Project Rough Draft

00Casting

Morgan muse

Logan ally, Morgan’s ringmate

Ainsley Roark ally, logan's academy roommate

Margaret Neal associate, Morgan’s academy roommate

Amanda Moore Morgan’s academy mentor

Sylvanus Crane Morgan’s academy master

Keith Ross fmr. escort customer

Kevin Niall fmr. escort customer, test target

Kane Tiernan Lloyd's patron, underworld lord

Hadrian Lloyd Morgan’s front, underworld boss

Kraig Read executive lieutenant

Bruce Kail lieutenant, insurgent

Brendan Mann liaison, insurgent

Ash assassin, mentor

Belinda assassin,

Gareth assassin

Fisk assassin

Tear assassin

Llewellyn vampire lord, underworld patron

Notations

Morgan is subjected to occasional nightmares provoked by the demon's attempts to fight her domination. The frequency and intensity gradually increase over the course of the book.

Ash eavesdropped on Morgan’s first meeting with Mann, so he would have overheard confirmation that she was the intended recipient of the contract on Kevin Niall.

The draft in progress needs to pause while the background revisions are taken into consideration. Most of the changes result from altering the sequence of events so that Morgan’s first incarnation is male. This radically alters the background events establishing Morgan I and Morgan II.

Mother

Morgan I was the son of Rohan, a knight from Arduin and Rowan, a courtesan from Arden. Rohan was a recently widowed father of three on a mission in Avon when he met and fell in love with Rowan. In spite of the fact that they could not marry, they had a child together. Morgan was turned over to his father at the age of seven to be trained in the arts of sword and sorcery. For ten years he alternated between initiate studies at the academy in the autumn and winter and training while traveling with his father in the summer. His roommate at the academy was the child of an Athean slave who had escaped from slavery though the use of a magic artifact that turned her into a boy who was recruited by academy scouts and brought to Avon for initiation. Shawn had been trapped in male form, reverting to female form nine years later when "he" lost his virginity. To reclaim her official identity, Shawn tried to use the ring to become male again, succeeding only when "she" lost her virginity to Morgan.

Later, Morgan stumbled across the ring and tried it on, becoming female. Shawn was forced to explain to his panicked roommate what "she" would have to do in order to regain her manhood. Suddenly realizing who the girl he had given his virginity to had been, he asked Shawn to return the favor. Unfortunately, she was discovered in the dorm before they could have sex, and she was escorted off campus. Posing as a girl, Allannah, she sought shelter from her mother. In the days that followed, while Morgan tried to rendezvous with Shawn, her mother worked overtime to make a lady out of the "hopeless tomboy". Rowan's efforts to accept and embrace herself had an unexpected effect on Morgan, complicated by two things. First, Morgan felt oddly comfortable in her new body and while that disturbed her it had caused her to wonder if she would have been happier as a girl. Second, Morgan had fallen in love with the girl who took her virginity as a boy.

Morgan had always been an androgynous and sensitive person, mistaken often for a girl as a child and capable of passing for one if he tried. Many times in his life he had been told, in a playful way, that he should have been born a girl. On becoming a girl, Morgan had been both frightened and eager to explore her new condition. In the moments they had spent together, as Shawn eased Morgan into bed, soothing, calming and arousing her, the feelings Morgan had felt for the female Shawn had reattached to the male Shawn. Worse, Shawn had made it clear that he had no intention of reverting to his native sex. The initially frightening notion of remaining a girl, in order to be with the person she loved, grew more attractive the longer she was subject to her mother's guidance. When she finally arranged to sleep with Shawn, with a little help from her mother, she tested him with a barrage of nervous questions trying to gauge his feelings.

After sex, while she waited for the spell to come undone, she asked Shawn what he intended to do with the ring. Shawn told her he wanted nothing more to do with it, since he was no longer at risk of reverting to female form. When Morgan reverted back to male form, he asked Shawn if he could have the ring. When asked why, Morgan pointed out that Shawn had given up being a girl in order to pursue his dreams. Morgan explained that he had a dream he was willing to give up being a boy for. Shawn found it odd but could not argue, so he gave Morgan the ring. When Morgan became female again, Shawn asked her what she hoped to gain from her transformation and she took a deep breath, looked him in the eye and told him "love". Shawn was shocked as he realized what she meant. Unable to accept the sacrifice Morgan was offering to make for him, Shawn tried to discourage her, going as far as breaking her heart.

Devastated, Morgan turned to her mother for solace, revealing the whole story to the shocked woman. After recovering and demanding an explanation for Morgan’s transformation, Rowan took her son turned daughter in hand and offered her unconditional love and support. She advised Morgan to confront Shawn with the ungarnished truth. So, heart in hand, she went back to Shawn and explained everything but this time Shawn confessed that he simply did not have strong enough feelings in return. He was a man on a mission, and he could not allow himself to be sidetracked by love, or even a devoted lover. Shattered, Morgan resolved to return to her old life, determined to forget the whole ordeal, only to discover that the ring had gone missing. Some pickpocket had lifted it off Morgan while she was running back and forth in angst and anguish. She confronted Shawn with this news, and he resolved to help her track down the ring.

Morgan was able to remember when and where a stranger had stumbled into her, so they returned to that area and sought out witnesses who recognized her assailant and could direct her in pursuit. It took a while to track the thief down and find out where he had fenced the ring. After some encouragement, the fence informed them that he had immediately contacted a collector of rare artifacts when he acquired the ring and sold it for an awesome sum only an hour earlier. They got the address of the collector, resolved to get access to the ring long enough for Morgan to return to normal but they were rebuffed at the door. Desperate, Morgan broke in to get to the ring but just as she found it and went to put it on, she was caught. The collector turned out to be a very powerful wizard and he unleashed a lethal attack without hesitation. To their mutual shock, the fury of spell was drawn to the ring, which shattered in Morgan’s hand, unleashing a flood of power into her.

Unknown to her, the soul trapped in the ring and the demon that was bound to it, transferred automatically into her, as the destruction of the ring transferred the bindings from the shattered metal to her living flesh. While the wizard stood in shock, Morgan raced away, escaping into the night. With the loss of the ring, she was forced to permanently adopt her new gender and identity. She quickly discovered the scope of the sacrifice her transformation imposed. For all of her training, she had nothing to support and legitimize it. Her options as a girl with no history or credentials were very slim. While she was exploring her options, she caught the eye of a powerful noble who made arrangements, through Morgan’s grandmother, to acquire her as his mistress. In order to gain shelter from her mother, Morgan had made an appeal to be trained as a courtesan and had been undergoing a crash course in her mother's trade when she revealed her true identity to Rowan.

Morgan had continued with that training to justify her ongoing presence as Rowan's apprentice. Rowan's mother set a trap to force Morgan to accept the lord's patronage, binding her to him as his personal courtesan. By the time Morgan realized what had happened, she was legally enslaved to him. Rowan continued to help her adjust and adapt to her new life and circumstances. When Morgan was nineteen, she stumbled into the discovery that it was possible to trigger the magic she had absorbed and change sexes. If she succumbed to a powerful masculine or feminine impulse, she could turn male or female, respectively. It was difficult to control, since it required her to either indulge in or suppress a feeling that could originate from within herself or in response to outside stimulus and she accidentally betrayed her secret to the lord's wife, Naomi. A practical woman, she simply took advantage of the situation to force Morgan to service her in addition to her husband.

At one point, as the result of efforts by the demon within to take possession of her, Naomi, and then Morgan, were impregnated in quick succession. Naomi was impregnated with a parthenogenic son of Morgan’s who was a reincarnation of Logan, while Morgan was impregnated with parthenogenic daughter who was a reincarnation of herself. Neither of these inceptions was sufficient to liberate the demon, though it did gain an equal hold on Logan and Morgan’s souls. When Logan was born, a few days before Morgan II, it was obvious that he was not the son of the lord but since the lord was oblivious to the truth about Morgan, he simply assumed that his wife had been unfaithful. Thus, Logan was considered a bastard. He was Naomi's favorite and her secret delight. Morgan, as a courtesan, did not need to explain or justify her daughter's paternity but she named her former self as the father and named her daughter Morgan.

Morgan I had been living under the alias, Allannah, long enough to have acclimated herself to her new name. Logan had been named on impulse, when the lady asked her what "her" son should be called, she had blurted out the name "Logan" without even thinking. Upon thinking about it, she knew instinctively that it was the right name for the boy, unaware that her response had been prompted by an unconscious awareness of the soul trapped within her. While the two mothers resolved to keep Logan's paternity a secret, Morgan had previously confided in her mother about the way the lady had been exploiting her male side. When Rowan confronted Morgan with her suspicions, Morgan confirmed that Logan was "her" son and begged her to keep it a secret. Of course, it was necessary to bring her into Naomi's confidence as well and things were arranged so that Morgan and Logan would grow up as siblings, paired together as companions.

Over the following years, the demon was slowly threading itself deeper and deeper into Morgan I, until the time when Morgan II and Logan were seven. In the years since the ring was shattered, the wizard, aided by the cult of Azael, had been searching for Morgan I. The children had been born already, by the time Morgan I was located, and the cultists saw a perfect opportunity to resurrect their god. On the assumption that Morgan II and Logan were created by the demon; to expel the souls binding it to the warded body of Morgan I, the children could be used in a ritual that would resurrect the demon Logan had slain in his former life. This forced the cult to wait until the children were seven and capable of receiving the mantle of their former selves. When the time came, the pair were abducted and taken into the ruins. Then, Morgan I was lured into the ruins to come rescue them. Suspicious, Morgan approached carefully and discovered the cultist's plot.

An elaborate ritual was planned, in which the children's lives would be used to compel her participation. The first part of the ritual was supposed to concentrate the souls of Morgan and Logan in the children's bodies, leaving the demon in sole possession of her soulless body, at which point it would be free to attack and devour the helpless children, consuming them body and soul to resurrect itself in its full glory. Morgan I searched through everything she had learned about demons and demonic possession and concluded that the only way to foil the cultists was to sacrifice herself. Finding a way to kill herself and leave no remains for the demon to possess required a little imagination. The best she could come up with was provoking a dragon to devour *her* alive. Fortunately, the cultists had already succeeded in provoking a dragon; Morgan had risked her life sneaking past it to rescue the kids.

Unwilling to leave the children in the hands of the cultists, if she was not going to be around to help them, Morgan I decided to make some use of the dragon's hunger before she fed herself to it. Using herself as bait, she led the dragon into the ruins and ambushed the cultists. The dragon happily tore through the cultists, snapping them up in its efforts to get Morgan. The hard part was keeping ahead of the dragon long enough to ensure all of the cultists were taken care of. The best she could do was see to it that any cultist not devoured was at least crippled before her game plan came to its grisly end. It had seemed possible for a moment for her to escape with the children and her own life, when the dragon got one step ahead of her. At the moment of her death, the demon was literally torn in half, as the two souls it had rooted itself in departed Morgan’s body and refocused exclusively in Morgan II and Logan.

Daughter

Morgan II and Logan escaped from the ruins and returned home. They had witnessed the death of Morgan I and told the tale to their shocked elders. Morgan and Logan were temporarily separated, as Morgan was sent to live with Rowan and begin training to become a courtesan. To make peace with her husband, Logan's mother revealed that his father had been a male courtesan. This gave Logan enough legitimacy to be the lady's personal heir and resulted in him being sent to the academy for initiation. Being in the same city made it possible for Morgan and Logan to continue the friendship they had developed growing up together. Their friendship evolved as they grew older and became more and more intimate. They explored their emerging sexuality together and became lovers in their teens. Their relationship was discovered when Morgan completed her training and refused her license, citing an engagement to marry Logan.

When Logan's mother learned of this, she objected, revealing that they had the same father. Refusing to believe this, they decided to elope but doubts caused them to visit the College of Healing at the academy for tests. The tests revealed a shocking and inexplicable oddity. They were virtually twins. Apart from sex, they were identical. Perplexed by this mystery, they were even more stunned to learn that they were both tainted by a demonic influence. In spite of having to suspend their plans for a future together while those two mysteries were being investigated, they resolved to stay at the academy. While Morgan had not been a novice initiate, the psychic abilities she had developed following her ordeal in the ruins qualified her for apprentice initiate studies alongside of Logan. To pay for everything, since she was virtually broke and Logan had been cut off for defying his mother, Morgan decided to exploit her training to work as an escort.

In the process of establishing themselves on their own, Morgan ended up stumbling into a relationship with Logan's roommate and their mutual, longtime friend, Roark. Mislead by Logan's withdrawal, Morgan had assumed that he had given up on her and she had welcomed Roark's attention. She quickly fell in love with him, as he gave her hope for the future, but they were caught in bed by Logan. Logan snapped and almost killed Roark and was forced to explain himself to Morgan and Roark. Once Roark understood the truth, he made a vow that he would not take advantage of the situation to steal Morgan away before they discovered if it was possible for Logan and Morgan to be together. It was a tenuous truce, since it was implied that he would resume his pursuit of Morgan once he and Logan were on equal footing with her. So, Morgan threw herself into her work, finding intimacy only in the arms of strangers who paid for the privilege.

Unknown to Morgan and Logan, their intimacy had been exploited by the demon divided between them to gradually reconstitute itself. It existed as two shadows of its former self, mirror images that helped attune them to each other and filtered fragments of their former selves into their current incarnations. Part of their intimacy was founded by the unique experiences they shared, the inexplicable skills and abilities they would discover, the odd flashes of memory that aroused more questions than they ever answered and the strange discoveries they had been confronted with by the College of Healing. Not one to dismiss an opportunity or advantage that presented itself, Morgan had simply embraced the emerging skills and abilities, adapting and integrating them into her formal training. Her former life had given her an excellent foundation to build upon, but it did not provide solutions to all her problems. Like her former self, Morgan was unlucky in love.

Morgan had not been prepared for another suitor to enter her life. Kevin Niall managed to slip past her guard by virtue of possessing qualities that she had admired in both Logan and Roark. Unconsciously, she responded to his advances because it was like finding both of her loves in one person. Lloyd warned Morgan not to get involved with Niall but that did not help. Her efforts to repulse his advances were undermined by the emotional undercurrent, leading to a situation where she was forced to submit to her secret desire in order to achieve her conscious goal of driving him away. The result was tragic. Her attempt to drive Kevin away only made him pursue her more fiercely, provoking a chase that led to his accidental death. The incident also convinced certain parties that she was a professional assassin. One of those parties, formerly an academy initiate by the name of Shawn, had become one of the deadliest assassins in the northern realms, Ash.

Ash had been unnerved by his first encounter with Morgan, reminded of the boy who became a girl in the hope of being loved by him. Ash investigated Morgan, not surprised to learn that she was the original Morgan’s daughter, but he was surprised learn the official identity of her father and learn that he had officially sired a son by another woman as well. He puzzled over the facts. Allannah had died to save the son and daughter of Morgan I. The boy had been kept ignorant of his father's identity until after the death of the woman his father had become. The girl had been named "for her father" but Ash knew the truth and found it odd that Morgan would name a daughter after her former self. Further study of Morgan II turned up other perplexing things. She had obviously inherited a number of the former Morgan’s habits and traits. He had hardly begun to penetrate the mystery surrounding her when she killed an ambushing assassin.

When Ash learned that she was not really an assassin, he had already seen her use moves the first Morgan would use in fights. Even though he knew he ought to kill her, he simply could not do it. Whenever he tried, he was confronted by the ghost of the friend he had betrayed. But he could not leave her to her own devices either. Like Lloyd, Ash felt her only chance to survive was by becoming an assassin and living up to her new reputation, but he also knew she could not be forced into it. However, with a little judicious nudging, she would walk down that path on her own. Only at the end, when she had proven herself, would Ash be able to offer a partial explanation, confiding that he knew her mother and father and for their sake he had given her a chance. Logan had also been given some consideration, which, combined with the fact that he had been an assassin, had made it possible for Ash to take certain risks with him as well.

Rough Blocking / Dialogue

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As had become her habit, Morgan woke up early, worked out and had breakfast with Logan and Roark. A strong bond existed between Morgan and Logan, as revealed in his vocal concerns about her profession. In the course of their conversation, while musing over recent events and situations, Logan asked her if she planned to go back to work. Morgan mentioned that she had been summoned to a meeting with Lloyd and expected him to ask the same question but confessed that she had not made up her mind about how to respond. Morgan took Roark's advice and put everything out of her mind to focus on her classes. While Morgan had been trained in the basic arts of sword and sorcery, she had always had difficulty with magic as the result of her psychic sensitivity.1 This was unfortunate, because psychic ability was far more difficult to train and develop than magic ability. In order for her to even learn magic, it had been necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent.

"Is it morning already?"

"Go back to sleep. I’m just going out for some exercise."

"It's not even light out, yet. When do you ever sleep?"

"I strive for quality, over quantity. Don't sleep too long, Margaret, I won't be back to wake you for classes."

"I won't…"

Now that she had been cut off from her past, she tried not to think of those days and yet the habits they had forged remained strong. They roused her before dawn and drove her through the elegant patterns of a deadly dance.

"You're up early. Nightmares again?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Not really. Memories, maybe. It can be hard to tell."

Morgan carefully avoided his gaze. It was ironic that he would mention his struggle to recover the memories of his former life. Knowing how difficult it was for him to remember his past, she felt guilty for wanting to shut out any memories of her own. It had been a while since she had allowed herself to dwell on the past. She had spent so much time and effort focused on creating a new life for herself, she had blocked all thoughts of what she had lost. Unfortunately, there was no real way to escape from the events and circumstances that had shaped her into the young woman she had become.

"You still reliving Niall's death?"

"What? No. Just my regular nightmares this time. Never thought I'd be grateful for that."

"Hopefully this means you're getting over it, then."

"It's not much of an improvement."

"Morning, Morgan."

"Good morning, Roark."

"Already worked out I see. I told you you wouldn't catch her in time."

"I'm warmed up enough to spar. Care to join us?"

"As much as I long for the pleasure of a sound beating, I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

"Again. You're not that bad, Roark. If you'd just practice a little…"

"As little as possible, thank you. We do enough sword work in class."

"And yet, you'll jump into a duel over the faintest slight."

"Which should count as sufficient extra practice."

"Never mind. Next time, you ask him."

"Sure."

"That's not fair. You know I can't say no to her."

"Really? I'll try to remember that. It could come in handy someday. Morgan?"

"I'm good. We'd better make this quick, though. I'm starving."

"All right then." "I was wondering, have you made up your mind about going back to work?"

Morgan adjusted her grip and met his blade solidly. He lunged in, applying force to her blocking blade in an attempt to drive her back. Her eyes tightened and her shoulders tensed in an effort to disguise her reaction to the question. Her work was a constant source of strife between them. It had begun as a necessary sacrifice. Unable to find a job sufficient to meet her tuition and expenses, while leaving her enough time for classes and study, Morgan eventually became desperate enough to consider exploiting her family legacy.

Morgan, descended from a long line of courtesans, had been raised and trained with expectations of becoming a courtesan herself. Raised primarily by her mother, the mistress and muse of a powerful aristocrat, Morgan had started out with a fairly normal childhood. She had her mother's patron for a father-figure and his children, the children of his other retainers and her own siblings, for peers and playmates. Her grandmother had not approved, insisting that a proper courtesan needed to be specially trained from birth but a compromise had been reached that allowed Morgan to remain with her mother until puberty, when her formal training as a courtesan could begin. As a result, her primary education was informal, mostly private tutoring in the spheres of academics, aesthetics and athletics, like all of the other children.

Sensitive to discrimination, Morgan had approached her early education with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. In part, that stemmed from the fact that she was the same age as the lord's youngest and favorite, son. By the custom of the household, Morgan had been selected as the boy's personal companion. She had been more than enough of a tomboy to keep up with him, but he had resented her for challenging his natural superiority as a male and a noble. His efforts to put her in her place only made her more determined to prove herself. After some intense, initial rivalry, they eventually became close, intimate friends, however. That period of her life had been spiced by good-natured competition and an uncanny knack for misadventure.

Her exposure to normal life had made things very difficult for Morgan, after menarche, when she began training formally under her grandmother to become a courtesan. It did not take her long to realize that she did not want to end up like her mother, the property of some nobleman. As time passed, Morgan’s resolve was tested. She found herself under increasing pressure to commit herself to her courtesan training. Whenever possible, she escaped from it to pursue other options. Her rebellion was noticed by her grandmother, who concluded that her other interests were coming directly into conflict with her calling. She increased the demands of Morgan’s training, leaving her with no time or energy for adventures. That made escaping her fate as a courtesan an even greater priority.

Unable to abandon her training, she ultimately resolved to reject it. When she came of age, completing her training, she refused her courtesan's license and returned home. Unfortunately, her plan collapsed when her grandmother followed and turned her childhood home upside down with a plot to force Morgan to accept her heritage. Only a freak accident on her return to the city, to accept her license and a contract that would bind her to a petty and possessive young lord, saved her from her grandmother's plot.

Ironically, as she sought to establish herself in her new life, she had found herself reduced to the possibility of contracting her services as an escort and personal companion. Knowing that Logan would never condone such a thing, Morgan had gone to their mutual friend and ally--conveniently, Logan's roommate, Ainsley Roark. Once she convinced him it was necessary, Roark had introduced her to Lloyd. Morgan had described her background and explained her situation to Lloyd. After a little deliberation, he had agreed to give her chance.

It did not take long for Morgan to prove herself to Lloyd and both of them were mildly surprised by the fee she was able to command. In spite of the demand for her services, Morgan had remained careful to keep a low profile for fear of being expelled from the academy. Fortunately, Lloyd took great care handling her contracts, carefully screening her clients to ensure she was never in great danger of being abused, exploited or discovered by the authorities. The sacrifices she made, and the risks she took, had been hard for Logan to accept. But he had learned to tolerate her work, and she had learned to tolerate him always questioning it. The question he had just asked went beyond his normal concern, however.

"You mean, after what happened with Niall?" Morgan clarified, wincing slightly and averting her eyes. Unpleasant memories flashed through her mind as she levered his blade away and executed a series of probing strikes.

Over the course of a couple of months, Morgan has amassed a tiny fortune. Every night she spent with a strange man, she consoled herself with the knowledge that it brought her one step closer to never having to sell herself again. She had a few setbacks, as her work occasionally put her in awkward or compromising positions and she had argued with Logan almost incessantly about the sacrifices she was forced to make. The job had it's good side, like the affair with Keith Ross--turning a shy and awkward boy into a cool and confident man. But it had also had it's bad side, such as the affair with Kevin Niall that followed. A passing obsession that had grown to threaten her "career", Morgan had been forced to play a dangerous game that had resulted in his death.

"Yes."

"I don't know," Morgan sighed heavily. It had been an accident, but Morgan had spent each day since the tragedy berating herself for the mistakes she had made. It had been almost a week already and she had not worked once. In fact, she had not spoken with her benefactor since the morning after the incident and had heard from him only the previous night. Shrugging, she confided, "I received a message to meet with Lloyd tomorrow afternoon. He probably wants to know the same thing."

"You know you don't have to."

"I don't know. I mean, yeah, I made quite a bit before the fall festival but it's not nearly enough to put us both through the academy."

"It's enough to get us through this year. That gives us time to find some other way to make ends meet. There's got to be a better way to make a living, Morgan. We have other skills and talents."

"Hired swords just don't make the kind of money an escort can. Honestly, sometimes I think I should have taken Kevin up on his offer."

"What, become his personal courtesan? I’m glad he died before he managed to convince you to do that."

"Logan!"

"I'm sorry. I liked him but I also know how much you'd end up hating yourself if you were forced to do that. You paid a high enough price to escape that fate the first time."

"Like I had a choice. Like I still have a choice. I'd be happy to quit, Logan but the thing is, it's the best I can do now. It would be stupid to stop short of what we need. The pay is good enough that a few months is enough to cover tuition, room and board for both of us with something left over for spending. I'd prefer to just get it all over with. Because, if nothing comes up before summer, I'll be forced to go back to work, and I don't know if I could do that."

"I don't know how you were ever able to do it."

"It's what I was raised for."

"It's not what you want to be doing, though. What good is a second chance if you keep falling back into the same old pattern?"

"That's my whole point. I don't want to go back to it but if I quit too soon, I won't have any other option."

"If you don't quit soon, you might not have any options."

"Ouch!"

"Damn. I'm sorry. Let me see."

"It's fine. I'll fix it when we're done."

"No. We should stop. You did say you were hungry, right?"

"Oh, fine. But you owe me a decent match next time."

Ironically, while Morgan possessed the talent for magic, it went untested and untrained through most of her childhood. Her latent magic aptitude evolved instead into a natural, if modest, psychic ability in response to the traumatic experiences she had as a child, when she was lost in the ruins of Aeslyn Tear. Morgan had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare her dead and had experienced things that no adult wanted to believe.

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. Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to. An odd side effect of her sensitivity, Morgan could perceive the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even basic spells. Intimidated by awesome and intricate psychic architecture harnessed by magic, she became wary of anyone proficient with magic. When she discovered that her psychic abilities gave her an edge in protecting herself from--and dispelling--magic, she regained her confidence.

"Now do you see why I won't spar with you?"

"I don't cut her every time."

"No. Just when you're arguing, which happens whenever you talk about her work."

"I'm just…"

"Jealous."

"I am not jealous! I'm just trying to look out for her."

"I'm not saying you aren't. But she's not going to quit unless you give her a damn good reason. Do you want to tell her how you plan to make ends meet?"

"Oh, Logan! Don't tell me you're giving our money to Roark!? No offense, Roark. It's just…"

"Hey. No. I understand. Granted, I could probably double your money in one night…"

"Or you could lose it all."

"True. That's why they call it gambling."

"Don't worry, Morgan. That's not what we've been up to."

"Then what have you been up to?"

"Nothing. Just a few odd jobs here and there."

"Ah. Well, at least you're trying. There, all mended."

"Come on. Let's get something to eat."

"What were you guys planning to do after classes today?"

"When are you supposed to see Lloyd?"

"Tomorrow night."

"He probably has a job or two lined up for you for the weekend."

"I know."

"So, what are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know. I’m still pretty messed up over the whole thing with Kevin. I keep expecting him to show up and corner me, then I picture him falling. It all comes flooding back. I don't think I'll ever be able to take a bath again without thinking of that night."

"I just can't believe he reacted like that. I had no idea he was that gone over you."

"That whole obsession of his didn't tip you off?"

"Like either of you are any better. I just can't believe I misread him so badly. I should have known it wasn't going to work. Instead of chasing him off, I made it impossible for him to let go of me."

"Morgan, you can't blame yourself for how he felt."

"Roark, I killed him."

"No. It was an accident, Morgan. You have to stop blaming yourself for his death."

"No. It's my fault. I took that stupid contract, I convinced myself that Lloyd was right about him. Logan could see it. Why couldn't I?"

"I know I said it would only encourage him but I didn't know he'd react like that."

"Besides, he says the same thing about all your dates. He hates seeing you with other men."

"That's not it. I hate watching her go out, because I know that she hates doing it."

"Hey, it's bad enough you argue with me about it, do you have to argue with Roark too? Give it a rest for one day, please."

"I'm not arguing with anyone. I just wish both of you would believe me when I tell you I'm not just being jealous. Especially you."

"Oh, no. You've never been jealous over Morgan."

"Logan! Roark! I mean it."

"Sorry."

"Maybe now isn't the best time to think about this."

"What?"

"Why don't you just focus on your studies for now. For all you know Lloyd is just checking up on you. Why fret over a question that might not come up. If it does, at least you'll be able to think about it with a fresh mind."

Returning from classes in the early evening, Morgan had an unexpected encounter with Mann. Morgan confronted him, to ask why he had been following her for the past few weeks. Suggesting it would be better to speak in private, he invited her to join him for a meal. Her curiosity forced her to accept his invitation to dinner. In response to her question, he explained that he had followed her as a favor to a friend, to find out what sort of work she did for Lloyd. As they ate, Mann politely inquired about her history and association with Lloyd. He asked how and why she came to work for Lloyd, how she felt about working for him, how she felt about the work she did and how she would respond, hypothetically, if given a contract that named him. Morgan responded with an abbreviated version of events, careful to avoid incriminating herself. She concluded by telling him she had an exclusive arrangement with Lloyd and was satisfied with how he managed things.

"Excuse me."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was… It's you!"

"Ah, Morgan! I was just looking for you."

"You know where I live?"

"Well, I have been following you for a while…"

"I noticed. Do you mind telling me why?"

"That's part of what I came here for. 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? My treat."

"Sure, just give me a moment."

"Ready?"

"Let's go."

"I think you'll like this place. They have the most delicious, spiced meat pastries. So, what would you like?"

"To start with, who are you and why have you been following me around?"

"My name is Mann. Brendan Mann but most people just call me Mann."

"Go on."

"Right. Let's see, how should I explain myself? 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."

"I've had a bit of exposure, yes."

"You've also been the focus of a lot of rumors. 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?"

"No. As I said, it's just the popular rumor. 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. As the daughter of a courtesan, Morgan had grown 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 courtesan's 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.

Morgan was reminded of the uncertainty she had felt during her childhood. Until her mother reached a decision about her daughter's suitability, Morgan had lived in limbo. The first time she encountered a strange man, she would find herself studying him, looking for some sign that would identify him as her father. Of course, she was not the only one who was curious. The gossips loved to speculate, and Morgan could not help but listen to their supposition. There had been plenty of whispered rumors but never anything solid enough to identify the man who sired her.

It seemed like yesterday, and a lifetime ago, that she had learned how close she had been to her father the whole time she was growing up. He had turned out to be a man she knew intimately. He had been a knight in the service of her mother's patron. The father of three other children, Rohan had been widowed when his wife died in childbirth several months prior to the events that led to Morgan’s conception. It had stung to learn that she was the unintended result of a moment of weakness on Rowan and Rohan's part.

Even though her conception was unintentional, she had the comfort of knowing that she had not been unwanted. The reason she had known Rohan so well was because he had taken a keen interest in her training. In spite of the fact that circumstances had made it impossible for him to marry her mother and formally recognize Morgan *as* his daughter, he personally saw to it that she received the essential training in swords and sorcery to pursue a formal initiation at the Academy of Avon Tear. That included training generally offered only to boys and Rohan had not spared her modesty, even though her exposure often encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys.

Rohan had wanted to provide her with an alternative to her mother's trade. When she began her formal training, her training with him became limited to what Rohan could teach in his free time, when she was home for the summer, but she applied herself passionately to his instruction, demonstrating a natural talent for fencing with a long sword. In contrast, her training in sorcery was a grim and torturous ordeal. In order for her to even learn magic, it had been necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent. This was unfortunate, because psychic ability was far more difficult to train and develop than magic ability. To gain the mental discipline she needed just to cope with her psychic gift, she applied herself to mastering a number of rigorous, physical disciplines. In addition to fencing, she remained devoted to her training in gymnastics and dance and incorporated both, along with the various forms of armed and unarmed combat she was exposed to, into the fighting style she was formally training in.

In the moment those memories flickered through Morgan’s mind, Mann chuckled, shrugged dismissively and shook his head. She pushed aside the thoughts and feelings her sudden reflection had awakened and returned her attention to the conversation as he responded to her declaration.

"Actually, there is a rumor along those lines but no. I was following you to find out what sort of work you did for Lloyd."

"Who said I worked for him?"

"Are you saying you don't?"

"I'm afraid not. Sounds like you're chasing a rumor after all."

"Or maybe, the way you see it, he works for you."

"Excuse me?"

"There's no need to be so coy, Morgan. I know what you are."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"He's your contact, isn't he? Lloyd finds work for you, so technically he works for you, and you work for the client."

"I'm afraid I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"No? 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."

"You set me up. Why?"

"Because I needed to be sure about you before I could approach you."

"Approach me about what?"

"I'll get to that in just a moment. First, I need to ask you a few more questions."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, to start with, just how close are you and Lloyd? I don't recall ever seeing you before this summer."

"We're not that close. A friend of mine introduced us a couple of months ago."

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

"You already know he's my contact."

"Of course. I just need to know how intimate your relationship is."

"Well, we're not lovers, if that's what you're asking!"

"No. I think we've established that already. Besides, Lloyd is not the type to mix business with pleasure."

"That's one of the reasons I like him."

"So, what are you two?"

"Friends, I guess. 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?"

"I suppose so. 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."

"Is Lloyd the only front you've established? Is there anyone else you've arranged to do business with?"

"Yes and no, respectively."

"Well, let me ask you a hypothetical question. 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 whoever replaced him?"

"I don’t know that I would. 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?"

"Like you do?"

"Sure."

"If that made a difference, then I'd already be obligated to work for you. I'm not pleased that you know but if you think that knowledge can be used to blackmail me, think again."

"Who said anything about blackmail?"

"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."

"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."

"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."

"Great. Anyone else?"

"As I told you, there are rumors going around about you. 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?"

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

"Well, obviously, I normally wouldn't be open to an offer like that."

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

"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?"

"Well, in that case it would be an entirely personal matter."

"That sounds very practical."

"Of course it does. Was there anything else?"

"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?"

"Do you know why Lloyd turned him down?"

"Yes."

"Well? Can you tell me why?"

"Actually, no. 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. 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. My friend will be very disappointed to hear that you're not interested. 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."

"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."

"I appreciate that. Well, thanks for dinner."

"My pleasure."

When Morgan left, after declining Mann's proposal, Ash shadowed her and the assassin that had been waiting to silence her if she refused the offer. As Morgan turned down an ally, a shortcut on her route back to the campus, the assassin struck. Before Ash could intervene, Morgan sprang into action. Morgan’s only warning was a sudden premonition of danger. Responding with trained but untested, combat reflexes, Morgan evaded the initial surprise attack. Twisting to avoid the knife thrust to her back and following through to throw her assailant into a wall, Morgan kicked the knife out of his hands as he recovered from the impact. She exchanged a few stunned words with her attacker before he drew his sword and resumed his assault on the unarmed girl. Morgan danced around his attack again, this time disarming him and running him through with his own sword in one flowing motion. Only when her assailant was dead, did Morgan succumb to shock.

Her core discipline was an exotic fighting style she had inherited from her mother and grandmother. Developed by the Maidens of the Goddess, it had been preserved and passed down in secret, through certain courtesan bloodlines, following the conquest of Arden and the resulting purges.

"Damn it."

"You tried to kill me…"

"Figured that out all by yourself, did you?"

"What do you want? Money? Me?"

"Then again, maybe not. Do I look like I'm trying to rob or rape you?"

"Then why did you attack me?"

"What? You want me to spell it out? I've got to hand it to them; you do play innocent to the hilt."

"Who are you? What have I done to you?"

"Sorry, Red. No time for introductions. I've got a bit of killing to do, yet."

"I'm not even armed!"

"Well, this isn't a duel. Besides, you're dangerous enough without a weapon. I should've listened to them about that. Nice moves, by the way."

"Wait!"

"Nice everything, really. It's too bad you have to die."

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Nothing personal, Red. Not… possible…"

"No. What have I done?"

"Just… a girl…"

"Who are you?"

"Damn…"

"Hey, are you alright?"

"He's dead…"

"I saw. Here. Let me see.

02

Morgan was stunned by her own reflexes. In spite of her disbelief, she knew she had killed her attacker and could not help staring at her hands and the man they had slain. Carefully, Ash stepped in and ushered her away from the scene of the incident. The shock was so great, she did not seem to even notice her own injuries. As Morgan struggled to recover her wits, she heard Ash comment: *So, someone finally figured out it wasn't an accident.* He escorted her to a safe house, oblivious to the effect his reassurances had on her. Morgan was bewildered by what she heard, then alarmed when it sank in. Morgan waited until they were alone and asked him what he meant. Ash seemed surprised by her confusion and confronted her with several shocking revelations. In a detailed recapitulation of his view of events, Ash concluded that the attack was probably in response to the assassination of Kevin.

"I've got you. Come on, let's get you out of here."

"I know you. Who…? What do I…?"

"You can call me Ash. Pretty fast reflexes you have there. Can't say the same for him."

"I didn't… I didn't want to kill him…"

"It didn't look like you had an option. It was you or him."

"He wouldn't… tell me… why…"

"He was probably sent to avenge Niall."

"Wait. I ca… I can't… breathe…"

"Stay with me, Morgan. Just a little further. All right, let me take a look at you. You're soaked in blood. Just take it all off and throw it in the trough. That's pretty clean, stand still and I'll wash off the blood. Well, not as bad as I'd feared. Some minor cuts and scratches. Nothing serious. How are you holding up?"

"I'm freezing!"

"You're still in shock. Don't worry, you'll be fine. You just need some time to sort yourself out. Okay, 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? Lend me your shirt!"

"No. Two half naked people walking down the street will attract too much attention. Just stick to the shadows and stay out of sight until I get back."

"Trust me, I'm not going anywhere. I just hope no one comes down this alley."

"Morgan?"

"You're 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 washroom 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 into 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."03 2nd morning

The next morning, Ash was gone when Morgan woke up. Confused and alarmed by the things Ash had said to her, Morgan ignored his instructions to lie low and wait for his return and went straight to Lloyd's office to confront him with what she had learned. Her meeting with Mann had completely slipped her mind in the wake of the attempt on her life and hearing Ash claim to be an assassin hired to kill Kevin Niall. Lloyd was stunned by the news from Morgan and disturbed by the questions she raised. Unfortunately, there was no denying what she had experienced and learned. Lloyd quietly confirmed his involvement in organized crime and considered the situation Morgan had created. It was not hard to figure out how someone could have mistaken her for an assassin. It was even more obvious that Morgan’s enlightenment made her a dangerous liability at that moment. In order to buy time to consider his options, he put her under house arrest and sent for Ash, to find out exactly what the assassin had revealed to Morgan.

"We need to talk."

"Morgan? I wasn't expecting you until this evening. What's wrong?"

"Kraig, would you excuse us, please? I need to speak with Lloyd alone for a moment."

"Excuse me?"

"It's okay. We'll finish this later."

"Sure, Boss."

"Now, why are you barging into my office at eight in the morning?"

"Something's happened…"

"What happened to your arm, Morgan? You're bleeding!"

"What? Oh, don't worry about it."

"Don't be stupid. Come over here and sit down. I'll have a healer in here in just a moment."

"Don't bother. I can take care of a few cuts and scratches myself."

"If you insist. Now, what do you need to talk to me about so badly you didn't even notice you were wounded?"

"Oh, nothing serious. I was just ambushed by an assassin last night. I can't imagine why that would bother me more than a few scrapes!"

"What!? You can't be serious!"

"I don’t think I'd cut myself up like this!"

"I don't mean it like that. Obviously, you've been attacked. But an assassin? Come on, Morgan. Why would anyone try to kill you?"

"Well, he wasn't trying to rape or rob me, Lloyd! As for why, I'd love to tell you, but I sort of killed him before I could get any answers out of him."

"You what?"

"It was him or me. He made that clear enough before trying to lop my head off. But if you want a reason, let's look at the logical explanation; he was probably sent by someone who believes that I was paid to kill Kevin Niall!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Morgan. We both know that's not true."

"It doesn't matter what's true, Lloyd! That's what people believe!"

"What!? Who the hell have you been talking to!?"

"Assassins, Lloyd! I'm surrounded by them. Some idiot started a rumor that I'm your assassin and since that's the sort of business you're in, it's no wonder everyone believes it! Even Ash though that you had hired me to kill Kevin!"

"Morgan, Morgan, you need to calm down. I'm sure there's a rational explanation for whatever happened to you. You're jumping to wild conclusions and making some dangerous accusations."

"Calm down!? I just spent the night with a cold-blooded, contract killer chatting calmly about the trials and tribulations of 'our' profession!"

"Morgan! Stop! Sit! Good. Now, tell me what's going on. I promise I'll take care of it. Barging in here and shouting at me is not going to help you or me sort anything out."

…

"Why didn't you tell me you were a crime boss? Why didn't you tell me I was getting myself involved in organized crime?"

"I expect you should have known that before you came to me. It's a little late to come here and pretend that you did not know who you were dealing with. Do you honestly think any average, law abiding citizen would agree to front an unlicensed courtesan in this city? You should know better than that."

"Before Kevin, I didn't care. It didn't matter. I'm just… I can't believe you kept me in the dark after what happened with him. How could you not warn me when you knew people were going to think I killed him on purpose? How could you do that to me?"

"How was I supposed to explain it to you, Morgan? 'Oh, by the way, you're an assassin now. Keep up the good work.' Is that what you expected me to say? How well would that have gone over, huh? For that matter, why couldn't you just follow orders?"

"What?"

"How many times did I tell you to stop associating with Kevin? How many reasons did I give you to convince you to slam the door in his face?"

"I tried, damn it!"

"Morgan, I didn't ask you to try. If you hadn't let your own feelings get in the way, you could have sent that boy screaming for his mother."

"You don't understand--"

"Morgan. I'm not going to argue with you about Niall again. I'm sorry you got dragged into the middle of this, but you are as much to blame as I. Now, as for keeping you in the dark after the fact, I was hoping no one would ever question Niall's death. Rumors alone should not have provoked anyone to retaliate against you. Because it was an accident, it didn't seem possible that anyone could ever prove otherwise. If someone was suspicious, I expected to see some signs of investigation."

"Well, it looks like you missed the signs, then."

"I am afraid so. Unfortunately, that's not the worst problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Morgan, it is not a common practice in the underworld to disclose critical information to outsiders. The only outsiders we tolerate are clients and customers--people who come to us and in the process condemn themselves. Running girls is a pretty light trade, as far as shady businesses go. A girl like you is more a commodity than a conspirator and we do our best to keep you from learning anything that could make you a liability."

"A liability?"

"Yes. Believe it or not, no one enjoys having to snuff out a pretty, young girl because she knows things that could threaten the security of an asset, or the integrity of an establishment, within the underworld. At the same time, no one hesitates to do it the instant she becomes a liability."

"Is that it then? You're going to snuff me out?"

"Sit down. There's no need to get excited. To be honest, I haven't decided what to do with you yet, Morgan."

"What can you do?"

"I've really only got two options, Morgan and I haven't decided which one is liable to work with you. Right now, all I can really do is sit on you for a while."

"What does that mean?"

"That means you're going to be my guest for a while."

"Wait, you want me to stay here tonight."

"No, I'll send you over to the mansion, but I need you to stay there until this is sorted out."

"Lloyd! I can't do that. I have classes! People are expecting me. I can't just disappear like that."

"I’m sorry, Morgan. This is something you can't afford to say no to. I'm not going to force you but if you leave my custody, I will have no choice but to consider you a dangerous liability and combined with the fact that someone else wants you dead, I don't think you'd want to risk it. I know you don't like it but it is for your own protection."

"Do you really think I am a threat to you?"

"Is that what's got your nose out of joint? Morgan, I do not question your loyalty. I have to consider what happens if you turn up dead and someone decided to look into how you got that way. I have to consider what happens if you end up in the hands of my rivals or the authorities under interrogation. You have no idea how dangerous you can be to me. Yes, you know too much but at the same time you don't know enough."

"Great. So once again I end up in limbo."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"Try not to give me a hard time about this, Morgan. Now, wait here for a moment. Kraig! Get someone to track down Ash. I want to see him in my office yesterday! Oh, and round up some muscle. You're escorting Morgan over to the mansion. Send a message ahead to have a room prepared and drum up some extra protection for the house. Kail! Give Kraig a hand, will you?"

"You look much better."

"Thanks, Kraig."

"Morgan, Kraig will take you over to the mansion and show you to your room. I want you to stay there, understand?"

"Do you really have to lock me up, Lloyd?"

"I'd prefer not to have you chatting with my men. But I'll tell you what, you give me your word to keep your lips buttoned and remain within the limits of the estate, I'll give you the run of the house. Does that sound fair?"

"I can't even talk to anyone?"

"You're in enough trouble, girl. Kraig, make sure everyone knows she's off limits, will you? There'll be a guard at her door. Make sure he knows what to do. I'll come by when I have a chance, Morgan."

"Come on, Red. Let's go."

"Logan's going to wonder what's happened to me, Lloyd."

"I can take care of Logan. You just mind yourself, hear?"

"Wait. What did you mean by that? You wouldn't--"

"Morgan, Logan always struck me as a reasonable sort. I am sure I won't have to resort to drastic measures to convince him that there's nothing for him to be alarmed about."

"Don’t be so sure. You don't know him like I do."

"I will explain the situation to him so that he'll understand that this is for your own good. Now, if you don't mind, I have a lot of work to do."

"Let's go."

"Can I ask you something?"

"You really shouldn't be talking to me."

"And you probably shouldn't have been listening in on our conversation."

"Ah, I can explain that…"

"Can you explain this? You didn't believe that I was an assassin."

"Well, no."

"And you certainly don't believe that I was Lloyd's mistress."

"Not likely."

"Basically, you don't believe any of the rumors about me."

"Not surprising. I know better."

"Exactly. So, what makes you so special?"

"I'm not."

"I believe you are. Lloyd trusts you, doesn't he?"

"Like, for example, trusting me to escort you to your room and make sure you don't chat with any of his men?"

"He didn't say you couldn't talk to me."

"It's sort of a given, since I'm one of his men."

"Well, since you've already bent the rules there, why not answer a question for me?"

"Go ahead, get it out of your system."

"I assume, if he trusts you, you know him pretty well. I just… I need to know if he's serious. Would he have me killed for trying to leave?"

"At this point, he'd have to."

"Why?"

"Because at this point, if you left, it would be an act of rebellion."

"Rebellion?"

"There's too much you don't understand. You're like a little kid, right now, asking why, why, why, why. For now, you just have to trust that he's got your best interests at heart and be patient. The answers will come if you give it time, Red."

"What answers?"

"Now, you see, this is why no one can talk to you. I have more important things to do than answer your questions right now. Like, for instance, finding answers to those questions myself. All right?"

"How can I have faith in someone who would kill me over something I don't even understand?"

"That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself. Just try to understand this, your ignorance is a danger to you and to us. This is necessary to protect everyone from that danger. Is that so much to ask?"

"I could tell you if I had been asked."

Morgan’s detention at the mansion surprised and alarmed Kail. He was relieved to learn that she had only reported the attempt on her life, forgetting to mention the meeting that prompted it. Unfortunately, he had no idea why Lloyd had her isolated and feared that she would be interrogated and expose Kail's plot. While she cooled her heels in a private apartment, Kail organized a raid on the mansion, hoping to abduct her before Lloyd got around to questioning her. Oblivious to this, Morgan tried to contact Logan and reconstructed the events of the past few weeks in her head. In the afternoon, Lloyd paid her a visit and explained the situation to her. While defending his decision to keep Morgan in the dark, he illustrated how that had contributed to the problem. He confessed that he was at a loss about what to do with her, presenting a grim sketch of her options. That evening, as Morgan emerged from the bath, she was confronted by Ash.

"*Logan…" "Come on." ··I know you can feel me.··*

*"Morgan…? Is there something wrong?"*

*"Finally! I need help!" ··No! You can't come here. It's dangerous!·· "I'm in serious trouble, Logan! I was attacked…" ··I have to warn you; you could be in danger!··*

*"Ah! Tone it down a bit. What is it? What's going on?"*

*"Major disaster." ··Someone almost killed me last night!·· "There's a rumor that I'm an assassin. I mean, someone thinks I was paid to kill Kevin!" ··I was set up.·· "The contract was a test. When Kevin died, it made them think I was an assassin. Lloyd thinks they'll be waiting for me if I come home." ··What if they come after you!··"*

*"Whoa! Stop. Your thoughts are running together. Did you say someone tried to kill you?"*

*"Yes! On my way home last night," ··I was ambushed!·· "He followed me from the restaurant and attacked me in an alley." ··He tried to stab me in the back. I can't believe I killed him!·· "I didn't know I could move that fast!"*

*"Morgan, please try and focus. Where are you?"*

*"Lloyd has me locked up at his house." ··What am I supposed to do?·· "You can't come here! You might be in danger." ··You have to warn Roark.··"*

*"I'm coming to get you. Stay where you are."*

*"Wait! No, Logan. You can't. Or maybe… You can say you were supposed to meet me here. That's good. They must not suspect why you came. Tell Roark…" ··Why didn't he tell me Lloyd was a crime boss?·· "You both could be in danger!"*

*"Roark is with me, Morgan. We're both fine. We're coming to get you. Please wait there."*

*"Be careful, Logan."*

…

"How are you doing, Morgan? Feel any better?"

"It's a nice room. I think I'd love it if it wasn't a prison."

"There's no lock on the door, princess. If you'd just give me your word you won't try to leave, you could have the run of the house. There's no need to make this an unpleasant ordeal."

"I'm usually paid to play make-believe. I can't just bask in the lap of luxury and enjoy myself when I know you're off somewhere trying to decide if you can afford to let me go on living."

"I'm sure we can dispense with the melodramatics, Morgan. As you pointed out, no one's picking up the tab. I know you're angry with me. I came here to talk with you about your situation but if you're too busy feeling sorry for yourself, I can come back later."

"No, please. Talk to me. I want to know what's going on. I need to know what I'm supposed to do to make my life go back to normal."

"Well, I don't know if that will be possible. It's going to take me some time to find a way to sort all of this out. I'm sorry to say, people who are forced to become involved in criminal enterprises almost always turn out to be liabilities. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

"It isn't?"

"No. I was thinking about what you said earlier, and I realized that I might have made a mistake."

"Ah. I don't remember falling asleep, but I like this dream so far."

"Funny. All I am saying is, you might have been able to avoid this if you had known about the organization."

"Go on."

"Well, here's the problem. I had always assumed that you knew. In fact, that sort of thing is the root of the whole problem. In the underworld, it's not really common to come right out and say what you mean. Business is conducted with a lot of double talk. You've picked up that habit too."

"I'm with you so far."

"So, I'm going to wager you've had a few conversations with people that didn't quite click."

"I know. I didn't get it until last night but… Yeah, it's obvious that some of the conversations I've had with people were not the conversations they had with me."

"Right. It didn't help that I kept our association somewhat obscure. Since you said you only wanted to work for a few months and then quit, I didn't want you to become involved in the organization. It's only possible to get out of the underworld if you are never fully in, understand?"

"I think so."

"So, I kept you in the dark about my other endeavors and I told all my men that you were off limits. Unless someone had specific orders, like to deliver a message, they were to stay out of your way and leave you alone. Now, I admit, part of the reason for that is because I didn't want any of these thugs trying to take advantage of you and telling them you were a call girl would have had them all lining up to try you out. It was simpler all around to let them believe you were my mistress."

"Heh. Well, that rumor only just made its way around to me."

"I figured you wouldn't mind if it did."

"No, not really. It's funny though."

"What's not funny is that the way we conducted business, combined with the secrecy and rumors that surrounded you, suggested that you might be working as an assassin. Unfortunately, that's not all. It just happens that within a few days of a few of your jobs, someone or other suffered from a sudden or suspicious death in your general vicinity."

"You're kidding."

"No. I’m sorry to say, two of them were not mere coincidences. Do you remember Earl Merlinden, the poor bastard who died of a heart attack in bed with you?"

"Oh, that wasn't my fault! He lied to me about his condition. I tried to revive him!"

"What about that old woman who walked in on you and the junior finance minister"

"How could I forget, she flung a pot of boiling water over us. I didn't stick around to get acquainted, though."

"As I recall, you jumped out the window, sprinted for the pond and never looked back."

"What would you have done if your back was scalded from head to heels?"

"About the same. However, the junior finance minister's wife died that afternoon of a stroke."

"I never knew."

"Well, maybe you're just cursed. Who knows. The point is, there was enough to support the rumors. Niall's death was just one coincidence too many, I suppose."

"There's more to it, though."

"Yes. I've talked to Ash. You seem to have convinced him that you were competition the night you met Niall. Once he was convinced you were in the trade, he had no qualms about confiding the details of contract he believed he had inherited from you."

"Better you heard that from him, I guess."

"Yes. And, on that note, I wanted to explain the primary reason for your incarceration."

"Oh?"

"Yes. As a general rule, when an asset has completed a job, I always recommend that they disappear for a while. When an asset is targeted for retaliation, I insist on it and recommend additional security measures. If I had allowed you to return to the academy today, I would have been placing you and everyone around you in danger. I'm taking a risk just keeping you here but whoever is after you would presumably know about the connection between us, so I might already be at risk. Thus, it makes more sense to concentrate ourselves here behind fortified defenses."

"That won't stop them, if they're really determined to get me, will it?"

"Probably not. Rather than dwell on that, however, maybe you should be thinking about the long term."

"What long term?"

"Because you have become involved in all of this, your only real option is to become more involved in all of this. You should try to figure out how you really feel about that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's time you asked yourself how you feel about the prospect of contract killing."

"Are you serious? The only way you'll let me live is if I become an assassin?"

"Morgan. You're missing the point. As far as the underworld is concerned, you already are an assassin. At this point, there's no way to undo that. So, you need to figure out if that's something you will be able to live with."

…

"You're dead."

Ash had become very suspicious of her in the wake of his discussion with Lloyd. Morgan swallowed her fear and carefully confirmed everything he had told her the night before. Before answering his questions about her, however, she proposed a different explanation for the attempt on her life, describing her meeting with Mann, unaware that he had witnessed it. Ash was forced to retreat when the raid began and could not prevent Morgan’s abduction. He was able to follow as she was delivered to Mann, who gave her one last chance to accept his proposal. Morgan was forced to explain that she was not an assassin.1 Unfortunately, while she was able to convince him that she was just an escort, she had also condemned herself to a painful interrogation and eventual execution. Mann could only intervene if she was an assassin. He expressed sincere regret and sympathy for her misfortune and excused himself, abandoning her to her fate at the hands of Kail's inquisitors.

"I wonder, can you heal fast enough to survive a slit throat? I'm going to remove my hand and if I hear anything louder than a whisper, we're going to find out."

"Why…?"

"What's that?"

"Why… why am I still alive?"

"Simple. I didn't come in here to kill you."

"Then what…?"

"Ah, ah. Softly, now. You still have a razor at your throat."

"Why? Why are you doing this? Why attack me?"

"Ah, right. Just a reminder that you can be killed. I didn't want you to be too sure of yourself after your performance last night."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite. You only proved my point. You cheated death and here you are not even a day later with your guard completely down."

"Excuse me? Then what do you call staying in an armed fortress?"

"An illusion of safety. Personally, I don't trust anything that makes me feel safe. If you want to survive in this world, you're going to have to shed a few illusions, starting with that one."

"Yeah, well, definitely not feeling safe here at the moment."

"Good. Keep that in mind. Now, I believe you and I need to talk."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Then I'll talk. You can chime in at any time. Now, let me see. Where did I want to begin. Oh, yeah. I got called in to talk with Lloyd today. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes."

"Do you care to explain yourself?"

"I… I thought I should inform Lloyd of what happened. I also wanted to get some answers from him. When I… when I was explaining what we had figured out, I sort of mentioned that you… you had reached the same conclusions."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"I'm paraphrasing. I don't remember what I said, word for word."

"Do you know what Lloyd asked me when he called me in?"

"I imagine he wanted to know if you'd told me you were an assassin and if we had shared the details of the contract with each other."

"Is that what you told him?"

"I told him we… well, that we talked shop, so to speak. I didn't tell him anything specific, if that's what you mean."

"Is there anything you're leaving out?"

"Well… I didn't say anything about the meeting with Mann."

"That's it then."

"What?"

"That explains why he's suspicious of you. Whatever you told him about last night, he must have spotted a hole in your story where you left that out. That's not a good thing, Pet."

"I gave Mann my word I wouldn't mention the meeting, though."

"Well, if the assassin was his, I'd say you're under no obligation to keep that promise."

"Absolutely not. Not that I plan to ask Mann for clarification."

"I’m under no pressure to keep that a secret. I could try to clear this up with Lloyd if you want."

"I appreciate the offer, but I think Lloyd has some other doubts about me."

"Like what?"

"I don't think it's something I should be talking about."

"Indulge me."

"Fine. My original agreement with Lloyd was short term. I was never supposed to get involved with anyone else in the organization. Now, I know things that could make me a liability if I were allowed to retire as I had intended."

"I see. In that case, Lloyd and I are both partly at fault."

"That doesn't change anything, Ash."

"No. I don't suppose it does."

"My neck is starting to kill me."

"Nothing personal. You understand."

"I'll try not to hold it against you. You're not very big on trust, are you?"

"It's better than being too trusting. You take too many risks."

"It's worth it if you can find someone trustworthy."

"Shh."

"What is it?"

"Put something on. Someone's coming."

"What? Wait!"

"Here she is!"

"Morgan? Please come with us."

"Who are you?"

"We don't have time for this. Just grab her and go!"

"What do you think--"

"Should we take her like that?"

"Probably a good idea. At least she'll be easier to search."

"Wha… dyou… do… tha' foah?"

"She's still awake? Hit her again."

"Wait…"

…

"Good evening. I apologize if the men were too rough."

"So. It's you again."

"You probably have a few questions."

"I don't even know where to start."

"Then, allow me. As I mentioned before, I have a friend who is very interested in you. He was very disappointed by the outcome of our last meeting. So much so that he insisted that I give you another chance to consider his proposal. Now that you've had some time to think about it, is there any chance that you've changed your mind?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Do you know what happened after our meeting?"

"I presume you went home, yes?"

"I think you know better than that. Let me ask you this, if you are not willing to take 'no' for an answer, they why did you bother asking?"

"The attempt on your life was not the result of you saying 'no'. Not precisely. If you recall, I asked you a number of questions about your association with Lloyd. From your responses, my associate concluded that you were too loyal to Hadrian Lloyd to be trusted to keep the meeting a secret. I had no part in making that decision."

"But you admit that the assassin was yours?"

"Yes. But I assure you that both my friend and I were relieved to learn that you survived the attempt. I can't say our associate was equally pleased by the outcome. In fact, he was quite alarmed when you brought the incident to Lloyd's attention."

"I told him about the attack, but I did not mention the meeting."

"I am sure you did not."

"I do not think I will be able to keep that secret, now that I have been abducted from Lloyd's home, however."

"Again, that was not my decision. My associate deemed it necessary to remove you from Lloyd's custody before you could be compelled to disclose anything. Fortunately, I was able to convince him that your incarceration suggested that Lloyd mistrusts you. It gives me the opportunity to ask you one more time to consider our proposal."

"Why? I mean, why am I so important to you?"

"There are a number of things that make you ideal for our needs. Your youth, your ability, your beauty, your talent for manipulating men--and women; all of these things combine to make you a formidable asset."

"There's only one thing you've overlooked, then."

"What is that?"

"I'm not an assassin."

"I think we've already established…"

"No. You don't get it. You were wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I’m not the one Lloyd gave the contract to. I'm just an escort. The whole thing was a misunderstanding."

"I don't believe you. If you're not an assassin, if you didn't take the contract on Kevin Niall, then why did you pursue him? Why did you kill him?"

"That's the thing. I didn't pursue Kevin. He pursued me."

"I still don't believe you. I was watching the whole time you were involved with Niall. At our meeting, you dropped your act as soon as I explained how you were set up."

"That's because, while you were wrong about everything else, you were right about me working through Lloyd. I was working as an escort the night I met Kevin and when he took an interest in me, I used him as a way to break off from a client I had fulfilled my contractual obligations to. After that, I couldn't shake the guy!" Morgan confessed, with a bitter laugh.

Morgan took a deep breath and then elaborated on her story, describing how she had unwittingly blown off the real assassin and encouraged Kevin's obsession with her. Over the next few days, he continued to pursue his interest in her, prompting Lloyd to call her in. Lloyd had warned her to stay away from Niall and encouraged her to chase him off. In spite of her own desire to drive him away, Kevin had proved too stubborn for her.

Unbelievably, Kevin had turned out to be a genuinely nice guy. In spite of her resolve, his attention was hard to resist. When he managed to corner her, he engaged her in animated discussions about the ruins and the impulse to live a life of adventurer. Even Logan and Roark found themselves responding to his charm. Gradually, Morgan found her own resistance crumbling. Time and again, he had managed to get past her defenses, luring her into debates about the age of gods and related myths and legends. Nothing really seemed to deter him, not even rivals for her affections.

Lloyd's patience finally ran out. He called Morgan aside and instructed her, for the final time, to stop flirting with Kevin and just put him out of his misery. It was their shorthand for ditching customers who remained attached past the fulfillment of a contract and meant that Morgan was supposed to take them out, give them the ride of their lives and then tell them that she had been paid to do it. To make it easier for her, he drew up a contract to support her claim, literally paying her to get rid of him, for once and for all. Morgan thought that was too harsh but when Lloyd reminded her of her obligations, she relented.

Morgan had argued with Logan about the plan as she prepared for her date with Kevin. He had warned her that sleeping with Kevin would only encourage him to keep after her. As she bathed and dressed, she struggled to convince herself that she was doing the right thing. In spite of the fact that he had become a legitimate rival for her affections, someone she could be with, it still seemed hopeless. If she had any hope of a real relationship with Kevin, he had to know the truth and still want to be with her.

The date began with an elegant meal, followed by a show. At dinner, she noticed that Mann and the assassin--who she would not name, were following her. During the play, Morgan found herself brooding over her decision. Lloyd had convinced her that Kevin desired her only because she seemed mysterious and unobtainable. The combination of satisfying his desire and then confronting him with the truth about herself, certainly sounded like a sure way to make him hate her but Logan' argument had spawned doubts.

After the show, Kevin took her to a gathering of young nobility for an evening of dancing and again she spotted her "admirers" in the crowd. Morgan confided that she had a brief exchange with the anonymous assassin, in which she confided her plan to put Kevin "out of his misery" at the end of their date and declared her work "a private matter" urging him to back off. Over the rest of the evening, Morgan carefully allowed things to escalate between herself and Kevin. By the end of the evening, Kevin felt comfortable and confident enough to take her to his suite in the most expensive hotel in the city. Too soon, her date came to it's harsh conclusion but things did not go as planned.

After bedding down with him, Morgan discovered that she could not complete the contract. Morgan gave Kevin an encore in the bath, to buy time to consider what to do. Inevitably, she reached the same conclusions she had started with. Her life was messed up enough. So, she braced herself and confronted him with the cruel truth. Morgan was surprised by his reaction to hearing what she did for a living. Instead of recoiling, he asked her if it was what she wanted to do for a living. His sympathy and understanding caused Morgan to panic. She emphasized that she had accepted payment to be his companion and in specific, paid to end it by driving him away. She was professionally obligated to have nothing to do with him beyond that evening. She strained to convince him they had no future together.

Unfortunately, Kevin refused to let her go. He pressed her to explain why she did it and made a proposal, suggesting either marriage or patronage. He insisted that whatever her needs were, he could meet them. He could take care of her, and she would be free to be with him. That was more than Morgan could cope with. Stunned by his acceptance but frightened by what he demanded, she fled. Unable to explain herself, she simply put on her dress and left, chanting apologetic denials. Unfortunately, Kevin refused to let her go. He raced out after her, naked and wet, desperate to catch her and force her to explain. Racing out after her as she fled, skidding on wet, soapy feet, he crashed into her as he caught up to her at the stairwell landing.

The collision sent both of them over the edge of the balcony Morgan barely managed to catch the rail and grasp his hand. Unfortunately, with the film of soap covering his body, she could not keep her grip, and he fell seven stories to his death. There were hundreds of witnesses and not a single person, apart from the real assassin and Mann,, apart from those who had come to witness an assassination, dared to think that the tragedy had been anything but an accident. As Morgan reeled from the disaster, she spotted her audience once more in the crowd.

Morgan quietly skipped over the way Ash had waited long into the night to approach her and deliver a parting remark, "So much for privacy."

A few days passed, occupied by investigations, interrogations and Morgan’s exoneration, before she heard anything from Lloyd. "I'd only just received a message to meet with him when you approached me," she confessed, meeting Mann's gaze.

"Unbelievable."

"You still think I'm an assassin?"

"No. I just find this situation somewhat tragic."

"What do you mean?"

"I had intended to point out earlier that it accomplishes nothing for you to deny that you are an assassin. Your arguments come too late. The truth only underscores the lie. As a courtesan, or an escort, you already have the perfect cover for an assassin. With the reputation you have gained, most of the men who believe you are an assassin are so certain of it that it would be almost impossible to convince them that you are not."

"That's inconvenient but I wouldn't go so far as to call it a tragedy."

"The tragedy is, I am not such a man."

"So, what you're saying is…"

"You have succeed in convincing me that you are of no use to us."

"Well, that's a good thing, right?"

"No. It means that you are a liability."

"I see. No. Save your breath. I've already heard that speech from Lloyd."

"If it means anything, I do feel bad about this. I hate it when people have to die because of my mistakes."

"That's not particularly reassuring, Mann."

"I didn't expect it to be."

"I suppose someone's waiting to finish me off as soon as you're done with me? I mean, you came prepared the last time…"

"There are men waiting to interrogate you. Their methods are certain to be both excruciating and humiliating. Once they are done with you, if they do not choose to amuse themselves for a while, you will be executed."

"Spare me the details. I just wanted to ask, is it too late to say yes?"

"Excuse me?"

"What happens if I agree to the offer?"

"But you're not an assassin…"

"Well, I'm definitely not a martyr. Trust me, if I have to kill to get out of this trap, I won't hesitate. I mean, I have so many people convinced that I'm an assassin, why fight it? It's not like I've never killed anyone. So?"

"If you choose to accept our proposal, you may be required to demonstrate your loyalty."

"What does that mean?"

"That means sacrificing someone important to you."

"I…"

"If you want my personal opinion, I believe you would be better off taking your chances with the men in there. They only want to rape, torture and murder you."

"Are you…?"

"It's really a question of what you think you can live with. Well. It looks like you need a moment to think. At the end of the hour, this door will be locked, ending negotiations and the opposite door will open. You already know what you will find down that way. It has been a pleasure seeing you again. I have your robe waiting if you choose to come in and hear our proposal."

"Take care of it. I'll be back to pick it up some time."

"I see. In that case, goodbye, Morgan Roan."

"See you later, Mann."

1| Morgan was forced to work as an escort to support herself. Fronted by Lloyd, she kept a very low profile, and rumors started among his men that she was either his mistress or an assassin. A contract was arranged to test her but by coincidence the target of the contract became obsessed with her and pursued her, creating the impression that she was luring him in to kill him. She was confronted by Ash, the assassin Lloyd gave the contract to, and unwittingly convinced him that she had been working the same contract prior to his involvement. In an attempt to end the target's obsession with Morgan, Lloyd instructed her to take him out, satisfy his desire for her and then drive him off by revealing that she had been paid to sleep with him. Unfortunately, the target's feelings for her were more serious than anyone thought, provoking him into a chase that resulted in his accidental and public death, falsely confirming Morgan as an assassin.

04 3rd midnight

Morgan’s mind raced in the moments between Mann's exit and the entrance of her torturers. Her options had narrowed down to kill or be killed. Abducted in her bathrobe and then strip searched, she was naked and unarmed. In spite of that, she was far from helpless. If anything, she was at her most dangerous, since the only thing she could rely on was the lethal dance she had slipped into the night before. The naked dance was the true legacy of her bloodline, a fighting technique developed by the maidens of the goddess over a thousand years. A muse, and former maiden of the goddess, had preserved the art through the purge by passing it on to her daughters. Morgan had been exceptional at it, forced to seek mental discipline through the rigors of physical training. As the men entered, Morgan slipped free of her bindings and cut a swath through the startled men. In moments, Morgan had slain a dozen armed men, most of them with their own weapons.

"How do I get into these situations?"

…

"Great. Nothing."

The clatter of the other door unlocking sent a cold flare up her spine.

"Come on, girl. You can do this." Abducted in her bathrobe and then strip searched, she was naked and unarmed. In spite of that, she was far from helpless. If anything, she was at her most dangerous, since the only thing she could rely on was the lethal dance she had slipped into the night before.

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"Hello, Pretty."

"Pay up, Mate. I told you she'd turn 'em down."

"Yeah, yeah. Head's up, Red. You just cost me a week's pay. You better stretch those pretty legs and get comfortable, 'cause you're gonna be busy payin' off this debt for a while."

"Keep your pants on, Gus. You're gonna have to wait until I'm done with her. I'm taking payment for your last bet outta this lovely bed warmer."

"Kill the chatter and get some restraints on her. You'll all get a chance to entertain her after she's been softened up a bit."

"Done deal, Boss. Heath, on the right. Gus, take the left. Watch yourselves. She's a killer."

"What? You want me to be afraid of a little slip of a girl like that?"

"Can it, Gus."

"Quiet lil' cunt, ain't she?"

"Careful, my pets. You don't want to mark her up, now, do you?"

"In that case, why don't you put her down? Save us the trouble."

"Please. It's so much more fun to watch them squirm."

"Arlene, you are one creepy bitch."

"I'm sorry, are you asking for some extra play time with me?"

"I meant it as a compliment, you crazy witch!"

"Your point?"

"Stop wasting time. Reese, try to keep your thugs in line."

"No problem, Boss. You all heard the man! Let's get this filly in the chair already!"

"May I say something?"

"Well, well, well. She speaks!"

"Don't spoit it, Pretty. We'll hear everything you have to say later."

"I just wanted to give you all a fair chance…"

"Fair chance! Did you hear that!?"

"…There's still time for you all to turn around and crawl back into your hole. Just pretend you never saw me and I'll do the same."

"Right. Forget the chair. I’m gonna soften her up right now."

"That's an ugly knife, Gus. It suits you."

"An' it'll gut you if you don't lie down nice and quiet like."

"Last chance everyone."

"Give it up, Red. I don't bluff."

"I’m not bluffing."

"Heath, get in there and back him up."

"No problem. Arlene, you ready to fix her up? She's begging for a little cuttin' 'fore she goes down."

"Do not worry, Pet. I will see to it she doesn't get too out of hand."

"Thanks for the warning, Arlene."

"Ready, Heath?"

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for back up?"

"Let's go."

"What the…? Put her down, Arlene! Now! Finn! Morse! Get your asses in here! Fast!"

"Foolish girl, you just… You're a…! Stay back! No!"

"Arlene!?"

"What's going on?"

"Oh, shit."

"I know you're in there. You might as well come out."

"I saw it but I'm not sure I believe it."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I suppose this means we won't be getting around to that interrogation."

"That works for me."

"You should have taken the offer."

"You should have taken mine."

Morgan kept her wits together long enough to scrounge a minimal outfit of boots, cloak, an unstained, oversize shirt and belt to carry a pair of daggers, a sword and their sheaths. Taking to the shadows, Morgan made her way back home, allowing the shock to run its course as she fled the scene of the slaughter. In the process of learning to fight and fence, she had recognized her capacity to kill, and she had been close to death, but this had been the first time she had consciously and deliberately killed anyone. The disturbing thing was that it was easier than incapacitating her foes, as she had previously endeavored to do whenever she fought. For the first time, she understood why the new church had sought to extinguish the maidenhood of the goddess. Such thoughts were shattered when Morgan was attacked out of the shadows. In seconds, she realized that this foe was a match for her own lethal skills.

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"Merciful Goddess!"

"You scared me!"

"Are… are you okay, dear?"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"Are you sure? You look… well…"

"I know. It's about what you'd think but I escaped from…"

"Oh, my! Oh, do come inside, child. Let's get you a healer. I'll send my son to summon the guards."

"No. Please. I can make it home. Please don't bother yourself."

"Oh, you poor girl. It's not bother. I insist."

"I don't want to get you involved."

"Well, I appreciate your concern but it's you I'm concerned about. Not to mention any other poor girl that animal might prey on!"

"It was more than one. But have no fear; they can no longer harm anyone."

"Goddess preserve us!"

"So, you see, I'd prefer not to call any attention to myself."

"But…"

"The hands of the Goddess are still felt but they must not be seen. Please, good woman. I implore you."

"By Arden's Oath…"

"Glennie? I heard you cry out. What's wrong? Who are you talking to out there?"

"I’m fine. Got startled by a stray cat, is all. She doesn't seem to want to come in, though. Go on, get those boys tucked into bed, now. I'll be up in a moment."

"Thank you and may the Goddess watch over you."

"Arden guide and guard you, Maiden."

For the first time, she understood why the new church had sought to extinguish the Maidenhood of the Goddess.

"Almost there."

Such thoughts were shattered when Morgan was attacked out of the shadows. In seconds, she realized that this foe was a match for her own lethal skills.

In truth, Ash was her superior. Morgan was stunned and infuriated by the attack, but fear won out as she sensed the change in him. Ash revealed that he had followed Morgan’s abductors and had managed to eavesdrop on the conversation she had with Mann. He quickly sketched out his problem. Ash had exposed himself dangerously on the assumption that they shared the same trade. This made her an even greater liability to him than she was to Lloyd or Mann. When she asked if this meant he intended to kill her, he announced that he might not have to. He informed her that her abduction from Lloyd's had almost certainly turned Lloyd against her. Mann and whoever he represented were also certain to send more assassins after her. The odds of her surviving long enough to be a threat to him were pretty slim. However, having seen her in action, he thought she might yet be of some use to him.

"Ash!? Are you insane!? You could have killed me!"

"I know."

"You know? You know!? This is the second time you've attacked me! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"At the moment, trying to decide what I am going to do with you."

"How did you even find me?"

"I followed you. When you were abducted, I followed your captors. When they dropped you off, I scouted the place out and spent a few hours trying to find a way to get in and get you."

"You did?"

"Yes. Of course, by the time I found a way in to where they were keeping you, you had killed everyone and escaped. Since then, I've been tracking you."

"All right. But why did you ambush me?"

"Before I found a way in, I figured out where you were being held. Do you remember the narrow windows on each corner at the front of the room you were in? Well, I spotted you through one of them and listened in on your meeting with Mann."

"You heard all of that?"

"I did. And, Lloyd was right. Most people, hearing the story you told him, would not be convinced that you are not an assassin. In fact, it's so convincing, so perfect for throwing off an investigation, that it begs for disbelief."

"Well, surely *you* don't believe it, right?"

"I don't. But at the same time, I don't know that I shouldn't. I don't want to believe it. I just can't quite believe anyone could make all of that up. It's too detailed. It's too informative. For instance, why, if you were being cautious enough to avoid naming me, would you work our encounters into your cover story? Why do you have an explanation for deceiving me woven in to your deception of others? It seems rather curious, Morgan."

"The best lie is based on the truth."

"So, you mean to say, you warped the entire truth to support your cover?"

"I guess so."

"Well, then. Only. Now, you see, I just can't seem to shake off this feeling. It bothers me, Morgan. I've seen you take down an assassin attacking at a time and place of his choosing. I've seen evidence of you taking out a room full of enforcers and at least one professional killer and I was only able to get the drop on you the first time. This time, I had to really work at subduing you. All of that says you're everything I believe you to be. There's really only one question that's bothering me."

"What's that?"

"You are not an assassin, are you?"

…

"I'll take that as a yes."

"I suppose that means you're going to kill me now."

"I'm tempted. Believe me. I take it, then, that the story you told Mann is the truth, then?"

"I couldn't have made it up."

"Well, that's a relief."

"What is?"

"Knowing that I deceived myself. I would have been very disappointed if I had learned that you deceived me on purpose."

"Except, I did. I mean…"

"Once you knew what I was, you had to convince me that I was right about you. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. I didn't really have a choice."

"True. And for the most part, you lie very convincingly."

"Finding yourself alone with an assassin has that effect."

"I am sure it does. I should have listened to my original suspicions about you. Hindsight. I suppose that the only reason you're alive right now is because I am curious."

"About what?"

"If you're not an assassin, then what, exactly, are you?"

"I'm an escort."

"I don't buy it. You don't move like a bed warmer."

"What?"

"You move like a trained fighter. What sort of call-girl has that kind of background?"

"Oh. No. I’m not just a call-girl. I'm a courtesan. Well, I was trained to be a courtesan. I'm not actually licensed."

"You mean you're a muse."

"A… what?"

"I thought so."

…

"Yes, I know what a muse is. So, you're a pure-breed?"

"How do you know about that?"

"That's not important. You must be only, what, eighteen?"

"Seventeen, actually."

"Seventeen, then. Why sell yourself as an escort?"

"I needed the money and it's basically what I was trained to do."

"Don't you mean 'Born to do'?"

"Yes. It's something I've been specifically bred and trained for. My grandmother called it our family legacy, passed down from mother to daughter since the fall of Arden. Except in my case, she took over my training when I was eleven. As I grew up and realized what I was supposed to become, I tried to rebel. Once my training was complete, I turned down the contract she had arranged for me and returned to my home."

"I'm surprised she would have allowed that."

"As it turned out, she didn't. She followed, broke up an engagement between me and a boy I grew up with, destroyed my parents’ lives for trying to help me and forced me to accept the contract and return to the city."

"I see. Then what happened?"

"I got into an accident on my way here. I was out of it for a little while and when I made it back to the city, I discovered that I was presumed dead."

"Presumed dead? What sort of accident would lead them to think that, exactly?"

"It's a long story. Basically, I just got lost at sea for a while."

"So, you realized you were free of your grandmother and her plans for you and set out to make a new life for yourself?"

"More or less. I didn't come back alone. I saw the academy as the key to making a fresh start and my companion agreed. Unfortunately, we didn't have much money when we arrived in Avon. We both tried to find sponsors to the academy but neither of us could provide any sort of academic background. None of the jobs we could qualify for would have allowed us time to attend classes."

"Yet, there was one way to make a lot of money in a short time."

"Yes. As much as I hated the idea, I was forced to work as an escort to support us. It was difficult at first but then a friend introduced me to Lloyd. I had to be careful to avoid discovery, and Lloyd didn't want me getting in too deep, so I kept a very low profile. In spite of that, rumors started among his men that I was either his mistress or an assassin. To test the rumor, Mann arranged that contract on Kevin Niall. You ended up getting the contract, but he became obsessed with me. I suppose it must have looked I was luring him in for the kill the night we met."

"It did. That particular talent of yours would be devastating if you were a real assassin. Of course, I was furious to find someone else moving in on the target and my assumptions led to the misunderstanding between us."

"I was flustered by the idea that you had been sent by Lloyd to check up on me. All I had to do was break things off with Keith Ross. Did you know, I was actually trying to get away from Kevin when I approached you that night?"

"Really?"

"Yes. If I hadn't been so upset by what you said, I wouldn't have gone back to him that night. Because I did, I only fueled his obsession with me. It seemed like, the harder I tried to chase him away, the harder he tried to woo me. Lloyd kept ordering me to break it off, but he was the one invading my life. He just kept coming until I learned to tolerate it."

"Which is why you ended up developing feelings for him."

"That's correct. If I had been working, I'd have had my guard up. Instead, he was striving to create a real relationship with me. We even had a lot in common, so becoming friends was not difficult at all. Of course, I was already caught between two other guys, so the last thing I wanted was a lover. I wouldn't have gone on a date with him if Lloyd hadn't paid me to."

"Which leads me to another of those odd moments that convinced me you were an assassin. I was in the next room waiting to meet with Lloyd when you had that discussion. I clearly heard him order you to stop playing around and put him out of his misery. With words like, 'take him out' and 'put him down' what else was I supposed to think?"

"Well, when you trade in sex and death, you can never come right out and say what you mean, can you?"

"So, really he was just telling you to, what? Love him and leave him?"

"More or less. Usually, the put down is reserved for customers who pursue me beyond the terms of a contract. The problem with Kevin was that he cared about me a lot more than anyone imagined. When I told him what I was, emphasizing that I'd been paid to 'love him and leave him' he refused to accept it. He wanted to know why I was selling myself, offering to buy me off, even proposing to keep me as his mistress or even marry me. I couldn't hear it. I had to go but when I left, he chased after me."

"Jumping naked out of the bath and rushing out into the hall after you."

"He caught up to me at the stairs, where the hall emptied onto the balcony but when he tried to stop, he slipped. He crashed into me and both of us went over the railing. I managed to catch the rail and grabbed his arm, but his skin was too slippery."

"So, he slipped through your fingers and fell to his death."

"And if that wasn't tragic enough, it only served to convince everyone who suspected me of being an assassin that I was."

"I exposed myself dangerously by assuming that you were one. It was inevitably, given my assumption, that I would discuss the terms of the contract with you. You didn't know what I was until last night, did you?"

"No. I hoped I could come up with a plan before you figured out I was a fake. Each time you jumped me, I was certain I had blown it. You were going to kill me. You pretty much have to, don't you?"

"At this moment, you're the most dangerous person alive, as far as I am concerned. And yet, I can't help but admire the way you've handled yourself. Each time I confronted you, you stayed cool and calmly talked yourself out of an execution. You bluffed your way through the danger like a pro."

"It's still not enough."

"No. It's not."

"So, now, you really are going to kill me."

"I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure it's really necessary. You already have one group throwing assassins at you. After your 'escape' from Lloyd's manor, he's almost certain to be sending a few himself. All of your allies are known and are probably being watched, so you have nowhere safe to go and no one able to help you. The odds of you actually living long enough to become a threat to me are pretty slim, Red."

"Why leave it to chance? Not that I am complaining."

"I've been wondering the same thing. I should have killed you twice over by now but… I don't know. You have so much potential. I think it pains me to just throw that away."

05

Morgan asked him what he wanted from her. Ash countered by asking her what Lloyd had to say about the situation to her. Morgan confided Lloyd's opinion about bringing her into the underworld and Ash endorsed it. If anyone tried to force her to become an assassin, she would inevitably rebel. In his opinion, she had the capability to become one but the question she needed to consider was whether or not she had the capacity. In spite of surviving one assassination attempt and fighting her way out of the trap Mann left her in, Ash had proved that an assassin could get to her. No matter how many assassins she succeeded in killing, one of them would inevitably get her, unless she was able to get to the man who was hiring them. The other thing for her to consider was, if she became an assassin, she could negotiate a deal with Mann or straighten things out with Lloyd. Otherwise, her only hope was to flee and start over somewhere else.

Morgan did not really have the option to leave. While she had only recently established herself in her new life, she was tied to the academy until solutions could be found for the problems she and Logan had. When she confessed to that, Ash told her to return to the safe house, keep a low profile and think about what she needed to do. Ash informed her that, apart from some valuable advice, he was not going to tell her what to do or ask her to do anything she did not want to do but he was going to keep an eye on her. He only wanted one guarantee from her and offered one in exchange. As long as she consulted him before saying or doing anything that could expose him, he would give her fair warning before attempting to take her life. If she simply made a mistake, he would step in and nudge her back in the correct direction. Once she had decided what she was going to do, he would do what he could to help her.

Morgan set out for the safe house, but her condition reminded her that she needed clothes and supplies. She also felt it would be a good idea to retrieve her ring. Cursed though it was, it could mean the difference between life and death the next time she got in trouble. That decided, she headed for her dorm on campus. In spite of her caution, Morgan was spotted going into her dorm. She was confronted by her roommate when she arrived at their room and appeased her with an edited version of events. Morgan advised Margaret that she, or Logan and Roark, might be in danger too and asked her to warn the boys. Once she was packed, she slipped out into the night, oblivious to the assassin shadowing her. It was well before dawn when the assassin made his first move, but Morgan noticed at the last instant and broke into a run. The assassin pursued, determined to track Morgan down to her hiding place if he could not corner her.

06

Morgan knew she could not lead the assassin to the safe house, so she led him on an elaborate chase in an attempt to shake him. Along the way, Morgan stashed her belongings at a bathhouse relatively close to the safe house. To disguise her action, she continued on with a load of towels hastily stuffed into her spare pack. Unfortunately, she was unable to lose her pursuer, so she attempted to shake him in the busy crowds of the morning market. Her plan backfired when she found herself cornered and the assassin closed to finish her off. Morgan fought her way out of a blind alley, dragging the fight out before a crowd of astonished witnesses. The assassin tried to use the crowd against her, dropping his disguise and coming out on her flank. Morgan had already gotten a feel for his presence, however. When he struck, she was ready to turn the attack against him, with fatal results and right before the eyes of the guards drawn to the commotion.

Morgan was instantly surrounded by armed guards and ordered to surrender. Morgan was questioned and detained while the guards waited for an investigator to show up but when Morgan ran out of answers she could safely give, she was placed under arrest for a formal inquiry. The inspector helped complicate things, taking note of the fact that Morgan was the girl involved in the death of Kevin Niall, the girl whom recent rumors now said had been paid to kill him. With her involvement in a second death, alleged to be a retaliatory assassination for her part in the death of Kevin Niall, Morgan could be subjected to a full, formal inquisition. With that, a guard detachment was instructed to escort her to the prison. Morgan wondered what would happen to her as a result of falling into the hands of the authorities. Lloyd had told her that he would be obligated to silence her if that happened now. As a result, she was not surprised when Ash attacked.

Ash had returned to the safe house and discovered Morgan’s absence. Furious, he had set out to find her, stumbling onto her path by accident when Morgan raced by with an assassin on her tail. Following at a distance, he became separated from Morgan and her adversary in the crowded market. Ash was unable to intervene before Morgan and her assailant caught the attention of the crowd. Ash had also seen the guards approach and been forced to fade out of sight while they took Morgan into custody. When the guards began to transport her to the prison, Ash slipped ahead of them to stage an ambush and retrieve Morgan from their custody. The look on Morgan’s face, when he attacked, helped to calm him down a bit. She clearly expected to die and thus understood that she had made a fatal mistake. Instead of killing her, however, he turned the rescue into an object lesson about life as an assassin. Morgan stood in shock and horror, watching Ash slaughter the guards.

07

Ash grabbed her and made her look at the bodies. In an angry tone, he explained that if he had simply killed her before, none of them would have had to die. He went on to tell her that this was typically true of most assassinations. When a person insisted on taking the wrong course of action, it was essential to stop him before he got others killed. He had been forced to kill them to prevent her from being interrogated, revealing information that would have resulted in a wave of conflict and death. The only reason he was letting her off with her life at this point was because the assassin she had killed should have known better than to pursue his objective once witnesses became aware of the incident. With this lesson branded fresh in her mind, he dragged her back to the safe house and repeated his instructions. He stressed that she keep a low profile and to remember what happened the next time she felt compelled to ignore his advice.

4th morning

The next morning, Ash dropped some bad news on Morgan. The assassin she had killed the day before had been sent by Lloyd. A few of his lieutenants had confronted Lloyd over her "rescue" from his mansion and convinced him that she must have friends or allies she had given information about the mansion and its security in order for them to have been able to break her out. This directly implicated anyone she was known to associate with. At the same time, it suggested that Lloyd's men were either paranoid or collaborating in a cover-up of what had really happened. That meant it would not be safe for Morgan to contact Lloyd or any of his men. Ash also warned her of the danger of trying to warn any of her friends, since they would certainly be watched, if not eliminated out of hand. Morgan hoped that the warning she had sent through Margaret was sufficient to alert Logan and Roark to the danger they were in. With that hope, she assured Ash she would not attempt to contact them.

Morgan’s promise was strained that afternoon when she was out running an errand and spotted the pair out looking for her. In the time they had spent together, Morgan and Logan had developed a sort of rapport and clearly Logan was attempting to track her down using it. With haste, Morgan tried to make herself mentally invisible and slipped into the shadows to watch their progress. Fortunately, she had been careful to keep the low profile Ash insisted on, so the locals were not able to identify her in response to their questions. Unfortunately, she was not the only one shadowing them. An assassin had been following the pair hoping they would lead her to Morgan. With both of them observing at a distance, they actually bumped into each other jostling for cover while following Logan and Roark. Morgan left them go when they moved out of the neighborhood of the safe house and continued about her business unaware that she had been discovered.

08

The assassin continued to observe Morgan through the afternoon, until she saw the perfect opportunity to close in on her target in private. Morgan had returned to the bath house to retrieve her belongings, grateful of the opportunity to bathe and relax from the stress and exertion of the previous days. She paid no attention to the woman who followed her into the bath, once she recognized her from their encounter on the street, mistaking her for a local. She paused to relieve herself before exiting the wardrobe for the bath, allowing the assassin to get into position. As she emerged from the water closet, the assassin slipped a garrote around her neck and forced her up against the wall. The assassin put her knee to Morgan’s back and hauled back with the added leverage, leaving Morgan no way to retaliate. It was all she could do to blunt the cutting force of the garrote with her telekinetic ability. In desperation, Morgan sent a mental cry for help to Logan.

The assassin knew something was wrong when the garrote refused to cut into Morgan’s neck. The killer simply increased the pressure, hoping to generate enough constriction to cause Morgan to black out, at which point it would be a simple matter to decapitate her. At the same time, the assassin strained to keep Morgan pinned to the wall, without sufficient leverage to escape or counterattack. Focusing her psychic power on the fine filament of the garrote took too much concentration for Morgan to summon additional power for a psychic attack but as a last resort, she tried to call the ring of regeneration to her hand. Before she could succeed, Logan and Roark burst into the wardrobe. The assassin heard the thunder of their arrival and threw Morgan at the arriving boys to buy her time to escape. The collision stopped Logan and Roark short and focused all their attention on Morgan. As they removed the weapon from around her neck, the assassin made good her escape.

Once Morgan had completed her bath and dressed, Logan and Roark dragged her to a restaurant to confront her, demanding an explanation for her absence and the strange warning she had passed on through Margaret. Morgan did her best to explain the situation, being careful not to expose anything that would put them at further risk. She told them that someone was after her in the belief that she was paid to kill Kevin Niall. She did not know who, but they had proven willing to pay several assassins and go through her friends to reach her. To keep them out of danger, she had holed up with a man she had met while she was on an escort job and who had taken her in after seeing her fight off an attempt on her life. Morgan still did not know what she was going to do but because of another incident she could not go to the authorities. She assured them that she was trying to come up with a solution but had to remain in hiding for the time being.

When they arrived at the mansion, they noticed a suspicious amount of activity going on. Ash had stopped Roark and made him wait out of sight, while he scouted ahead. Clinging to the shadows, he had crept up on a group of men and overheard them discussing Morgan’s escape from the mansion. A little more eavesdropping revealed that a small group of men had actually raided the estate in order to rescue her. Knowing that Morgan did not have such a group at her disposal, he concluded that she had been abducted and withdrew to warn Roark.

From that point, they had spent their time searching for any sort of clue that could lead them to her. Unable to find even a witness to a group transporting a girl of Morgan’s description through any of the streets connecting to the mansion and unable to pick up any psychic traces of her, they were forced to return to their dorm. When they arrived, Morgan’s roommate confronted them, passing on the warning that Morgan had asked her to deliver.

At regular intervals, Logan had sat down and tried to reach out to Morgan telepathically, scanning for any mental traces of her. They wasted a great deal of time racing to places where Logan had detected her, only to arrive too late to find her. By the second evening, after losing track of her in the wake of her escape from the city guard, the two men had been exhausted and had been forced to find somewhere to sleep.

Presumably, the assassin that had followed them to Morgan had latched on to them when they passed through campus the night before.

09

Logan and Roark insisted on meeting Ash, intent on convincing the man that they, as her most intimate friends, were better equipped to look after her and were happy to take her off his hands. Morgan tried to discourage them, saying that Ash was a very private person and it might offend him if they implied that she would be safer with them. In the end, the matter was settled by Ash tracking Morgan down and confronting her with her friends. Morgan made introductions and explained what had happened. Ash listened to the pair politely for a while before pointing out, bluntly, that they had unwittingly led an assassin straight to Morgan. Worse, they had failed to capture or kill this assassin, meaning she could be lying in wait for Morgan around any corner. Instead of allowing them to take her away, Ash invited them to join Morgan in hiding, since they were obviously in danger because of their connection to her. Uncertain what to do, Logan and Roark accepted the invitation simply so they could remain close to Morgan.

While Logan and Roark were out acquiring new clothes and supplies to replace the ones they had not brought and which Ash forbade them to retrieve, Ash confronted Morgan in a rage. Certain that he was going to kill her, Morgan put up a desperate fight. He smacked her down, then threw her up against a wall and pinned her there with a knife at her throat as he accused her of defying his orders and contacting her friends. Morgan protested, with desperate sincerity, struggling to convince Ash that Logan tracked her down on his own. She told him that they had developed a psychic rapport as the result of past intimacy, which had allowed him to find her and sense that she was in danger when he came close enough to her to lead an assassin to her. She swore that she had done everything she could to try and avoid her friends and had concentrated on that so hard she had overlooked the assassin. Once she had demonstrated her psychic abilities to prove her story, he backed off and let her go.

5th morning

The next morning, the group gathered to discuss plans for resolving Morgan’s dilemma. In spite of Ash sparing her life, Morgan could sense the tension between them over the presence of her friends. Logan and Roark both seemed to sense it but they mistook Ash's cold formality for jealous resentment over their intrusion. Morgan found herself experiencing a deeper sense of terror, caught between Ash and her friends, than she had felt when confronted by Ash alone. Unfortunately, Morgan could not drive her friends off, now that they had joined her in hiding. The only break was discovering that Logan and Roark had already known the truth about Lloyd and his organization. As a result, Morgan was able to disclose the conclusions Lloyd had reached concerning her options. She also told them that she had been approached by a third party to work as an assassin, provoking them to send an assassin when she declined the offer. Even the city guard inquisitors now seemed to believe the rumor that she was an assassin.

10

With Logan's help, Morgan was able to convince Ash that it was essential for her to visit the academy. She was required to divulge some of her history with Logan and Roark to establish her need. While she and Logan had chosen to go to the academy to start them off in their new lives, they were tied to the academy for personal reasons. Morgan could not afford to burn her bridges with her mentors and masters at the College of Healing. It was only necessary to approach a few of them and explain the peril she was in--by implication the same story she had sold her friends on--and obtain a personal leave to resolve the situation. Ash scoffed at the idea that things could be resolved to the point where she could resume classes, but Morgan pointed out that if she could not fix things in a couple of weeks, more drastic measures could be considered. So, with the three men to escort her, Morgan visited the academy.

They experienced no difficulties reaching and traversing the campus. The people Morgan needed to talk to were already gathered in discussion of the report they had received from the city guard. It took a moment to calm then enough to listen to the explanation she had prepared. Starting with the rumor that she had been paid to kill Kevin Niall and disclosing that someone had approached her to perform an assassination, she had run afoul of the authorities and the underworld alike. She claimed to be caught in the middle, as each side fought to apprehend her while preventing the other from succeeding. In that vein, she explained her escape from the guards, saying that she had gotten away when assassins attacked the guards escorting her to prison. After a cross examination and several lectures from the faculty, Morgan, Logan and Roark were excused from classes for a couple of weeks, in order to sort the mess out.

Over the course of the day, Ash had watched everyone like a hawk. He contributed to the ongoing discussions about Morgan’s fate, pointing out the merits of various suggestions along with the risks and rewards of exploring them. Morgan’s options came down to fleeing the area and starting over elsewhere, becoming an assassin to resolve the concerns Lloyd had and taking the contract she had been offered to end the attempts on her life, or turning herself in to the authorities in exchange for a pardon and protection once she assured them that she had never killed for money and all the deaths associated with her were accidental or inflicted in self-defense. The whole time, Morgan was painfully conscious of the fact that Ash was just testing her. It didn't help that the looks they exchanged simply begged to be questioned by her two close friends. By the end of the day, Morgan concluded that it would take a miracle for all of them to survive the week.

11 6th day

Morgan nearly freaked out when Logan commented on Ash's behavior the next day. Unfortunately, Logan was not wrong in describing Ash as Morgan’s new shadow. Even when he was nowhere in sight, she could feel him like he was hovering over her shoulder and half the time it turned out that he was. Morgan was amused at first, when Logan suggested that Ash was infatuated with her, until he reminded her of her last obsessed suitor. In spite of herself, Morgan wondered if he was right, but she knew better than to ask Ash. Just the same, it was a plausible reason for him to spare her life. But whatever he felt for her, he had an odd way of showing it, stalking and ambushing her at will. In the same way he had demonstrated that she was not safe, he proved the same thing to her about her friends, Morgan learned, when she noticed that the backs of Logan and Roark's shirts had been cut during a walk, without any of them noticing.

Morgan stopped and strained her senses trying to spot the obvious culprit. A little further on, she noticed Ash stalking them and made an excuse to slip away from her friends. As she tried to sneak up on Ash, Morgan took a moment to be sure another assassin was not trying to close in on her. Once she was certain no one was on to her, she closed in on Ash, catching him off guard and laying the blade of a dagger across his throat. Ash froze and complimented her for getting the drop on her. He then casually advised her not to draw a blade if she was not committed to using it. Before she could respond, he broke away, disarming her and sinking her knife into her abdomen in one motion. Morgan stood frozen in shock as he twisted the knife inside her, to illustrate the conclusion of his advice. Morgan could not shut out his words as she dropped and confronted her wound. He simply continued to lecture her, squatting down next to her to keep eye contact.

It seemed pretty obvious to Morgan that he had every intention of sitting there watching as she bled to death. Under the circumstances, Morgan felt compelled to use the ring of regeneration in spite of his observation. Ash noticed her fumbling with the ring to make sure she put it on correctly and fell silent as she withdrew the dagger. Morgan was still in no condition to speak when Logan led Roark to her side, drawn by trauma transmitted across their link. Ash calmly and coolly announced that he had happened upon Morgan as she was being attacked and chased off her assassin. They accepted his explanation as he joined them in transporting Morgan home. Later that evening, Ash approached her in her room. He admitting to having been surprised by her again. Morgan offered a limited explanation, in response to his questions and comments. She remained on edge until she was able to remove the ring and go to sleep.

12 7th day

For most of the day, Morgan would stop periodically and search the area. Occasionally she would spot Ash staring at her from a distance or discover that he was standing just behind her. If Morgan so much as blinked, he would vanish. Most of these close encounters were just intrusions into private moments and conversations between her and her friends. Occasionally Logan would also catch sight of Ash and while Morgan thought the assassin was studying her friends, Logan became more convinced that he was watching her. He compared his behavior to hunter stalking his prey, something Logan was intimately familiar with. He did not react well to Morgan attempting to discourage him from thinking that way, leaving Morgan to wonder if Logan was feeling threatened by the attention Ash was paying her. She playfully reprimanded him for being jealous, only to regret it moments later when he excused himself and Ash pounced on her.

Ash slipped a hand over her mouth to silence her. Stunned that he would attack her just around the corner from her friends, Morgan fought for all she was worth. She broke free of his hold just as his other arm came around her throat to choke her. Ash pressed his silent assault, eventually pinning her to the wall. She almost lost it as she felt herself immobilized in such a vulnerable, intimate position. Morgan choked back a scream when he leaned in and asked which would be worse, to be raped or killed. His voice held a deadly promise, that sent panicked thoughts through her brain in a desperate search for any mistake or insult she might have made to provoke him. With the same racing thoughts, Morgan lied, naming rape as the worst possible outcome, with every intention of killing him if he tried. Morgan was shocked when he disengaged, cheerfully declaring that he liked the way she thought. Morgan blinked, then lashed out but he danced around her lethal blows and sent her sprawling.

Ash stared down at her disheveled form and sternly reminded her that, in spite of having the right instincts and mindset, she was still far from being an assassin. While she was recovering, Ash stooped down to ask her why she had not warned her friends about him yet. After staring at him in disbelief, Morgan confessed that she had assumed that doing so would only provoke him. It was bad enough that he turning her into a nervous wreck just pouncing on her every time she turned a corner or relaxed her guard. Unfortunately, it seemed that her caution was of no use. Morgan was with Logan the next time Ash ambushed her. In spite of his surprise, Logan moved instantly to defend her, engaging Ash at a highly advanced level of combat. Morgan watched in horror when the fight turned suddenly against Logan. He had been unprepared for the skill of his opponent and overextended himself trying to stop Ash from getting through to Morgan.

13

Morgan was amazed and disturbed by the sheer skill and determination Ash and Logan exhibited. In horror, she saw it as Logan exposed himself to a series of incapacitating strikes trying to protect her. Knowing Ash would certainly finish him off, Morgan did not hesitate. She jumped into the fight on overdrive, determined to finish it fast, before Ash could devote his full attention and superior skill to fighting her. The fury of her assault hammered the assassin back and when it became obvious that he could not regain the initiative, Ash pointed out that Logan lay dying as they fought. Able to feel that he was correct, Morgan was forced to let him escape when he broke off and fled. She turned her attention immediately to her friend and former lover. Without pausing to ask his permission, she dug out the ring of regeneration and used it to save him. Morgan stood guard over Logan until the ring had closed his wounds and then helped him back to his room.

Logan had recovered enough by the time they arrived to confront Morgan. There was no question in his mind that Ash was an assassin, and it was equally obvious that he had some sort of ongoing conflict with Morgan. Morgan was at a loss for what to say. Ash would realize that Logan would put everything together and realize that he had been harassing Morgan, was probably the one who slaughtered the guards to rescue her and the one who stabbed her in the alley. At this point, the truth could not endanger them any further. So, she confessed that Ash had been attacking her at random for days. Roark walked on them just as they were slipping into a full-blown argument. Logan demanded to know why she never told anyone. When Morgan told him that would have only gotten whoever she told involved, Logan argued with her, questioning her actions and decisions from the start. Morgan tried to explain but Roark cut in demanding explanations from both of them.

In moments, they had immersed themselves in a three-way inquisition. Morgan and Logan argued with each other as Roark questioned the choices both of them had made. In the process, Roark revealed that Logan had been working freelance for Lloyd for weeks, without confiding in Morgan, leaving him no grounds to question her own silence on. Morgan could hardly believe it. When she pushed, Logan was forced to confirm that he had been working as an enforcer and assassin, depending on Lloyd's needs. This forced Logan to reveal a bit of his past, which he used to defend his choices, while questioning Morgan’s. She cut him off, declaring that her main resistance to the idea of becoming an assassin had been fear of how he would react. Now, suddenly she learned that he already was one. Emphasizing that an assassin was the last thing she would have ever thought of becoming, under the circumstances it was the only practical solution to her problem.

14

Morgan’s assertion pushed the argument to new heights. The morals and philosophy of war and assassination were raised and reduced--boiling down to the point that, if someone was assassinated, they either did something to deserve it, or they were being sacrificed as the least expensive solution to a problem. From there, they debated the origin and purpose of crime and the underworld itself. By default, crime was the violation of the prevailing social contract, which swelled in proportion to number of people who were disenfranchised by the established order. Morgan pointed out that the horrors and atrocities of war, like the relatively recent conquest of Arden and Avon by the Kingdom of Arduin, were condoned by the established order--legalized and moralized murder, theft and rape on a massive scale. So, for Morgan at least, it was no worse to become an assassin than it was to become a soldier and that had been the best alternative to enrolling in the academy.

Morgan reminded Logan that, if she became an assassin, she would be able to resolve things with Ash, Lloyd and the people she had turned down. Considering the amount of blood on her hands already, it was ridiculous to pretend that she remained innocent and pure. Even before she had killed anyone, she had not been either. For now, however, they had to hope that Ash would give Logan and Morgan a chance to reveal that Logan was not a liability, since he was an assassin too. Ash would no doubt peel a strip of flesh off Morgan to punish her for standing up to him but when he heard that she had made up her mind, hopefully he would become a true ally. In the meantime, Morgan promised to alert Logan if anything else happened. With that, she returned to her own room and reflected on what she had learned and how it had affected her. To herself, Morgan conceded that Ash had ultimately provoked her decision.

8th morning

Logan returned the ring to her the next morning and thanked her for using it to save him. In spite of the problems it had caused them, it did prove useful on occasion, he admitted. Neither of them knew why the ring still worked for them and no one else but at least they were no longer bound to it either. Noticing that Morgan seemed to be on edge, Logan asked her what was wrong. Morgan confessed that she had expected Ash to return during the night. It was not like him to wait this long to retaliate for her misbehavior and standing up to him to defend Logan had been her worst offense yet. Morgan kept anticipating an attack as she waited for Ash to show up. It was driving her nuts waiting for the other shoe to drop. Morgan eventually tired of waiting at the safe house and went looking for Ash. Her fruitless search ended when Morgan was spooked by a casual touch, nearly attacking an innocent bystander.

15

Morgan fled the scene, mortified. As much as she wanted to resolve things with Ash, she would have to wait for him to make the first move. Until he chose to confront her, she needed to turn her attention to her other problems. Deciding that it would be better to hold off on approaching Lloyd until after she had settled things with Ash, she paused to sort things out. If she could not approach Lloyd, her only other option was to confront Mann and see if he was still willing to negotiate a deal with her. As she thought about their previous encounters, she realized that she had encountered him a few times before he started shadowing her. Presumably, those were places he normally frequented, places she could begin searching for him at. While reviewing their two conversations, she realized he was also the link to finding the man who had paid to have Kevin Niall killed. With a plan forming in her mind, Morgan started her search for Mann.

Morgan returned to discuss her decision with Logan, explaining her plan and suggesting that he might be able to approach Lloyd more easily than she. It would be risky, since he had been implicated in her abduction but prior to that Lloyd must have considered him a reliable asset. Hopefully that would encourage him to hear Logan out. Logan agreed on the condition that Roark accompany Morgan on her search. Morgan took advantage of the opportunity to question Roark about how he became involved with the underworld and how Logan came to work for Lloyd. They paused their discussion when they arrived at the place Morgan remembered seeing Mann at the most frequently. By this point, Morgan realized that Roark was the perfect person to assist her in flushing out Mann. They split up to make discreet inquiries about Mann, interested in learning more about him and how and where to find him.

Morgan and Roark noticed that it was getting late, so they returned to the safe house to check in with Logan. He had just returned from a dinner meeting with Lloyd, where he was able to begin sorting things out. Fortunately for him, the assassin that had followed him to Morgan was able to establish that he was not involved in liberating her from Lloyd's house. He had explained that Morgan had been approached to do a job; the attempts on her life and her abduction from his home were provoked by her refusal. Lloyd had endorsed her plan to resolve that situation by taking the job, since it solved his own problem with her as well. With that said, Morgan and Roark resumed their search for Mann. They followed their lead to a man who was able to name a few places where it should be possible for them to contact Mann. The only hard part was figuring out which place he would be at that hour.

16

Mann's trail led to an herbalist's shop that turned out to be a front for an opium den. They arrived about an hour after sunset. As they made their way back, they discovered that the opium den was actually a front for a blood den. Morgan was astonished when Roark pointed that out and even more amazed when he explained how it worked. Morgan’s knowledge of vampires was limited to myths and legends, but Roark proved quite knowledgeable on the subject. When Roark was approached and greeted rather warmly by a vampire, she suddenly realized why. On impulse, she asked Roark how old he really was. The vampire laughed and told Morgan that she was not ready to tell him. Roark suggested that Morgan wait in the front while he looked for Mann, assuring her that he had a better chance of resisting vampiric charms than she did. The vampire sighed and acknowledged that, over time, her pets did develop certain immunities.

In spite of Roark's warnings and her own caution, Morgan had wandered once more into a trap. Unnerved by the attention she was getting, she retreated into the opium den to wait for Roark. It was there that she unexpectedly encountered Llewellyn. The vampire looked startled to see her, betraying his recognition, prompting Morgan to ask if she knew him from somewhere. He introduced himself and asked her what had brought her to the den. She fought to shake off the aura of mystery and enticement that surrounded him and told him she was hoping to meet someone she had unfinished business with. To her surprise, he inquired if she had decided to accept the offer after all. When she asked what he meant, he explained that he was there to meet with Mann also. While encouraging her to take Mann's offer, he apologized, stating that she had chosen an unfortunate time to do so and casually subdued her.

Morgan stood helplessly as he drew her in, biting into her neck and draining her to the brink of unconsciousness. When he pulled back, he paused in amazement as the bite healed before his eyes. Morgan fought to remain conscious, meeting his gaze as he pulled back. Staring at her in amusement, he commented on her natural powers of regeneration, observing that combined with the effects of his bite, he might have added a whole year to her life. Morgan had heard that the venom in a vampire's saliva had a rejuvenating effect on healthy mortals but that sounded extreme and said so. It was a rough estimate, he admitted. Acceleration was the normal cause of the rejuvenating effect and it took repeated exposure to vampire venom to cause that in normal people. If her natural gift were to evolve to the degree his bite had boosted it, it would make her virtually immortal. He then warned her that she might become a vampire if she died in the next few days.

17 9th midnight

Morgan remained lightheaded and dizzy from the loss of blood as Llewellyn escorted her to a private room for some refreshments. It alarmed her to note that his polite and gentle suggestions had the power to command her complete obedience. For all she seemed to be his guest, she was more tightly bound than any prisoner. She suddenly had no trouble understanding how Roark could have fallen instantly in thrall to the vampire that had uprooted him from his life. She could also understand why he had been so sympathetic about the displacement she and Logan had suffered. On the other hand, it suggested a way to reconnect to her former life, if she was willing to bear the stigma. Eventually her addled mind put a few things together and Morgan realized that Llewellyn might be the person she had wanted to find. Impulsively, she asked the vampire if he was the friend Mann had mentioned in his proposal.

Llewellyn, amused by her temerity, admitted that he was. Morgan demanded an explanation for the assassination of Kevin Niall. Llewellyn explained that an understanding existed between the mortals and immortals involved in the underworld but every few generations the mortals required a little reminding. Most recently, mortals involved in the underworld considered the immortals an inconvenience, disdaining and defying the ancient pact governing their coexistence. While part of that defiance was understandable, provoked by the common belief that mortals who drifted into the sphere of the underworld became legitimate prey for immortals, the immortals were more concerned about mortal invasions into the ruins. Members of the nobility were commissioning expeditions into the ruins’ depths in search of ancient treasures and artifacts. Niall was among the most notorious raiders, defying the curse to acquire wealth and fame at the expense of the immortals.

Morgan protested that Niall was hardly the first person to defy the legendary curse and explore the ruins. At the risk of provoking Llewellyn, she pointed out that she had wandered the ruins for days when she became trapped in them as a child. Granted, she had been lucky to survive the things she had encountered down there but unless the disruption of her life was considered, there was no actual curse. Llewellyn reprimanded her, explaining that the curse was actually an ancient warning to those who disturbed the ruins, in particular, the inhabitants of the ruins or those things which they had been charged to safeguard. The wrath of the curse was made manifest in the immortals' response to such offenses. Simply visiting the ruins was no offense but slaying immortals and freeing demons in a quest for treasure or power deserved retribution. Niall had been given warnings and yet he had continued to exploit the ruins.

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Llewellyn closed their discussion by stashing Morgan out of sight with the compulsion to sit tight and remain silent while the vampire conducted his business with Mann. He assured her that she would be given a chance to meet with Lloyd once that business was concluded. There was nothing she could do but try to recover her strength and volition before he returned his attention to her. Laid out on a mattress, indistinguishable from the addicts sprawled in their own curtained nooks, Morgan witnessed a meeting between Mann and Llewellyn. They had a short discussion about the conscription of a new asset within Lloyd's organization. Mann had arranged for a meeting between the recruit and his new boss. Morgan was amazed and confused when the recruit turned out to be Ash. He was soon followed by Kail, one of Lloyd's lieutenants. Morgan became alarmed when Kail explained his objective to Ash, overthrowing Lloyd and taking over his organization and territory.

Ash assured Kail that he had no problems with his objective, due to unresolved disputes with Lloyd. He explained that poor management on Lloyd's part had resulted in the creation of a bitter rivalry between him and a young, ambitious assassin. In specific, he named Morgan. This intrigued Kail, who asked him if he would be willing to take up an outstanding contract on her. Ash asked for specifics and was told that he would be required to capture or kill her. Morgan had gained a reputation as one Lloyd's best assassins. In the opinion of Lloyd's rivals and enemies, she was a true artist, an asset worth acquiring if at all possible. To that end, it struck Kail as worth the effort to convert or capture her if possible. Ash pointed out that Morgan had managed to kill most of the people that had come after her to date, she would be difficult to capture and even more difficult to control. He asked what Kail would give the man who could succeed.

By this point, Morgan had heard enough. In spite of her weakened state, she managed to break free of the vampire's compulsion and stumble out the back of the establishment. On the way, she ran into Roark who helped her to make it back home. On the way, she told him they had a serious problem. There was no way she could take Mann's offer, not now that she knew it was all a set up to take Lloyd down. What Ash was doing signing up for it was beyond her but in their last encounter they had parted as enemies, and he had been asked to bring her down too. Unfortunately, he was the one man liable to capture her alive and something told her that would be far worse than being killed. Her first priority was collecting Logan and fleeing Ash's safe house. It had been stupid to stay there in the hope of making peace with the deadly assassin. Instead, it just made it easier for Ash to find her.

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Unfortunately, Llewellyn had tipped Ash off when she broke free of his control and Ash had wasted no time pursuing her. Halfway to the safe house, Ash slipped out of the shadows. He swiftly immobilized Roark and Morgan was no match for Ash in her condition. Ash threatened to break Roark's neck to extort a promise from Morgan to surrender herself. When she did, Ash turned to Roark and extorted a different promise. He was instructed to return to the safe house and keep Logan there, telling him that Morgan had met with Mann and accepted his offer. As long as he kept quiet about her abduction and the plot they had discovered, Ash would see to it that Morgan was not executed. With promises from both of them, Ash left, dragging Morgan along with him. On the way back, Morgan confronted Ash, revealing that Logan was an assassin and she had resolved to take the offer before learning it involved an insurrection against Lloyd.

Ash surprised her by informing her that he had known about Logan and her plans. He had expected her to make that decision since their first discussion of her options. In expectation, he had engineered a meeting with Mann, hoping to encourage a similar invitation in order to find out what sort of situation she would be getting herself into. It was simply unfortunate that it had put them both in the position of having to betray Lloyd. There was not much they could do about Kail and his rebellion at this point. Ash had to turn her over to Kail and convince him not to execute her in order to keep the promises he had made to her and Roark. Beyond that, she was on her own. Even more confused about where she stood with Ash now, Morgan fell silent as Ash delivered her to her new master, Kail. She paid close attention as Ash led her to the insurrection's secret base of operations, a safe house Kail had taken full control of.

Morgan did not know what to expect from her first meeting with Kail. Her only past association with him was walking by him in the halls of Lloyd's mansion and itching under his lecherous gaze. As he looked her up and down now, Morgan was grateful that Ash and Mann had both kept the truth about her to themselves. Unfortunately, they had complicated things by declaring that, in their professional opinions, it would be very difficult to secure her loyalty. From the start of their conversation, it was obvious that Kail had considered that point and reached a similar, more sinister conclusion. He proposed to gain control of Morgan by stripping her of all other resources and connections, to cut off all possible options of freedom except what he would allow. Morgan could not breathe, until Ash spoke up in dissent and proceeded to explain how Morgan’s friends could be used as leverage against her.

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Morgan almost lost it, shouting in anger and disbelief until Logan dragged her aside and asked how much her friends were worth to her. They both knew that she would give her life for Logan and Roark. In a more seductive tone, he asked her how far she would go to protect them from him. Morgan declared that she would sacrifice anything to protect them. With a cruel smile and caressing hands, he asked her to prove it. Leaning in close, as if to kiss her cheek, he warned her to play along in a fierce whisper. It reminded her of the question he had asked her two days ago and Logan's suspicion that Ash had wanted her. At this point, it hardly mattered if he wanted to have sex with her or just kill her. Either way, she had to go along with it, or Logan and Roark would die. Seeing that she understood, Ash established the terms of the contract. In exchange for absolute submission, he promised to let her friends go on living.

Morgan submitted to Ash, conscious that the whole thing was simply a demonstration for Kail. Her life was in his hands until dawn. Ignoring the audience, Morgan endured the whole ordeal without complaint. She had been put through worse in the course of her training to become a courtesan. She had actually been paid to put on similar performances with partners of both sexes. It did not bother her at all. It was just pleasant exercise, leaving aside the threats and dangers behind it. The same would probably not be true for a girl who was brought up to be an assassin. She might have been taught to use her sex as a tool or weapon, but the display Morgan and Ash were putting on would have injured her pride. Eventually, Ash was spent. Morgan thought it was over until Ash closed his hands around her neck. She experienced a moment of panic before remembering she could do nothing to stop him. She cursed herself as Ash strangled the life out of her.

Morgan regained consciousness in the light of dawn, amazed to find herself still alive. The warm sun on her skin assured her that her worst fear had not come to pass. As she reoriented herself, Ash entered the room and greeted her as Ember. He called it a right of passage, a final test to mark the point where Morgan had died and been reborn as the assassin Ember. Convincing Kail that Morgan could be controlled had been the final step in her initiation. As an assassin, it would be foolish to work under her own name. He reminded her that Kail now knew that he could use her friends as leverage. It was not an ideal solution, but it justified allowing the two of them to live and guaranteed Morgan’s commitment to being an assassin. The authorities might still have an issue with Morgan, but all of the other threats had been neutralized. She now had a new problem, Kail but she would have to resolve it on her own.

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Morgan was given the rest of the morning to sleep. In the afternoon, Morgan was brought before Kail, her new master. It was somewhat amusing to sit with Ash through a stern lecture for them to set aside their personal rivalry now that they both had sworn allegiance to his cause. He informed them that their loyalty would be put to the test from time to time and only when it had been proven would they be introduced to their peers. Until then, they would be watched and if necessary, eliminated. Capturing Morgan had put Ash ahead of her in Kail's good graces. He was free to go home and resume his normal routine while she would have to remain close to Kail under his personal supervision. When the meeting ended, Morgan trailed Ash to the exit and watched him leave. She was not particularly happy to find herself in hostile territory, but she could not help but recognize the opportunity Ash had engineered for her.

Morgan was in a position to do the most damage. Because he remained ignorant of her muse training, Kail had made the mistake of keeping her close to him. His own desire for her would inevitably bring him into striking distance. It was simply a matter of time. Morgan was stunned when the woman she would be sharing a room with turned out to be the assassin from the bath house. Their first meeting was tense and awkward. Morgan broke the silence; she had gotten the impression that Lloyd had dispatched the female assassin, so she was surprised to encounter her among Kail's men. Belinda introduced herself and explained that the orders had come down through Kail, so her mission had served a dual purpose. She then noted that she had gained a degree of fame and respect as the first assassin to survive making an attempt on Morgan’s life. Morgan shrugged and nodded, confessing that her reflexes made her particularly dangerous when surprised.

As she settled in, Morgan considered the risks and limitations she faced if she made an attempt on Kail's life. Kail confronted her the moment she was alone, expressing false sympathy for the ordeal Ash had put her through. It sickened her to have to respond to his advances but without that encouragement her plot would come to nothing. The idea of spending the rest of her life under Kail's thumb was instantly repulsive. She suspected that Kail was one of the men who inspired Lloyd's decision to keep her true calling obscure. He was just like that man who caused her to reject her courtesan's license. She had sacrificed so much to ensure she would never be subjected to that kind of abuse; she had an obligation to take whatever risks were necessary to stop it from happening now. If she waited, Kail would force her to do things she would never be able to forgive herself for. Fortunately, everything she knew about him told her he needed to die.

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That evening, Kail summoned her to a private dinner. She was forced to dress up for the occasion and the gown provided could have seduced a man on its own. When she joined him, she discovered that Kail was a man who enjoyed mixing business with pleasure. For all of his flirting, he got right down to business, asking for details on her past contracts. Morgan amazed herself with the number of unrelated "suspicious" deaths she was able to tie her actual activities to. Three of the deaths, she had actually been present for--two apart from the death of Kevin Niall. Kail was pleased and impressed with her resume and assured her that her talents would not be wasted. There was one major job she was needed for, but he informed her that she would be tested on a few lesser targets first. She asked if she would be required to kill Lloyd, afraid of how he would answer.

Kail surprised her by telling her that Lloyd's removal was already being taken care of. In a way, he told her, that was her fault. He had not wanted to move so soon but the chaos surrounding her recruitment had forced him to expose too many of his assets and Lloyd had begun to suspect foul play within his organization. Because of the haste, Kail had been forced to rely on an asset he was not one hundred percent confident of. Dismissing that matter, he returned to questioning her. He noted that he had incredible leverage over her to secure her loyalty, but he would prefer to earn her loyalty. With that in mind, he asked her if she had any special conditions or requirements for her work. As examples, he cited one asset's prohibitions against eliminating women or children. Morgan explained that she required solid evidence that her targets truly deserved or needed to die and she would not sacrifice her life at the academy nor the lives of her friends or family.

Kail assured her that, once she had proven herself, she would be allowed to return to her normal routine. Morgan observed that he must be confident in the hold he had over her to spend so much time alone with her. He laughed and assured her that he was more than a match for her, if she had made one false move toward him, she would have had a horrible surprise. He presented himself as a role model, a semi-retired assassin rising fast through the ranks of leadership in the underworld. The problem, he told her, was the nature of the hold he had over her. It produced obedience, not loyalty. Morgan responded that loyalty was founded on trust and inspired obedience. But trust, she pointed out, had to be mutual. She had already made up her mind to accept Mann's offer when Ash captured her, stripping her of the chance to join Kail's cause freely of her own will. It had startled her to find herself set against Lloyd, because he had come close to being a friend.

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Kail had noted her apprehension when she asked if she would be asked to kill Lloyd. He asked her what she would have said if had told her she would. Morgan shrugged. When she had needed Lloyd to be a friend, he had proven that he did not trust her, locking her up and then sending assassins to hunt her down. If Kail really wanted to earn her trust, he needed to surrender his hold over her as Ash had. She may have paid a high personal price but now she had his promise that her friends were off limits to him. Most importantly, the matter was settled quickly allowing them to go about their lives. Besides, she pointed out, anything else he did to test her loyalty became meaningless as long as her behavior was dictated by the threat hanging over her head. She would throw herself at him, out of sheer gratitude, if he promised never to use that threat to manipulate her, she laughed.

Kail rose to the bait, confessing that he had always been attracted to her and had grown increasingly infatuated with her. To the degree that he had hoped to win her affections. He admitted that he had been privately outraged by Ash's demonstration. He assured her that he had no intention of exploiting her in that way. In time, he hoped to become dear to her, which was why he wanted to know and respect her limits as a professional. As they discussed her prohibitions, Morgan thought hard and fast. The news that someone had already been sent to take out Lloyd meant she had no time to lose. If Kail was being to "noble" to put the moves on her, she needed to put the moves on him. Slipping into a coy mode, she observed that the best way to get over a bad experience was by having a good one. It would certainly beat lying awake and alone dwelling on the memory of what Ash had done to her.

Morgan could see the suspicion and desire at war in Kail's eyes. He wanted to believe that she was encouraging him out of unspoken desire for him, but his suspicious nature feared that she was only encouraging him to make him more vulnerable. Ultimately, his pride would not allow him to believe he could not overpower and subdue a naked woman in bed. Casually addressing his suspicions, she sighed in regret, noting that it was a shame that he could not afford to trust her. She understood, she assured him and did not blame him for being cautious. Then again, he could use that uncertainty to add to the excitement she proposed, posing seductively and calling it fun. He accused her of playing with him and she retorted that she would not be an assassin if she did not like to live dangerously. Besides, it was impossible to establish trust without taking risks. Why waste time?

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That was enough to shatter Kail's restraint. He swept her up and she responded to his kisses and caresses, allowing him to lead her into his room. He stripped off her clothes and tied her hands over her head, securing secure them to the headboard before disrobing and joining her in bed. Morgan had to give him some points for taking the time to arouse her before intercourse. But while his desire was genuine, a glimpse into his mind proved that he remained a threat to her and those she loved and respected. With mental fingers, she escaped from bondage and when Kail reared back at the peak of passion, she struck three lethal blows, crushing his windpipe and nose, then driving the shards of bone into his brain. It was the cruelest, coldest and most ruthless thing she had ever done in her life. Morgan disengaged, slipping out of the bed and into the bath, lost in thought and waiting for reality to settle back in.

As Morgan dressed, she considered what to do next. She wanted to rush out and warn Lloyd about Kail's assassin, but she had no idea who it was or when and where they planned to strike. It could be someone in his organization or a complete stranger. It had not been possible to find out from Kail without making him suspicious but there was a chance that Mann could identify the assassin for her. In any case, Mann was a loose thread she would have to deal with sooner or later. Sneaking away from the safe house, she headed for the blood den, hoping to catch him there or learn his whereabouts from someone there. Remembering her confrontation with the vampire, Morgan ended up staking out the entrance and waiting until Mann showed up. Spotting his arrival, she pounced on him as he passed her and dragged him into an alley. In crisp, cold words, she informed him of Kail's fate.

Mann made no attempt to resist. Morgan asked him who Kail could have sent to kill Lloyd and Mann informed her that everyone he had recruited had come from within Lloyd's organization. The most recent recruits were herself and Ash, so one of them might reasonable have been given the job as a test of loyalty. Otherwise, it could be any of the men Kail had converted. Morgan asked him what the insurgents would do now that Kail was dead, would they be a threat to her or Lloyd? Mann informed her that her best option was to step into the vacuum she had created. She simply needed to be able to convince the converts that she had the backing of Kail's sponsor. Morgan was surprised to learn that Kail had been expendable and asked him how she was supposed to do that. He smiled and asked her if this meant she was finally ready to accept the offer he had proposed at the beginning.

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Morgan protested that she already had and presumably, killing Kail ought to imply that she had reneged on the deal. Mann corrected her, pointing out that she had been captured and controlled but so far, she had not been given the chance to even hear the actual deal. For that, Mann informed her, she needed to meet the man behind Kail's intended coup. With her indulgence, he led her to him. Which meant he took her into the blood den through the door in the alley. In short order, Morgan found herself being formally introduced to the vampire, Llewellyn. She had known the vampire had been involved, as the client of the contract that "proved" she was an assassin. She was surprised to learn that he had been behind Kail and his revolution as well. When he openly thanked her for disposing of Kail, after Mann mentioned it, she was forced to express her confusion. Why was he happy to be rid of the man they had gone to so much trouble to recruit her for?

In many ways, Kail was merely a front for Llewellyn. The vampire had encouraged Kail to pursue his ambitions as a cover for the pursuit of his own objectives in the city and a front for certain offensives against the local nobility. In both cases, this campaign was in response to threats from mortal agencies, specifically intrusions into the ruins deep beneath the city and surrounding countryside. Instead of acting to disrupt and discourage such expeditions, the mortal lords of the underworld were promoting and profiting from them. In response, the immortals had decided to inflict chaos similar to what they had suffered upon those responsible. There were more than enough ambitious underlings willing to act as their agents once support was offered. Where Lloyd had refused to be tempted, Kail had jumped eagerly at the opportunity to advance himself. He did not even question his new patron's motives. It was enough that he was offered the resources he needed to depose Lloyd.

Kail, and his ambition, had been used as a way to sort the wheat from the chaff. His efforts to recruit people to his side revealed the true nature of the men working for Lloyd, identifying those who could be bought and swayed from those who were utterly loyal to their superiors in the organization. It was Llewellyn who was particularly interested in acquiring Morgan. Kail considered her a potential but expendable asset, while Llewellyn saw both immediate and long-term possibilities in her. For the immediate, it would have been useful for her to be a weapon exploited through Kail. From among those who could be swayed, Llewellyn had sought an assassin willing and able to take out a high-level crime lord. The man had been aware of the threat from the moment he endorsed the expeditions and had taken strenuous precautions against vampires and weres. Thus, the immortals needed a mortal assassin, but all the best assassins were loyal subordinates to the target.

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The real reason Kail had gained Llewellyn's support was because he had been an assassin capable of that job. Unfortunately, the price for his services had been Lloyd's power and position. As a down payment, Kail had been given control of the mercenary members of Lloyd's organization and support in organizing a coup. Over time, it had become apparent that Kail was not the most efficient solution and then an alternative had presented itself in Morgan. She was incredibly talented and her affiliation with the organization had been marginal. While she was fiercely loyal to those she loved and respected, she had no loyalty to the organization itself, choosing to stand apart. It was with some relief that Morgan was offered the job that Llewellyn and Mann had been grooming Kail for. If she accepted, she would be told when and where the assassin would make his move against Lloyd. Morgan contemplated her ordeal and the prospect of her first real assassination.

Ultimately, Morgan did not have the option of saying no. Stressing the urgency of the situation she told them they would have to meet and arrange the details later but for now she had to stop Lloyd's assassination. Which was wise, it turned out, since the assassin was supposed to be attacking within the hour. With no time to lose, Morgan raced to Lloyd's terrified that she would be too late. Fortunately, things were quiet when she arrived at the mansion. Because things had not yet been sorted out with Lloyd, she was forced to sneak in and avoid detection. She arrived at Lloyd's home office and sighed in relief when she heard that he was inside. As she slipped into the room, Lloyd and the men he was talking to looked up in surprise. She took a deep breath but before she could explain her intrusion, she spotted Ash melting out of the shadows. It was the confirmation of her worst fear. She sprinted across the room, ready to intercept Ash.

Ash had taken one look at her and assumed a look of deadly resolve. His attention locked on Morgan as he darted in to engage her. Lloyd's right hand, Kraig, shouted for Lloyd to get down, interposing himself between his boss and the two sprinting assassins. Ash and Morgan met in a flurry of blows, neither able to draw a weapon without the other slapping or kicking it from their hands. They said nothing as they engaged in their grim dance, grinning as it became apparent to both of them that the other was taking the effort to attempt to subdue and incapacitate, willing to kill only as a last resort. Both were thinking the same thought, that the other was obligated to kill Lloyd on Kail's orders and somewhat reluctant to succeed. As they fought, Kraig attempted to escort Lloyd from the room, carefully skirting the fight. Ash and Morgan paused to catch their breath and exchange what could be their final words.

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Kraig and Lloyd were halfway to the door when Ash and Morgan paused, and the first person drawn to the commotion appeared at the door. The two combatants spared a glance at the door, taking his arrival as the sign that they had no more time to waste. As one, they saw the new arrival rush to meet Kraig and Lloyd. Something about him struck Morgan as wrong and without thinking, she lunged forward to intercept him. A half second later, Ash seemed to pick up on it too. The cue turned out to be the man drawing a dagger and preparing to throw it, as the throw itself proved, directly at Lloyd. Kraig jumped in the way, catching the dagger high on his chest as Morgan and Ash attempted to intercept the real assassin. The elusive killer danced around them as he raced forward to engage Lloyd at close range. Morgan and Ash ended up hopelessly entangled and Morgan shouted out in desperation that Kail was dead, negating the contract.

The assassin hesitated for an instant, looking back at Morgan in disbelief. In that crucial moment, Lloyd whipped out his long sword and pierced the assassin right through the heart. Morgan and Lloyd looked on in shock as their boss casually dispatched the startled killer. He then turned and confronted the two, demanding an explanation. They both confessed that they had thought the other was here on orders to kill him. They explained how they had each been recruited into a conspiracy, led by Kail, to overthrow Lloyd. Morgan revealed that she had tempted Kail into lowering his guard and killed him, when she learned that Kail had sent an assassin to kill Lloyd. Ash claimed to have heard about the contract and had been lying in wait for the assassin to strike. The remaining details of the whole incident were sorted out and Morgan informed them that she had been retained to do a job in exchange for the information about the attack that Lloyd had just foiled.

A great deal had changed over a relatively short time, more than could be discussed at that late hour. Excusing herself, Morgan promised to return and go over the details later but she needed to find her friends and let them know that the worst of it was over. On her way out, Ash caught up to her and offered to walk with her. As they made their way to the safe house, Morgan questioned Ash about all of the things he had done recently. Ash confirmed that he had been manipulating events while he had been manipulating her, exposing Kail's plot and using her as the weapon to take him out. Along the way, she had confirmed his suspicions about her and her lineage. He had known that, if she simply lived up to her potential, she would be able to live up to her reputation. Only one thing stood between her and being an assassin, getting paid for her services. That said, he left her at the door to the safe house and vanished into the shadows.

Morgan found Logan and Roark brooding over drinks. They were both surprised to see her, given the dire situation Ash had created with his ultimatums. Morgan quickly explained how things had worked out and observed that the next step would be straightening things out with the authorities and returning to the academy. That would wait for the morning, however, as all three were exhausted. Upon retiring to her room, Morgan was ambushed by Belinda. Morgan’s premonition of danger was not enough to save her from being spitted on a long sword, but it did spare her from having her heart pierced. Belinda was quick to cover Morgan’s mouth, leaning into whisper into her ear. The female assassin had discovered Kail's remains and raced to warn her companion, only to learn he too had been slain. She had followed Morgan and Ash, silencing Morgan to prevent her from identifying Belinda. On removing her sword, she deliberately sliced through Morgan’s spine, leaving her paralyzed and unable to call for help as she drowned in her own blood.

Excerpts

Morgan Roan, an Accidental Assassin

Morgan was descended from a long line of courtesans, raised and trained with expectations of becoming a courtesan in turn. Morgan had no clue who her father was. There had been plenty of whispered rumors but never anything solid enough to identify him from. Her mother had been the mistress and muse of a powerful aristocrat. Morgan was raised primarily by her mother and trained principally by her grandmother. She had her mother’s patron for a father-figure, with his children, the children of his other retainers and her own younger brothers and sister for peers and playmates.

Morgan had no idea how close her father actually was. Her father had been a knight in the service of her mother's patron. The father of three other children, he had been widowed when his wife died in childbirth several months prior to the events that led to Morgan’s conception. Her conception was the unintended result of a moment of weakness on her parents’ part but the nature of her mother’s calling and the ordeal she went through at the time, made it easy to obscure Morgan’s paternity.

As a child, her training was informal, private tutoring in academic, aesthetic and athletic areas along with all of the other children. Her grandmother had not approved, insisting that a proper courtesan needed to be specially trained from birth. A compromise was reached that allowed Morgan to remain with her mother until puberty, when her formal training as a courtesan could begin.

Ironically, while Morgan had the talent for magic, it went untested and untrained. Sensitive to discrimination, Morgan approached her early education with a determination to prove that she was as capable as any boy. It was almost inevitable that a child of one of the retainers was of suitable age to be the personal companion of one of the lord’s offspring. In Morgan’s case, she was the same age as the lord's youngest, and favorite, son. After some intense, initial rivalry, they became close, intimate friends, their friendship spiced by good-natured competition and an uncanny knack for misadventure.

Into the Ruins I

An adventurous and athletic young girl, Morgan was a natural born tomboy. Fearless and curious, it was inevitable that she would get into serious trouble. Morgan had her first brush with death when she was seven years old. She had been with her friends at a swimming hole along the Avon River, when she was sucked into one of the underground channels into Ruins’ Deep. It was a wild ride, and Morgan was pretty beaten up by the time the current slowed and pooled. For a while, she was trapped in a small cavern but the water in the pool was pure and sweet and crowded with fish.

A resourceful girl, Morgan did what was necessary to stave off hunger and thirst, drinking from and fishing in the pond that she was trapped by. Eventually, she realized that no one was going to come and rescue her, and she turned her attention to escaping. She had become much better at swimming underwater and had discovered where the water drained out of her pond. She had not risked following the river for fear of being seriously hurt but the thought of remaining trapped alone forever grew into a bigger concern. She chose to swim downstream, coming close to drowning more than once before emerging in the buried city.

Days passed as she explored the ancient city, marveling over how intact everything was as she searched for a way to the surface. As hunger and exhaustion wore her down, Morgan discovered there were frightening things trapped in the city with her. Ghosts and other spirits—the former wandering freely and liable to follow her everywhere, the latter seemingly bound in place—were undetectable until she stepped into their warding circles and found herself struggling to defend her fragile mind from their ruthless probing. Her fear of being lost and alone compounded and evolved into greater horror and desperation with each encounter.

Unlike the ghosts, the demons could molest her, mentally and physically, as long as she was in their sphere of influence. Morgan sensed the demons wanted to break her in order to possess her body. But that was nothing compared to being swallowed alive by a dragon and then spat back up in the middle of a dragon's nest. She should have died right there. As the baby dragons jostled each other to get at her, Morgan twisted, contorted and slithered for all she was worth to escape the clutch and dive out of the nest. Slashed, scraped and bruised, Morgan dragged herself out of the dragon's lair and resumed her quest for the surface.

By the time she was discovered wandering through the surface ruins, her wounds had begun to heal—but along the way she had begun to suffer from starvation and dehydration. The traumatized girl was returned to her home, where she seemed to make a rapid recovery. When Morgan described her ordeal, revealing her desperate escape from an isolated cavern followed by days of wandering in the haunted depths of the ruins, the ghosts and demons that tormented her were dismissed as the creations of a fevered and frightened mind, but the traumatic effect of her ordeal was obvious enough.

Morgan had been trapped underground long enough for even the most optimistic adult to declare her dead. Provoked by her traumatic experiences, Morgan’s latent aptitude for magic evolved instead into a natural, if modest, psychic ability. The discipline to use it emerged under the influence of her training. Compared to the abilities of a powerful magic user or a trained psychic, her psychic abilities were weak and quirky. Overlooked but most profound, was the development of natural regeneration. She did not heal much faster than normal, but she healed completely and proved very resistant to disease and infection.

Always intuitive and empathic, her thoughts and feelings began to resonate with those of the people around her. She became somewhat more sensitive and perceptive than the average person, capable of glimpsing psychic or spiritual phenomena others were blind to. An odd side effect of her perceptiveness, Morgan became keenly sensitive to the mechanisms of magic, making it difficult for her to learn even basic spells. Intimidated by magic, she became wary of anyone proficient with magic. When she discovered that her psychic abilities gave her an edge in protecting herself from--and dispelling--magic, she regained her confidence.

Coming of Age

Morgan’s first lover was a boy named Kevin. She first met him at age eleven when they were both fostered for the summer at The Orchard Inn. It was one of the few times Morgan had ever been encouraged to spend her time as she pleased. She devoted most of the summer to exploring the countryside and playing with Kevin. Neither looked forward to the end of their time together, so it came as a pleasant surprise when they discovered that the academy and her grandmother's manor were close enough for them to hook up when they wanted after they returned to Avon to continue their education.

After menarche, Morgan began training formally under her grandmother to become a courtesan. It did not take her long to realize that she did not want to end up like her mother, the property of some nobleman. Fortunately for her, her father had taken an interest in her, in spite of the fact that circumstances had made it impossible for him to marry her mother and formally recognize Morgan as his daughter. He personally saw to it that she received the essential training in swords and sorcery to pursue a formal initiation at the Academy of Avon Tear. That included training generally offered only to boys.

Morgan’s father did not spare her modesty and that often encouraged unwanted attention and interest from boys. Her training as was essentially limited by what her father could teach in his or her free time, but she applied herself passionately to his instruction, adapting her dancing and gymnastic skills to fighting techniques on her own initiative and demonstrating a natural talent for fencing with a long sword.

Morgan discovered that the best way to escape from the demands of her courtesan training was to slip away from the manor and explore the city in the guise of a boy. She made friends with the orphans of the streets and unwittingly involved herself in their criminal exploitation, playing the games of adventure and daring that prepared and conditioned them for life in the underworld. She had been taunted into exploring—and eventually stealing from—people's houses. Presented as increasingly bold dares, she was carefully maneuvered into spying, casing and eventually cat burglary.

Jamie, Kevin’s academy roommate, insisted on tagging along whenever he met with Morgan. He was a solid and reliable sort for a practical joker and troublemaker. Morgan introduced Kevin and Jamie to her gang of friends, once they promised to keep her true gender a secret. Morgan, Kevin and Jamie were well matched, equally talented at getting into and out of tight scrapes, some mere mischief but often enough sobering misadventures. A natural leader and an orphan himself, Jamie had no trouble commandeering Morgan’s gang of friends. A penchant for exploration and exhibition caused them to embark on grand adventures.

Morgan responded to the challenges, blending her formal and informal training to best effect. Her formal training as a gymnast, a dancer and a courtesan came courtesy of and at the insistence of her grandmother, while childhood adventures and misadventures granted her an unusual knowledge of the ruins of Aeslyn Tear and an informal apprenticeship in crime. She developed her skills as a fencer, fighter and thief by posing as a boy while growing up. Among those who observed her upbringing, the unique mix of abilities she possessed marked her as an exceptional prospective spy or assassin.

Into the Ruins II

The existence of underground passages was a well-known secret among the youth of Avon and Morgan’s friends, Jamie in particular, decided one day to initiate her into this mystery. At first, being dragged underground awakened the trauma of her childhood ordeal. Her reaction stunned and scared Kevin and Jamie almost as much as it did her. In order to conquer her fear and prove herself she delved deep into the underground. When she found herself in a familiar area, she realized that the ruins of Aeslyn Tear undermined the entire city and surrounding wilderness of Avon.

Just a Girl

Inevitably, the changes in her body as she grew older made it increasingly more difficult to maintain her pose as a boy. It was simply a matter of time before her true gender was exposed to everyone through horse play and fighting. The day finally came when a couple of the boys recognized her in her normal guise as the poised and polite protégé of her grandmother. In spite of being unmasked, she was far from being cured of calamity. She tried in vain to keep the truth from changing her status in the gang, only to have her pride and stubbornness exploited.

No amount of success could outweigh the simple fact that she was a girl, however. It was not uncommon for any of the boys to goad her into wrestling with them, exploiting the struggle for erotic thrills. They would catch her in her feminine guise and use her to distract their marks. Often she was required to pose as a girlfriend as part of some scheme or simply to increase the status of the boy she was with. This only made her more determined to be one of the guys, to challenge them on the grounds they most prided themselves on. The problem was, when she really put her mind to it, she could pass perfectly as a boy.

Inevitably, the boys decided it was time someone taught her the difference. It was not difficult to exploit her pride and determination to prove herself to get her alone and naked. That had been one of their regular scams. They waited for a pleasant day to propose a visit to their favorite swimming hole. It seemed harmless, given it was typical for boys and girls to bathe or swim nude in public. The difference was that on this occasion her true form and identity was not the disguise it had once been. In addition, there was no adult supervision, no moderation as the boys indulged their curiosity at her expense.

Morgan’s curiosity, combined with injured pride over challenges against her gender and ability, conspired to make her, unwittingly at first, into a willing accomplice. After it was over, Morgan never said anything about being molested by the boys. Morgan eventually discovered the boys did not share her restraint. They said nothing to her but she caught them laughing over it a few months later. From their conversation, it was obvious that the ordeal had been meant to shame and debase her. It might have, if she had possessed any qualms or reservations about her sexuality.

Or if they had dared to rape her. Always a sensual creature, exploring her sexuality came as naturally to her as breathing and her training as a courtesan prepared her very well for the prospect of sex itself. The boys who had molested her had been not up to it. If they had intended to provoke her into having sex, their nerve had been broken. They had touched her intimately and probed her secrets with naked curiosity but wilted in the face of her arousing inspections. All things considered, the experience had not been entirely unpleasant, but the loss of friendship and respect hurt her deeply.

Going Straight

She attempted to cut her ties with the gangs only to face threats and blackmail from their patrons. For the first time she saw her life of crime for the trap it was. She knew she was in over her head when she found herself blackmailed into working as a cat burglar. She knew she had to do something about it when one of her jobs turned into a disaster where she was forced to kill to protect herself. Worst of all, her best friend and their mentor were dragged into the middle of things because of their concern for her. Together, the two youths were able to extract themselves from their criminal careers but not before both had been marked.

Trials of Maidenhood

As time passed, Morgan found herself under increasing pressure to commit herself to her courtesan training. Her rebellion was noticed by her grandmother, who concluded that her straying was coming directly into conflict with her calling. She increased the demands of Morgan’s training to leave her no time or energy for adventures. This made escaping her fate as a courtesan an even greater priority. As a result, she became even more devoted to her studies under her father. He had become her true mentor and confidante. Her relationship with Kevin and Jamie was suffering from the evolution of their rivalry over her.

Morgan had become infatuated with her father. Worse, her father had become fascinated with her, impressed with her potential, her quick and open mind and feline amorality. He had taken Morgan under his wing, dispensing practical wisdom and discipline like a father. Unfortunately, he could never tell her he was her father. But because he was, he had been blind as Morgan developed a crush on him. It never occurred to him how she would respond to his guidance and nurturing, particularly during the onslaught of puberty. One night he returned to his room to find her naked in his bed, determined to lose her virginity to him.

For the first time he was forced to recognize that she was becoming a desirable young woman. With strained patience and self-restraint, he told her they could never know each other as a man and a woman while he was her teacher. In response, she argued that, as her mentor, he ought to be the one to instruct her in the most intimate art. He strained to resist temptation, but Morgan had matured into a beautiful maiden and his resolve threatened to crumble before her seductive logic. To deflect her, he encouraged her to explore her options closer to her own age and reminded her of her relationship with Kevin.

As she had feared, sleeping with Kevin brought about the end of their friendship. For all she adored Kevin, he lacked the one thing her father offered, maturity and experience. Frustrated at his rebuke, she found her attention straying to the men her grandmother's training introduced her to. In order to pay to earn her keep, Morgan often worked for her grandmother as a muse. That usually involved modeling, dancing, acting or singing to amuse guests at the manor. Morgan quickly developed a habit of engaging her patrons in private, philosophical discussions through the early hours of the morning.

Morgan still found her father the most desirable man available. She was relentless in her efforts to seduce him, but he refused to compromise his integrity. When he found himself responding to her planned, close encounters--typically when she was in the nude--bathing, swimming or for some aspect of her physical training--he would leave or dismiss her, whichever was appropriate. When he finally confronted her about her behavior, he discovered she truly had no shame or fear. In her mind, there was no reason not to show how much she loved him. He still resisted revealing that he was her father.

Everything was going well until she turned seventeen and came of age. Morgan was under pressure from her grandmother to become the courtesan of her patron's grandson and heir apparent. The young lord had taken note of Morgan early on in her training and vowed that she would become his. His grandfather had presented his demand to Morgan’s grandmother, and she had promised that Morgan would comply, confident that she could bend the girl to her will. Morgan tried to be obedient, but the boy was always stalking her, trying to stake his claim, forcing Morgan to defend herself on more than one occasion.

Morgan could not abandon her training, but she resolved to never become some man's trophy. Unfortunately, the boy she had grown up with, the son of her mother's patron lord, had asked for her hand in marriage. She loved him but only as a brother and marriage was just another form of bondage to a man. When she completed her training, she refused her license, declined the marriage proposal and applied to the academy. Furious, her grandmother threatened to sabotage her education and end her suitor's courtship by revealing the truth of Morgan’s paternity to her mother's patron--unintentionally revealing the truth to Morgan.

In spite of the threat, her parents left the decision to Morgan. If the old woman carried through on her threat, there was a good chance her parents would be dismissed and find themselves unable to support Morgan financially, as they had originally intended. That meant Morgan would have to pay her own tuition and expenses if she refused to accept the contract her grandmother had arranged. However, if she accepted the contract, she would easily be able to afford the academy. Since the young man was himself attending the academy, he could hardly object to her joining him there.