

The lazy turn of the ceiling fan split the streetlight's dim glow into an uneven pinwheel across the bar's enclosed patio. Morgan closed her eyes to her reflection in the glass ceiling above, to the snow that was drifting down. She hadn't eaten in two days, and she would be walking that night...

"We're closing, miss."

She cracked her eyes again to see a dishrag run across her table.

"I'm waiting for someone." She sat up, squinting tiredly at her glass. She couldn't afford more than a shot, and she wasn't really fond of whisky.

The front door opened, and she watched in the reflection in the windows as the half dozen thugs filed in, despite the bartender's warning that they were closing. They ignored him, heading for the patio where Morgan was waiting. The waitress who had been wiping down the tables retreated behind the bar; Morgan waited with half-closed eyes, watching their progress.

"You been a load of trouble for me, Westmere," their leader said when he reached her, "and you're gonna pay for that trouble."

"Do you really think I give a damn about your trouble, Frankie?" she said, resettling her cloak around her shoulders. "You owe me fifteen crowns. I'm not going to let you forget it."

"Oh, but I already have."

She stood, turning slowly, popping the crick in her back between her shoulders. "If you think that's enough to get you out of your debt, Frankie, you should have brought more with you."

"You little—"

She deflected his blow, landing her fist in his stomach, following through with a solid hook to the jaw. The others moved to join in, and Morgan noted out the window that the kitchen boy had been sent for the sheriff. She made it short, to the point, and left with her fifteen crowns, walking out through the snow and heading south.

A week found her two hundred fifty miles south, on a hill overlooking the city of Garilon. She weighed the fifteen crowns in her purse, frowning. They would spend poorly in the city, compared to a little hole like Sandiston, which she had left a week earlier. Morgan started down the hill. She couldn't put it off; she needed to eat. The squirrels were thin this year.

She balked at the diner's door, reading the prices on the blackboard out front, but eventually went in and got a booth in the back and a cup of coffee.

The door opened; she had her back to it, but she could see the three men who came in in the reflection in one of the framed prints on the back wall. One in black silk and suede, one in a thick woolen mantle, the third... Her eyes frowned at the hint of chain mail under the gray tabard.

"What are we doing here, Elliston?" the one in the mantle asked. The man in the tabard nodded in her direction.

"And what good would he do us?" the silks asked. Her head turned a hair in their direction.

"He, Jack?" the one called Elliston said quietly. "I'd have thought one in your profession wouldn't make those kind of mistakes."

The mantle was unarmed, she estimated, but the tabard bore a blade, and if the silks didn't have at least one knife *somewhere*... Mage, knight, thief, she guessed. She unobtrusively shook a pile of salt onto the table and traced a rune in it, drawing a narrowed gaze from the mage.

“She knows enough to ward magic,” he murmured, and then the waitress approached them.

“Just three, gentlemen? Smoking or non?”

“We’re here for the lady in the booth,” the knight said.

“Oh, well, go right on back, then. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Morgan swore under her breath as the three headed for her, then slid into the U-shaped booth opposite her, the silks on the inside, the tabard on the outside.

“There was a fight in a bar in Sandiston about a week ago,” the knight began, and she bolted, dodging his blade, but not the thief’s grasp. She twisted out of his grip, holding his knife hand at bay, and found the knight’s blade at her throat as she straightened. She released the thief, who sheathed his knife and slid back into the booth, rubbing his wrist. The knight nodded for her to resume her seat, sheathing his sword after she had and sitting back down opposite her.

“Kerry Elliston, Xavier Thraice, Jack Hamilton,” he introduced himself, the mage, and the thief. “You handle yourself fairly well.”

“I can’t afford not to at this point,” she said quietly, her eyes still wary.

“So what brings you to Garilon?” the knight asked.

“No snow.”

The mage’s eyes were on the salt rune, and then her hands in the fingerless leather gloves.

“This is pointless, Elliston,” he said finally.

“How familiar are you with the duchy of Andelor?” the knight asked her, ignoring the mage for the moment.

“Which part of it?” she asked, turning her head to squint out the windows at the rain that had started, revealing the brand on her throat as she did.

“Murena,” the knight said, exchanging a glance with the thief.

“How restrictive is that?” the thief said.

“Is what?” she asked, shifting back around. He motioned to his throat. “I haven’t had a blade in two years,” she said.

“How’d you get it?” the knight asked. She stood and headed for the door as the waitress came back, the shilling for the coffee by the cup. The mage sat the knight back down.

“Stay and eat, Elliston. She won’t go far.”

Morgan settled on the stone railing along the river, massaging the bridge of her badly healed nose. Were they looking for *her*, or just for someone to do a job?

Murena. Did she know Murena? She laughed softly to herself. She was born in Murena. Branded in Murena. She popped the crick between her shoulders. She’d been fighting too long. It showed too clearly on her face, made itself felt too sharply in her back.

The rain dripped off her long bangs into the puddle below her. It was cold, but at least not cold enough to be icing.

She sighed slightly as she heard the footsteps approaching and pulled her cloak more closely about herself.

“Need a place for the night?” the knight asked.

“No.”

The mage was irritated, she guessed, watching the river but listening to his impatient shuffling.

“How long will you be in Garilon?” the knight asked almost immediately.

“Don’t know yet,” she said, hopping down off the wall and heading for a stand of trees up river, just outside the city.

“Give it up, Elliston,” the mage muttered. “You couldn’t trust a tramp with the work, anyway.”

“I know what I’m doing,” the knight murmured. “Let me work.”