weight on his shoulders. Her breathing continued to get faster and shallower and her eyelids grew heavy as she allowed him to drag her out of the alley and down the crowded street, away from the campus.

Morgan could not catch enough breath to protest as he led her further and further away from the sanctuary of the academy. She had no idea how much blood she had lost, but if she had been even a little more coherent she would have wondered why her savior had not stopped to bind her wounds before dragging her down the street.

Ash was not indifferent to her bleeding, but he had been forced to find a way to ensure that her blood trail led any potential investigators astray. Fortunately, there were always a few streets in any given district that remained partially flooded during the rainy seasons. Once he had passed through one, he started looking for a safe place to tend to her wounds and deal with her blood soaked garments. Spotting the perfect spot, he turned down another alley. "Just a little further," he promised his wounded and weary burden.

Morgan tried to rouse herself and look around to reorient herself. She was not particularly familiar with the place he had brought her to, and she was too miserable to try and remember the route they had taken. Noticing that he had dragged her into a blind alley, though, she felt a spike of panic that did wonders to restore her alertness.

Ash stopped next to a brimming water trough. "All right, let me take a look at you," he instructed, peeling away the cloak he had lent her. He cursed under his breath at the condition she and her clothes were in. Her white initiate's garb was heavily stained, and so was the inner lining of his cloak. He wadded the cloak up and dipped it in the water trough, while declaring, "You're soaked in blood. Just take it all off and throw it in the trough."

When she hesitated, he grabbed the front of her shirt, tearing it open and stripping it off of her. The abrupt and violent action tore away the scabs that had begun to form which had glued the fabric to her skin. She almost shrieked in pain, and gasped as the cold night air licked at her already chilled flesh. The look he gave her, in response to her outburst, was enough to make her quickly slither out of her pants and hand them over.

"I'm sorry, Morgan, but these clothes connect you to the assassin. Unless you think you can explain what happened to the authorities, these have to be destroyed," he declared.

"You could have said that first," she snarled.

"To a clever girl like you? I assumed you would have already figured that out," he retorted, and shoved her school uniform into the water trough with the cloak, wadding and twisting the material to squeeze out as much blood as possible. When he finished wringing the water out, the stains had been significantly diluted. "That's pretty clean," he stated approvingly, turning to her with a damp wad of cloth in his hand, "stand still and I'll wash off the blood."

Morgan, who had begun shivering on the walk, whimpered as he used the water soaked cloak to scrub at her exposed skin. The icy water amplified the chill of the air, to the point where it felt like he was trying to flay her skin. He ignored her bitter complaints and showed her no mercy when he found a few bloodstains and ordered her to strip off her undergarments too.

Once she was completely naked, he rinsed and wrung out the makeshift rag and instructed her to finish washing down. As she did, he appraised her injuries. "Well, not as bad as I'd feared. Some minor cuts and scratches, apart from the gash on your hand and that one across your back. Nothing too serious. How are you holding up?" he asked her soberly.

"I'm freezing!" she shouted in ire.

"You're still in shock," he told her casually, resting the inside of his wrist on her forehead. He was concerned about the drop in her body temperature, but it was actually a fairly warm evening, thanks to the humidity. The cold bath had done a good job of rousing her. With a mocking smile, he reassured, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. You just need some time to sort yourself out. Okay? Now, go ahead and ring those out and give them to me. I'll see if I can find you something for you to wear while I'm disposing of these."

"You expect me to stand around naked?" she cried out, in the middle of dunking what had once been her pants. Turning to him and seizing him by the collar, she demanded, "Lend me your shirt!"

"No," he denied, catching her hands and pushing her gently away. As she tried to wrestle out of his grip, he struggled to explain, "Two half naked people walking down the street will attract too much attention."

Morgan could not argue with that, so she stopped fighting and wrapped her arms around herself in a vain attempt to retain some body heat. Ash scowled at her, but fished her old pants out of the trough and wrung them out. Adding them to the pile on his former cloak, he gathered everything up in a bundle and picked them up. As he turned to leave the alley, he looked her in the eye and advised her, "Just stick to the shadows and stay out of sight until I get back."

"Trust me, I'm not going anywhere," Morgan promised him bitterly. As he walked away, she glanced around herself and shivered--in apprehension more than from cold. Being stranded naked and alone in a darkened alley in an unfamiliar part of the city was not what she expected from a rescue. Disposing of the evidence linking her to the slain assassin might turn out to be the wisest move, Morgan was willing to acknowledge, but it felt like she had escaped from a bad situation only to end up in one that was significantly worse. "I just hope no one comes down this alley."

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"Morgan?"

"Glad you came back."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a quilt."

"I told you to wait here, not go raiding people's homes!"

"I didn't break into someone's house. I got it off a close line down there. I was cold, Ash!"

"Well, go put it back. Here, you can put these on instead."

"Me and all my friends could fit into this, Ash! I think I'll stick with the bed cover."

"Don't be stubborn. Just belt it in place like a dress. And hurry. Someone could find that body at any moment and raise an alarm."

"Fine. But this is going to be a lot harder to put up than it was to take down."

"Then I'll get it. You get dressed. There's a belt, shoes and a cloak in the other bundle."

"I'm ready. Now what?"

"Now, we need to find a safe place to put you. Come with me."

"I meant to ask earlier, what were you doing in that alley? I mean, I'm grateful for your help, but it's almost too convenient."

"Don't worry about it. I was following you."

"What!?"

"Surprised? Actually, I've been tailing you since you first met me."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see how you would handle yourself with Niall."

"I know you were following me the night he died, but… the rest of the time too?"

"Yes."

"Great. Another one."

"You mean, that man you had dinner with?"

"Do you know him?"

"I've seen him following you around. So, I've sort of been keeping an eye on both of you."

"Why? I mean, after Kevin died, why would you keep following me?"

"I wanted to see if it was an act."

"You wanted to see if what was an act?"

"Your reaction to his death."

"What's wrong with the way I reacted to his death?"

"Nothing. You reacted perfectly. In fact, the longer I watched you, the more convinced I became that it wasn't an act at all. In spite of your contract, you actually developed feelings for him."

"It didn't stop me from doing my job."

"No. Of course not. From what I saw, he was a good kid."

"He practically proposed to me."

"Yeah. See, that's the problem. I mean, I understand how it happened. You're still young and naïve. We all make mistakes, and the romantic type sort of comes naturally."

"I really don't need a lecture, Ash. I've paid the price for my mistake."

"I could see that. But, have you learned from it?"

"Have I learned from it? Do you have any idea what it took to make me what I am now? I don't need you to tell me I'm supposed to be detached when I'm working. I've been trained and lectured on it since I was a little girl, Ash."

"Fine. I won't lecture you. But if you don't mind a little advice, training doesn't prepare you for everything. Take tonight, for example."

"What about it?"

"You've never experienced a serious attempt on your life before, have you?"

"Well, I had it on my calendar, but things just kept coming up."

"Very funny. Answer the question."

"No. And no, this isn't the first time I've killed a man, but it is the first time I've had to kill in order to defend myself."

"Then you understand, some things you can only learn from experience."

"I think I figured that one out a long time ago, Ash. But thanks for pointing out the obvious. That's always reassuring."

"I also assume this was the first time someone has approached you directly with a job."

"You really were spying on me."

"Be grateful. I don't think you would have recovered from the shock soon enough to get away on your own."

"I'm not trying to be ungrateful. I just don't like people taking so much interest in me. That's nothing but trouble."

"I'm glad you already get that."

"So, what was your point?"

"It obviously never occurred to you that someone who goes to the trouble to seek you out in person might not be willing to take no for an answer."

"What? You think Mann sent that guy to kill me?"

"He did follow you all the way from the restaurant."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Well, actually, no. I'm not that funny."

"Great. This is why I never wanted to get into this line of work."

"Hindsight."

"So, now what do I do?"

"Lie low, wait it out. Hopefully whatever made them so desperate is time critical, and won't matter in a week."

"Wonderful."

"Well, here we are."

"Is this your house?"

"It's one of many. I'd be earning a fortune in rent if I didn't need to keep them ready as safe houses."

"Oh? You forgot to mention that you were rich."

"I'm comfortable. I still have to work to support my investments, but these days, who doesn't?"

Ash had watched as Mann lured Morgan to a private dinner meeting. Due in part to Morgan's interference, Ash was still unknown to Mann and his associates, allowing him to spy on the meeting. Ash recognized Mann, however, having seen him tailing Morgan. Ash had kept Mann under observation as he observed Morgan, both interested in seeing how she would fulfill the contract on Kevin Niall. While Mann assumed her reaction to Kevin Niall's death was a performance, Ash was more suspicious and kept watching. His suspicions grew stronger the longer she kept up the act. Apparently, she had developed real feelings for her target, an understandable, yet dangerous, flaw in such a talented, young professional. Ash was surprised at her response to Mann's attempt to secure her services, but alarmed at her seeming indifference to the trap she had walked into.

"Go ahead and make yourself comfortable."

"Do you have a bath?"

"There's a wash room, but if you want a proper bath you'll have to visit the public bath down the street."

"Well, do you at least have something else I can wear?"

"There's an assortment of clothes in the bedroom closets. Take what you need. Would you care for something to drink?"

"I could use something to settle my nerves."

"I'll have it ready when you come back down. That looks better. I see you washed up anyway."

"I'd love a bath, but I don't want to go back out right now. Besides, you kept my purse when you stripped me."

"Ah, right. Here you go."

"Thanks. All in all, not my usual first date."

"What inspired that thought?"

"Well, I'm used to the men I date being in a hurry to get me out of my clothes, but so far no one has managed it quite as fast as you did."

"It's my special technique; wait 'til an assassin jumps a girl and then slip in and sweet talk her into giving up all her clothing while she's in shock. Works every time."

"That's what I thought."

…

"You know, something here doesn't add up."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, back in the alley, you said that you thought the assassin was sent to kill me for killing Kevin Niall."

"I did."

"Then later, just before we got here, you said you thought the assassin tried to kill me for saying no to Mann."

"It seems pretty obvious. I mean, he did follow you from that meeting."

"But, are you sure he wasn't following me before that?"

"I don't remember anyone following you before that. At least, not today."

"Just how often have I been followed?"

"Apart from me and Mann, no more than anyone else. I've been more consistent about it. Mann watched you closely for a few weeks, and then for a few hours here or there to study your habits."

"Wonderful."

"That's what you said the first time I told you."

"That's because the idea makes me feel so warm and fuzzy inside."

"Cute. But, back to what you were saying. What doesn't add up?"

"Well, what does Niall's death have to do with Mann's offer?"

"What? Wait, how can you ask that? Mann told you himself."

"He did?"

"Yes, that whole contract was a set up to expose you. He was there the night you killed Kevin Niall, he was paying so much attention to everything you did, he never even noticed me following you too."

"It still doesn't make any sense. I mean, I can see now why he'd want to kill me. But, he saw that whole disaster, and he still wants me to do a job for him? I just don't believe it."

"A disaster? I wouldn't go that far. The outcome left a lot to be desired, but it did fulfill the requirements of the contract, and you did demonstrate a lot of talent. Not that I didn't have doubts that you'd be able to pull it off. That was why I was watching you after all. I was pretty sure you'd already botched it if Lloyd was willing to bring me in on top of you."

"I still can't believe how fast he was to come down on me for getting involved with Kevin," Morgan groaned wistfully. Her companion shrugged and sipped thoughtfully from his mug. Once again, she was reminded that Ash and Kevin had entered her life on the same night.

Morgan had been the paid companion of Keith Ross, the son of a powerful merchant noble, the night she had met both of them. Morgan had been hired to turn Keith into a man and then turn him loose. Morgan had been with Keith for over a week, and had completed every aspect of her contract short of bringing their relationship to a natural end. To that end, Morgan had been subtly encouraging Keith to pursue the girl he had a longstanding a crush on. Morgan had been keeping her eyes open for another way break things off, when he brought her to a party honoring the recent exploits of the young noble and adventurer, Kevin Niall.

Morgan had been worried, until she noticed that the girl Keith liked was present. One look at Keith with Morgan on his arm, and the girl became jealous. With such a perfect opportunity, Morgan began looking for a man bold enough to pry her away from her date, freeing Morgan and Keith from each other.

Morgan was surprised when the guest of honor abruptly cut into her conversation and attempted to sweep her away. She quickly learned that Kevin had overheard Morgan telling Keith about the time she was trapped in the ruins as a child. He had interrupted at once, challenging her to prove her claim and once she did, he wanted to know about everything she saw and experienced while she was in the ruins. Keith slipped quietly away, once Kevin had engaged Morgan's full attention. Unfortunately, her ordeal in the ruins was a very painful topic for Morgan. Her experiences in the ruins had been both terrifying and wonderful, but the way people had responded to her accounts of the ordeal had left her traumatized. As politely as possible she tried to divert his attention to something else.

Of course, Kevin just thought she was being coy.

More than once, she had tried to excuse herself. Unfortunately, the other guests had assumed she must be someone important if Kevin was so interested in her. Each time she tried to slip away, someone would corner her, trying to figure out who she was or what Kevin was talking with her about. Kevin was always ready to intercept her when she escaped from those confrontations. Morgan thought she would finally escape from Kevin when she caught Keith sneaking off with the girl he admired. Satisfied that her mission was accomplished, she resorted to her most desperate ploy to escape from Kevin's company.

Ever wary of being exposed, Morgan was extremely sensitive to being observed. Morgan had picked up on the presence of someone studying her a little too intently and subtly encouraged his interest. In Morgan's experience, a man who stared that hard at a girl in another man's company simply had to be willing to take her off his hands. While she had not inspired him to approach her, she hoped by this point that he would be responsive if she approached him.

The man, of course, had been Ash.

To her surprise, he had not been interested in her for any reason she would normally have expected. His attention had been fixed on her out of irritation. He had confronted her angrily, revealing that he knew what she was, what sort of work she did. He asked her if Lloyd knew she was there and insisted on knowing what her intentions were concerning Kevin. Upset and angry at hearing that Lloyd had sent someone in to check up on her, she announced that she was on the verge of completing her contract, and that she would have to take care of Kevin before the night was over. It was only a matter of time before he dragged her aside somewhere private where she could go to work.

Morgan could not remember exactly what they said to each other, but whatever she said seemed to cool Ash down a bit, satisfied that she was just doing her job. He assured her that he would straighten the misunderstanding out with Lloyd, and asked her to try and keep her hands off Kevin until Lloyd got back to her about it.

Morgan was swept up by Kevin again, when Ash excused himself. Resolved to endure his probing questions, Morgan resigned herself to her fate. In truth, it had not turned out so bad. The direction the conversation evolved had suggested that Kevin might be receptive to her tale in a way others had not been. He had been in the ruins and must have encountered some of the things she had. But, while she had resolved to indulge in a little recreation to distract the man from his obsessive interest in the ruins, her conscience kept summoning up images of Logan and Roark. Reminded of the unresolved love triangle she was in, she found herself spurning Kevin's advances. Naturally, this only aroused his interest in her, apart from what he could learn from her.

Lloyd summoned Morgan to his home the next day to issue a warning. He had learned that Kevin had become infatuated with her, and urged her, for several reasons, not to become involved with him. In the light of a new day, Morgan was more than willing to obey. Morgan tried to discourage the young lord's interest, in part to honor Lloyd's request, but also because the situation was a painful reminder of her past. Growing up as the companion of a lord's son, and being trained as a courtesan under the watchful eyes of another young lord, had taught her the danger of courting the attention of a noble.

Unfortunately, Kevin simply became more infatuated with Morgan the longer he pursued her for information about the ruins. Morgan had cursed herself for being stupid enough to get involved with Kevin in the first place, when she realized that the young lord had become completely obsessed with her. Her life was already complicated enough. Unfortunately, Kevin seemed determined to complicate it further. He had gone to the trouble of having her followed, and began showing up to confront her at all the places she usually hung out. Morgan tried to drive him off, but often that just was not possible.

Morgan sighed, pulling herself out of her reverie. Ash glanced at her curiously, waiting patiently for her to resume the conversation. With a shrug, Morgan admitted, "He kept telling me to put him down, but I just kept on screwing up by the numbers."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. In the end, all that matters is that you managed to fulfill your contract."

"Oh, sure. Kevin Niall won't be an inconvenience for anyone ever again. Of course, dropping him to his death, stark naked, from the seventh story landing of the Imperial Hotel might, just might mind you, have been overkill. But hey, mission accomplished. I don't know why I didn't think of trying that from the beginning."

"That was just a bit over the top. On the other hand, there wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind that it was anything other than an accident."

"That's because it was an accident!"

Morgan protested, insisting that Kevin's death had been an accident. Which, he "reminded" her, was what the contract had specified, prompting him to extend his complements for making it look so convincing. He playfully accused her of stealing the contract from him, and pretended to criticize Lloyd for offering it to both of them, effectively exposing the truth about Lloyd and his criminal organization to her for the first time. The suggestion that someone believed she had assassinated Kevin, and had sent an assassin in retaliation shook Morgan severely. In many ways, that eclipsed the revelation that she had unwittingly been part of a criminal organization. Her surprise and refusal to believe, seemed curious to Ash. When he commented on Lloyd’s involvement in the underworld, her professed ignorance about the organization seemed so genuine. Morgan was either the best liar he had ever met, or not at all what he had been led to believe.

"What? Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"It can be hard to tell with you…"

"What did you think I meant when I said the whole thing was a complete and utter disaster? What the hell are you laughing at!?"

"I'm not… I'm not laughing at you. Just the situation. I'm sorry. I've always had a morbid sense of humor. You have to admit, it is kind of funny."

"Funny? Try mortifying!"

"All right, all right. So, it was a disaster. But don't take it so hard. It could have happened to anyone."

"Well, it happened to me. What I want to know is, how could anyone think I set that up on purpose? Where the hell would someone even get that idea?"

"All right. I think I am beginning to see what's confusing you. If Mann or his associate had any issues over the way Niall died, they would not bother with such an elaborate set up. Mann already knows enough about you to simply dispatch an assassin straight off. Now, a third party, say friends and family of Niall's, have more than enough wealth and influence to arrange a simple revenge assassination. Your involvement was public enough that it would have been easy to raise questions about your innocence. But if that's the case, then someone would have to have tipped them off about your contract."

"What?"

"I know. I don't like that idea either. I trust Lloyd, but it suggests that he has a leak or a traitor somewhere in his organization. It would be more likely that someone on Mann's side of the table tipped the family off. Probably not Mann or his friend. If they had wanted to rub someone's nose in his death, you would have been considered expendable from the very beginning. Depending on who Mann's friend really is, it is even possible that this was all a set up to start a turf war or to bring the authorities down on Lloyd. No. In the latter case I don't think we would have seen an assassination attempt on you. The city guard would have simply arrested you and tried you for conspiracy and murder."

"Okay, now you're back to not making sense again."

"Sorry. I forgot you're still new to all of this. Seeing as you're still shaken up from the attempt on your life, I'll humor you. Things like this are always happening in the underworld. A job is rarely ever just a job. It's usually a tiny thrust or counterthrust in a larger conflict. So, sometimes the job turns out to be a feint designed to provoke one organization to attack another, in the belief that they are simply retaliating for an unprovoked attack. In the meantime, while those two organizations are distracted by war, the person behind the job is able to make an unopposed move on one or both of the warring factions."

"Still not making sense, I don't think."

"I know you're not that shaken up, and I don't care how young you are, you don't expect me to believe that Lloyd hasn't explained the basics to you, do you? I didn't see you get whacked on the head."

"The basics of what?"

"Right. I must have blinked or something. I’m talking about his organization, Morgan. How it operates, how it fits into the rest of the underworld, things like that. Do you follow?"

"Wait. Lloyd's some sort of organized crime boss?"

"No. Not at all. Perish the thought. Lloyd's just a guy who knows people, and how to get things done. I've told you before you don't have to play games with me. I mean, you have a great act, and everything, but this isn't the time for it. There's nothing you're into that I'm not in to deeper. Don't waste my time playing dumb and innocent. It just comes off as being sarcastic."

"I… That is… All right, let's just stop for a moment."

"What's wrong?"

"This… I've had a really bad day, okay? Getting pounced on by an assassin has pretty much thrown my head out of gear. I'm sorry if I come off as sarcastic, but I'm still pretty messed up and confused. Especially about this."

"What do you mean, 'this'?"

"This! Tonight! You! Your timely rescue. It doesn't all track!"

"I've been trying to help you sort everything out…"

"Well, give me a moment to sort some things out for myself, all right?"

"Fine. Knock yourself out."

"Damn…"

"What now?"

"I just realized I've been overlooking something crucial."

"What?"  
 "You keep saying, I fulfilled the details of the contract. Ash, do you know what those details were?"

"I thought I made that clear already."

"No. You didn't. I know you knew about the contract. You had to or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"That's true."

"So, you know what I was supposed to do the night Kevin and I went out on that date?"

"Why?"

"Because Lloyd told me."

"What, exactly did he tell you. For that matter, why was Lloyd sharing confidential information about a contract with you?"

"That was a mistake. I told you that when we first met. Lloyd called me in and gave me the contract, presumably because he thought you couldn't handle it. I was surprised to learn you had been on the job for a week before I was called in, but since you had finally gotten close to the target, and since you clearly had not been informed of Lloyd's decision, I decided to give you room to redeem yourself. This early in your career, a failed contract could ruin you. I even told Lloyd I wouldn't move on Niall until you backed off. Lloyd called me in and told me that he had ordered you to take him out that night. He told me to be ready for you to bow out, so I could finish the job."

"I see."

"I don't blame you for being upset about Lloyd bringing in someone to clean up after you. I simply assumed you realized I had inherited the contract the first time we met. But now that I think about it, we were both pretty tight lipped about it. For all you knew, I was just checking up on you, right?"

"Something like that."

"Well, now I know why you've been so coy."

"You mean, dense."

"I can afford to be polite. So, are we clear on everything now?"

"You tell me. Mann set me up with a contract to kill Kevin Niall…"

"With instructions to make it look like…"

"…an accident."

"Which you did, ironically, by accident."

"And you think this because you were brought in by Lloyd…"

"…to do the same job. Exactly."

"And someone either tipped off the friends or family of Kevin Niall, or Mann and his friend won't take no for an answer, so that's why an assassin tried to take my head off this evening?"

"Correct."

"Then I think we're pretty clear on everything. If you don't mind, I'm just going to lie down here for a moment and let that sink in."

"You do that."