Draft

Chapter 01

In the pale light of false dawn, Morgan awoke with a gasp. Her wide eyes flickered over the deep blue outlines of familiar objects searching the impenetrable violet shadows for the demons that had haunted her nightmare. When nothing leapt out at her, she sat up hesitantly in bed and froze in disbelief as the pallid face of her mother caught her eye from across the room. Gesturing at a lamp on her bedside table, and muttering an incantation, she summoned a flame. As the warm hued light brought the room and its contents into full focus, the shadows recoiled and became even more impenetrable. The lamp revealed that, rather than confronting her mother's ghost, she had simply caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror opposite her bed. Until that moment, she had not realized how much she had come to resemble the woman who brought her into the world--and then left her alone in it. Before she could do more, her roommate stirred in the opposite bed and squinted balefully across the room at her.

"Is it morning already?"

"Go back to sleep," Morgan admonished gently, swinging her legs out of bed. With the demons of her childhood waiting for her in dreams, she had no desire to return to sleep, but that was no reason to deprive her roommate. The poor girl was fortunate Morgan had not arisen screaming, as she had in previous years. Gathering the things she would need to start her day, she explained, "I’m just going out for some exercise."

"It's not even light out yet," the other girl complained, covering her eyes with her forearm. Removing the limb a moment later, she stared at Morgan directly and challenged her, "When do you ever sleep?"

"I strive for quality, over quantity," Morgan replied acerbically, wishing deep down that she could make it through a night without some kind of nightmare or other affair interfering. She quickly brushed out and braided her hair, slipped into an older blouse and pair of pants she could work out in, and laced herself into a fighting bodice. After she had gathered up her boots and cloak, and belted on her sword, she poured--and drank--a glass of water to rinse the sleep out of her mouth. As she was dousing the light and exiting their room, she reminded her roommate, "Don't sleep too long, Margaret, I won't be back to wake you for classes."

"I won't…" came Margaret's drowsy reply.

Morgan shook her head and closed the door gently behind her. She made her way down the hall to the bath, taking a moment to relieve herself and wash her hands and face, before putting on her boots and heading out of the dorm into the cool morning air. On exiting the building, she pushed her bangs out of her eyes and studied the horizon. Concluding that she had woken even earlier than usual, she decided to start the day with a walk around the academy campus. Situated on top of a sea cliff, the academy stood above the usual blanket of fog cast almost nightly over the heart of the city. Overhead, thick piles of cumulus drifted lazily in from the sea. Occasionally the fog would be thick enough or the clouds low enough to completely shroud the coastal mountains, and, once in a while, the city might enjoy a clear, crisp dawn. Morgan loved mornings like this most, when it seemed like she inhabited an island up among the clouds in the sky.

Morgan set out through the heart of the campus, admiring the tall, sculpted buildings and manicured lawns and gardens. Gradually, she made her way out onto the point—where she would have been able to overlook the ocean on a clear day. The strong, distinct odor of the sea was muted by the sharp clean scent of rain. Morgan frowned, realizing that the morning showers would probably catch her well before she returned to her dorm, but resolved to endure it as she made her way back along the top of the sea cliffs.

The rain caught her about halfway back and did a fair job of shredding the morning mist to reveal the rocky coastline. Morgan drew her hood up and pulled her cloak tight around her body to keep dry. The walk and the weather did a good job of distracting her from the horrible events her mind had revisited in nightmares. Soon enough the rain passed, allowing the full glory of dawn to be appreciated.

Morgan’s spirits lifted as she made her way through the trees that reached down to encircle the landward end of the campus. Following a familiar footpath, she made her way to the meadow behind the dorms and threw back her hood and cloak. When she reached the center of the meadow, she shrugged off her mantle, carefully folded it and laid it aside as she proceeded to stretch and limber up for her usual work out.

Once she felt loose enough, she proceeded to work through the elegant patterns of a deadly dance. The nature of this exercise made it almost inevitable that her thoughts would turn once more toward the past. She reflected on moments when her grandmother first instructed her in the art, or when she enhanced that training under the guidance of her grandfather. As had become her habit of late, she tried to avoid exploring the memories of how and why she had taken her training even further.

It only brought them to the center of her attention.

Over the years, as she disciplined her body and mind, she had stirred up fragments of a life she had lived before. Each of the memories and abilities she had stumbled across had been carefully woven into her current life, evolving into a pattern that had shocked and disturbed her. Looking back on all that she had recovered, it had become obvious that she had been male in her former life. It was something she should have considered; the soul, it was said, had no specific gender. Unfortunately, having grown up in a society that proclaimed women subordinate to men, Morgan had devoted herself to proving that it was not necessary to be a man to be worth something. To learn that she owed her exceptional achievements as a woman to a foundation that had been laid down when she was a man had almost destroyed her. She had recovered, but now that she knew the truth about her former life, she no longer looked forward to unlocking new memories and tried not to think of those days when she had--and yet the habits they had forged remained strong.

It became easier to push those thoughts aside when she spotted her two favorite people approaching, one trailing far behind the other. Morgan smiled to herself, completing her current set of forms and then stopped to greet her friends as they reached the center of the meadow. The first one to arrive was a redhead like herself, and on closer examination, her virtual twin. If he had been a girl, Morgan suspected that they would look exactly alike.

"You're up early. Nightmares again?" he asked, allowing some of their old familiarity to color his concern. He met her eyes directly, while shucking off his cloak and piling it next to her own. It was obvious that he had to restrain himself from offering her a comforting hand.

"Yeah. You?" Morgan inquired softly, reminding herself that she had not been the only one traumatized by their childhood abduction. She allowed her eyes to flicker toward the approaching form of their mutual friend. Logan was frowning at her when she glanced back, forcing her to look down as he responded.

"Not really," he admitted, and then shrugged. "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, when she had been thinking about the effort she went to in order to shut out her own. It was futile but so was trying to escape the past in her current incarnation. They were both trying to do that to some degree. If they did not tune out the memories of the life they had growing up together, they would not be able to endure the things that had come between them now. Unfortunately, they did have a long history together, and it was almost impossible to forget that. No matter how much time and effort she spent focused on forgetting the past and creating a new life for herself, 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?" he prompted, still studying her with concern.

"What?" Morgan blurted, flushing slightly at being caught off guard by the question. Shaking her head and raising her hands, she clarified, "No. Just my regular nightmares this time. Never thought I'd be grateful for that."

"Hopefully this means you're getting over it, then," he comforted, placing a hand on her shoulder. There was a hint of relief evident in that response. The gesture was not too forward, and it did not presume too much on their past together, but it said a lot that he held back until she assured him she was not being plagued by her newest nightmare.

"It's not much of an improvement," she complained with a mild glare. He just patted her on the shoulder and shook his head, stepping a pace away just as his roommate walked into earshot.

"Morning, Morgan," the newcomer greeted her cheerfully.

"Good morning, Roark." Morgan extended a hand to the dark-haired youth, who promptly bowed and kissed the back of it. The courtly greeting was just the product of his upbringing, as the supernumerary son of a minor merchant noble. In spite of that, he still earned a growl of displeasure from Logan, which he casually ignored. Of the three of them, he was the only one not discomfited by the situation they had gotten themselves into.

"Already worked out I see," he observed, straightening up and smiling at her. He gave her hand a friendly squeeze and then turned to his roommate. Holding out his hand, as if expecting a payment, he gleefully announced, "I told you you wouldn't catch her in time."

"I'm warmed up enough to spar," Logan retorted, giving Morgan a respectful nod of inquiry. She shrugged and nodded back, resting her hand on the pommel of her sheathed sword. Logan smiled an overly friendly smile at Roark and invited, "Care to join us?"

"As much as I long for the pleasure of a sound beating, I'm afraid I'll have to decline," Roark deferred with a shake of his head, stepping back out of harms way with his hands held out in mock surrender.

"Again. You're not that bad, Roark. If you'd just practice a little…" Logan complained trying to sound encouraging.

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

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

"Which should count as sufficient extra practice," Roark countered snappily, lacing his fingers together and resting his hands behind his head.

"Never mind. Next time, you ask him," Logan suggested, giving Morgan a nudge.

"Sure," Morgan replied with another shrug, before moving off a few paces and drawing her sword experimentally.

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

"Really?" Logan turned to him and quirked an eyebrow. Giving his roommate a meaningful look he nodded and announced, "I'll try to remember that. It could come in handy someday. Morgan?" He shifted his attention to her as he moved away from Roark to face her across a few yards of trampled grass.

"I'm good," she replied, sheathing her sword and shaking her arms to get the blood flowing. She gave Roark a questioning glance, waiting for him to signal that he was ready to preside over their sparring session. When he nodded his response, she smiled playfully at Logan and noted, "We'd better make this quick, though. I'm starving."

"All right then." Logan turned to Roark and signaled his readiness with a nod.

\* \* \*

For a while, they worked through their standard offensive and defensive forms in focused silence. They started hand-to-hand and then shifted to sword work once Logan was truly warmed up. Roark stood by calling the shots, no longer unnerved by their insistence on practicing with live steel. They were both talented and well studied in the art of fencing, more than capable of turning a deadly slice into a playful slap with the flat of the blade. Roark, equally well schooled, was more than capable of spotting an opening for a lethal blow, stopping action and awarding the point if the other was at least in position to exploit it. Occasionally, one or the other would get cut during these practice sessions. But to them, that was just a way to get more practice in the healing arts. Roark's main concern was keeping them from becoming too worked up, crossing the line from mere sparring to actual fighting.

After a while, they slipped into their usual banter. Some of it was designed to distract, and some of it was critique or commentary following a successful strike or desperate defense. The verbal exchange offered Roark an additional measure of Logan and Morgan's state of mind. The first warning sign was a shift from the practical to the personal, and on this morning, it was Logan who crossed the line first.

"I was wondering," Logan interjected casually, testing Morgan's guard, "have you made up your mind about going back to work?" He punctuated the question with a solid overhand blow capable of cleaving her head in two or lopping an arm off at the shoulder.

Roark's protest died as Morgan's blade came up smoothly in defense.

Morgan tightened her grip and met his blade solidly overhead. 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. It was far from innocent and brought far too much to mind. 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. Her mother, the mistress and muse of a powerful aristocrat, had tried to provide Morgan with a fairly normal childhood. Her grandmother had not approved, insisting that a proper courtesan needed to be specially trained from birth, but a compromise had been reached that should have allowed Morgan to remain with her mother until puberty. On some days, Morgan felt that her grandmother had been right. Her exposure to normal life had made things very difficult for her, after her mother's death.

Orphaned at the age of seven, Morgan had been sent to Avon to live with the woman who had given birth to her father and trained her mother. Her grandmother wasted no time beginning Morgan's formal training to become a courtesan. It did not take Morgan long to realize that she did not want to end up like her mother, the property of some nobleman. Unable to abandon her training, however, she ultimately resolved to reject it. When she came of age, and completed her training, she refused her courtesan's license.

It was ironic that price she had to pay, in order to escape from that life, would be having to live it--working 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 a 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 and the demand for her services. Morgan was always careful to keep a low profile, for fear of being expelled from the academy, and Lloyd took great care in handling her contracts. They carefully screened her clients and customers 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, however, went beyond his normal concern.

"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 suffered a few setbacks, as her work occasionally put her in awkward or compromising positions, and she had argued with Logan almost incessantly about the need for what she was doing. The job had its 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 its 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." Logan's response cut through her reflection, after deflecting each of her blows. He was forced to give up a few feet as she drove forward aggressively.

"Hold," Roark called out, as Logan slipped in a patch of mud.

Logan recovered his balance and prompted, "So?"

"I don't know," Morgan sighed heavily, taking a few steps back and bringing her guard back up. 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," Logan asserted, bringing his blade back up to meet hers in guard position.

Roark waited for them to glance his way and nodded, "Engage."

"I don't know," she repeated, shaking her head and evading his efforts to tap her sword out of line. She feinted to his left, but he simply drifted back and shifted his guard to maximize his response to an initiative on that side. While feeling for another hole in his defenses, she elaborated, "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," he argued. He swung alternating attacks that she blocked easily. He swung low to block her return strike to his thigh and forced her to jump back as he shoved her sword off to the side and tried to cut across her open belly. Rather than press his advantage, he declared, "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." He emphasized this with a wave of his sword.

"Hired swords just don't make the kind of money an escort can," Morgan protested sourly, bringing herself back to guard. With a wry smile and a shake of her head, she confided, "Honestly, sometimes I think I should have taken Kevin up on his offer."

"What, become his personal courtesan?" Logan cried in disbelief. He swept his sword out to the right and rolled it in his grip, describing a circle with the tip. With some vehemence, he added, "I’m glad he died before he managed to convince you to do that."

"Logan!" Morgan almost shouted, lowering her sword in shock.

"I'm sorry," Logan shrugged unapologetically, before gesturing with his sword for her to resume her guard. As she did, he confessed, "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 once before."

"Like I had a choice." Morgan scowled, bringing her blade back up and settling into her starting stance. Tossing her head to get her bangs out of her eyes, she continued with a faint glare, "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," Logan muttered.

"It's what I was raised for," Morgan reminded him in a tone that invited no reply. Logan's mouth tightened into a firm line, and they remained silent for a few more rounds. Roark monitored them anxiously, wary of the tension building up between them. His attacks were sharp and solid, forcing Morgan to strain in order to block them or turn them aside. Roark was about to call the whole thing off when they paused to catch their breath. A taut silence stretched between them. It was obvious that Logan was not ready to concede the argument. Trying to head him off, she amended, "It’s the only means I have to make a future for myself."

"It's not what you want to be doing, though," Logan pointed out firmly, catching her off guard with the simple truth. Unable to deny that Morgan simply resumed her stance and gestured for him to continue with their practice. Logan sighed and rolled his shoulders, dropping into an offensive stance. After they exchanged a few probing strikes, he demanded curtly, "What kind of second chance do you expect to find starting down the same old road?"

"That's my whole point!" Morgan retorted angrily, catching a blow close to the cross guard and using the leverage she had to force an opening she could exploit in a real fight with a kick or a punch. Instead, she opted to step through rather than remain inside his guard forced to employ an overhand defense. As he whipped around to avoid a passing slice, she took a deep breath and concluded, "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," Logan persisted angrily. He pressed her with an aggressive, ricocheting series of attacks, designed to batter her defenses down. Working on the inside of his broad, sweeping onslaught, she had the advantage of speed and leverage, but his blows continued to pick up force and momentum, until finally her wrists bent under the pressure, allowing his blade to bite deep into her right upper arm.

"Ouch!" Morgan cried out, more in protest than in pain, as her right arm went numb with shock. In spite of falling back, and losing her grip with that hand, she kept up a left-handed defense long enough for Roark to call a halt.

"Damn." Logan sheathed his sword as Roark glared at him and went to Morgan's side. Shaking his head, Logan met her eye-to-eye and apologized, "I'm sorry. Let me see."

"It's fine. I'll fix it when we're done," Morgan insisted, clenching her right hand open and closed trying to get the feeling back, while Roark quietly urged her to let him look at the cut.

"No. We should stop," Logan admitted. Giving her a rakish smile, he reminded her, "You did say you were hungry, right?"

"Oh, fine. But you owe me a decent match next time," Morgan demanded, in a tone that would have been playful if it was less strained. Twisting her neck and raising her wounded arm, she tried to examine her injury, as Roark took her sword and sheathed it for her. She immediately gave off a noise of lament for her poor shirt, which had shared in her suffering but was less adept at mending itself.

Reaching within, she closed her eyes and held her free hand out over the wound, silently calling the blood back to her body, asking her flesh to mend. That was one of the differences between magic and psychic abilities. Magic imposed order on the universe and was expressed in commands. A psychic was simply in tune with the universe, and recognizing that it had its own order, tried to work *with* it--or *inspired* it--to achieve a desired result. Her body, wanting to be whole and healthy, and her blood, wanting to be a useful part of her body, eagerly adopted her plan and a few moments later Morgan opened her eyes to see unblemished skin and an unstained, cut sleeve.

The slashed fabric caught her attention. It bothered her that she could mend something as complex as living flesh with a thought, but a simple woven fabric was unresponsive to regeneration. She did not know a spell for mending fabric, but her intuition told her it ought to be simple enough for her magic talent. She heard, but did not listen to, her friends as she became absorbed in the problem.

"Now do you see why I won't spar with you?" Roark snapped at Logan.

"I don't cut her every time," Logan denied, glaring back.

"No," Roark conceded tersely. Glancing at Morgan and then turning back to his roommate, he leaned in and observed pointedly, "Just when you're arguing, which happens whenever you talk about her work."

"I'm just…" Logan tried to explain.

"Jealous," Roark cut him off, with an expectant look.

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

"I'm not saying you aren't." Roark knew when to stop pushing his roommate. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. With a sigh, he decided to speak his mind anyway, reminding Logan that he was going about discouraging Morgan in the wrong way. "It's just, 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!" Morgan blurted out in instant dismay, as the exchange between the two young men finally caught her attention. Roark's words had inspired a moment's panic, prompting her to protest, "Don't tell me you're giving our money to Roark!?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she turned to Roark and tried to minimize the damage. "No offense, Roark. It's just…" She gestured with her hands helplessly.

"Hey. No…" Roark could not help laughing as he realized what she was afraid of. One of the first things Logan and Morgan had learned about him, when he became Logan's roommate, was that he was a notorious gambler--a fact that caused him to fight an occasional duel and resulted in no end of scheming to find ways to cover his occasional debts. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed her fear. "I understand. Granted, I could probably double your money in one night…"

"Or you could lose it all." Morgan crossed her arms accusingly.

"True. That's why they call it gambling," Roark responded with a broad grin.

"Don't worry, Morgan. That's not what we've been up to," Logan assured her, giving his roommate a reproving glare. He quickly masked it and turned back to her. One look at her and he realized he had not covered his lapse fast enough.

"Then what have you been up to?" Morgan asked, arching a suspicious eyebrow.

"Nothing." Logan turned his attention to deflecting Morgan's curiosity. With a shrug and a casual smile, he took her arm and led her back to where they had left their cloaks. When she continued to study him, he added, "Just a few odd jobs here and there."

"Ah. Well, at least you're trying," Morgan conceded, allowing the matter to drop. She paused for a moment to mutter a spell over her torn sleeve, hoping the improvisation she had come up with would work. Morgan had been trained in the basics of sword and sorcery in her former life, but in her present life, her aptitude for magic had gone untested. In fact, she had difficulty both learning and using magic as a result of her psychic sensitivity. In order for her to use the magic she had inherited, it was usually necessary to suppress her natural psychic talent. This was unfortunate, because psychic ability was far more difficult to train and develop than magic ability. Her improvised spell combined both talents, so she was inordinately pleased when it worked. With a glowing smile, she announced her tiny triumph, "There, all mended."

"Come on, then. Let's get something to eat." Logan handed Morgan her cloak, and once she had put it on, escorted her to the dining hall, with Roark flanking her other side.

\* \* \*

The kitchens at the academy provided for all of the students and staff, but apart from accommodating the various class schedules, operated without formality. The trio simply picked up their food from the banquet and made their way to one of the long tables. After their workout, Logan and Morgan were ravenous, downing healthy portions of hot cakes, fried eggs and sausage, all drenched in a sweet and spicy syrup. Roark picked his way through smaller, more refined servings of poached eggs in a cream sauce, honey biscuits and a huge serving of fruit with curds. The fruit, a selection of items in season, was oversized only because Morgan had a habit of pilfering at least half the bowl.

"What were you guys planning to do after classes today?" Roark asked when the other two slowed down enough to offer an intelligible response.

Logan was the first to manage to swallow, washing the bite down with a gulp of water. Clearing his throat and nudging Morgan, Logan asked, "When are you supposed to see Lloyd?"

"Tomorrow night," she replied, after a long draught of cold milk.

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

"I know." Morgan wiped her mouth with her napkin and then tucked it back in her lap. The question had suddenly diminished her appetite, leaving her poking at her meal with a desultory fork. She glanced up at Logan. He was still eating heartily, but he was watching her for her response. It was just another reminder that all would not be well between them until she resigned permanently from her family calling. Trying to put off a resumption of their argument, she forced herself to take another bite and washed it down with more milk.

"So, what are you going to tell him?" Logan finally asked.

"I don't know." It was what she had been saying all morning, but it was not enough to put him at ease. If the money was not such a critical issue, and if she did not have her grandmother waiting in the wings to sell her off to an ambitious and arrogant young noble if she failed to make it on her own, Morgan would be happy to tell Logan what he wanted to hear. She had more reasons to quit working as an escort than he could hope to exhaust, the most recent of which she was not ashamed to admit. "I’m still pretty messed up over the whole thing with Kevin." She finally confessed. Giving Logan and Roark a meaningful look. "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." Logan shook his head, choosing to comment on the strange relationship that had evolved between Morgan and the locally famous adventurer. Logan had not approved of Lloyd's plan to drive the unwanted admirer away, but nothing could have prepared him for the disaster that had resulted. It still baffled him. Looking Morgan in the eye, he declared, "I had no idea he was that gone over you."

"That whole obsession of his didn't tip you off?" Roark sniped sarcastically.

"Like either of you are any better," Morgan noted with a wry smile. She did not need to say more to make either of them look chagrined. Having a man obsess over her had not been a new experience, unfortunately. It simply had never gone as far with anyone else as it had with Kevin Niall. Because of her training, she took the outcome very personally. A thread of pain and guilt could be detected in her voice as she reproached herself. "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 counseled her firmly.

"Roark, I killed him," Morgan declared, setting down her fork.

"No. It was an accident, Morgan." Roark reached out and took her hand, forcing her to meet his eye. When she did, he squeezed her hand and counseled, “You have to stop blaming yourself for his death."

"No." Morgan shook her head and slipped her hand out of his. Picking up her fork and using it to cut a sausage in half, she claimed responsibility, "It's my fault. I took that stupid contract, I convinced myself that Lloyd was right about him. Logan could see it," Morgan nodded at him across the table, spearing the bite of meat angrily with her fork. Waving the morsel in the air, she demanded, "Why couldn't I?"

"I know I said it would only encourage him," Logan interjected, grabbing a piece of bread from the nearest basket and soaking up a gob of syrup as he contradicted her, "but I didn't know he'd react like that."

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

"That's not it," Logan protested in muted outrage, nudging Roark roughly with an elbow. When the other young man turned to slug him lightly on the shoulder, Logan pointed his bread at him and asserted, "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?" Morgan cut in plaintively. Both of them turned to her, mouths open to defend their defense of her, but she waved them off. "Give it a rest for one day, please."

"I'm not arguing with anyone," Logan protested in spite of that. Roark rolled his eyes and Morgan sighed, but he tossed his bread onto his plate and crossed his arms. Giving both of them a suffering look, he pled, "I just wish both of you would believe me when I tell you I'm not just being jealous. Especially you."

Roark pointed at himself with wide eyes and raised eyebrows, before snorting. In an overly casual tone, he noted ironically, "Oh, no. You've never been jealous over Morgan."

"Logan! Roark! I mean it." Morgan snapped, not quite rising from her seat, but managing to give the impression of looking down on a couple of rowdy boys.

"Sorry." Logan picked up his bread and resumed gnawing on it.

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

"What?" Morgan caught the change in his tone and quirked an eyebrow.

"Why don't you just focus on your studies for now?" Roark suggested, having given up on the idea of making plans for the evening. Morgan obviously had too much on her mind and Logan was being stubborn and assertive as usual. He was a good person, Roark could attest, but he was living proof that a man could not go back to being friends with a girl when they used to be more to each other. Not that Roark had not tried himself. He was simply better at playing the part. To answer the look she was still giving him, he expounded, "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."