

The tall, straight-backed man on the lean, rangy horse was more than grateful to see the inn lights through the gathering gloom of the late autumn evening. It was not that he minded travelling, indeed his work meant that he did a great deal, but a long day in the saddle was just that. Now all he was looking forward to was a good stretch, a meal by the heat of a roaring fire, a glass of wine or ale and a soft, or at least softish, bed.

In itself, the day's ride had been pleasant, through countryside interspersed with the occasional wood, usually marking where the broad trail crossed one of the several small rivers and streams that meandered eastward from the far distant Cascade mountains. Behind him, nearer Larburgh, most of the tributaries joined together to form the great Reskon river which poured out into the Darent Sea at the seaport itself.

A stiff, cold wind rocked him in his saddle and, shivering slightly, he urged his horse on toward the warm lights and beckoning cheer of the large country inn; after two nights sleeping out of doors he was looking forward to some comfort and ease tonight. Tomorrow, well tomorrow he would start his new task, obeying the commands of the sorcerers as he had for the whole of his dark life.

He knew from his maps of Cardia that the inn stood at the cross-roads of two major thoroughways, consequently trade was plentiful and the inn had become a very large establishment, a scattering of buildings having grown around it to cater for the other needs of the travelling fraternity.

As he got nearer, Morgan could see a smithy and a general store among the cabins that he assumed were the homes of those who worked hereabouts. The reports had mentioned that, although the place had really grown into a small village, it was still known as The Royal Swan after its prosperous and very popular inn.

Sliding down from his mount, Morgan stretched the tired muscles of his lean, hard body and flexed his fingers before handing the reins over to the stable boy who had appeared from the back of the stone-fronted building. Giving the boy a copper coin, he hauled his saddlebags over his shoulder and, carrying his sword in its scabbard, opened the main doors which were closed against the cold night air.

Heat from the large fire burning in the stone grate to the right of the room hit him first, followed by the thick smell of pipe smoke, brown ale and roasting chicken. Closing the door behind him, he dropped his baggage on a convenient chair and looked around. He found a cheerful room, lit by lanterns hung from the low beamed ceiling, but he could see that although it was large, it was only moderately full of customers.

A bald-headed man stood behind the huge wooden bar counter to the left where he was serving a group of three older men, hunters Morgan guessed from their appearance. Across the room, on the far side of the roaring hearth, four shabbily dressed men were playing cards at a bench table in the corner. Two more patrons, waggoners by the look of them, sat near the fire, sharing a large platter of meats whilst drinking deeply from large tankards.

As Morgan moved forward, shrugging off his thick cloak, he paused abruptly as he spotted another customer sitting alone, almost lost in the shadows of the dark corner beyond the bar. His eyes narrowing, he inspected what he could see of the man but gained no information apart from the fact that, whoever he was, he preferred to sprawl in a corner chair wrapped in his cloak rather than sit openly by the fire.

I'm getting paranoid, he thought, shaking off the initial feeling of threat that had seared through him at the sight of the almost overlooked figure. Or slow, he added in self-derision, his nerves quieting now that he'd found and discarded the cause for that flash of wariness.

'Good even, sir.' The jovial welcome from his host rang out across the wide bar. 'Food and a room, I'll wager. That right, sir?'

'Good even, landlord. Yes, you'd be right,' Morgan answered. His broad smile, one of the most useful tricks of his trade, encouraged the small, stocky man to continue his welcome after placing Morgan's order through a serving hatch behind him.

'Call me Jake,' the man said. 'We've never had need of titles at The Royal Swan. Everyone knows me, Jake Turner, and I'll not stand on ceremony for anyone but the king.'

Morgan became aware of a stir throughout the room, and could see that the phrase had caused more than one expression to fall into sad contemplation.

'Sorry,' Jake apologised with a distinctly quieter manner. 'Some sayings just fall from the lips with habit. Zens knows, I meant no offence.'

'None taken, and call me Morgan,' he replied easily, his knowledge of the king very slight anyway. The reports had only mentioned that the Royal Family had been murdered some weeks earlier, and that the First Minister had taken control. No doubt more news had filtered through by now, but Morgan had no interest in such matters. They had no bearing on his current task.

'Just passing through?' asked Jake handing over a large glass of beer.

Loosening the laces of his jerkin and unfastening the neck of his shirt, Morgan nodded. The heat of the room was pleasant after his cold ride and, pulling up a stool and taking a large gulp of the bitter brew, he added, 'On my way to Garton.'

As in Larburgh, this attracted some attention, and he had no trouble in gleaning valuable knowledge about the garrison town, the Tendra Scouts and the situation in the north.

It seemed that over the last twelve months, the scouts had been called to the town of Garton from where they now patrolled more formally, raiding parties over two borders, the western mountains and the northern hills, requiring their protection for the local villages and farm lands. Their Grand Master, a retired king's guard named Vallen, was known to be an irascible, bad-tempered but honest man, or so they'd heard, one of the hunters added quickly, not knowing who their drinking companion might be.

Morgan could understand their caution.

'I'm looking to join them,' he lied, knowing from past experience that volunteering this information should loosen their lips once again. 'They still taking men?'

The tallest of the hunters, a well-built man who introduced the whole party and named himself Keth, answered him eagerly. 'Oh, yes, definitely. I've heard they need even more men, now that winter's coming on.'

At Morgan's frown of seeming incomprehension - winter usually a quiet time for any army - the hunter went on with his explanation. 'I know, I know. The snows up there would normally close down most action, but although it will prevent the Strath coming down from the north, the Atan trolls are a different matter.' Pausing to take a

drink while Jake handed a steaming plate of roast chicken and potatoes to Morgan, Keth continued as his audience began to eat.

‘Those beggarly trolls, they don’t stop for snow. They’re born to it, up there in those mountains,’ he said heatedly. ‘As far as I can make out, it’s only their lack of numbers that enables the scouts to deal with them as it is.’

There was a rumble of agreement around the group as though this topic were a common and well-discussed one. Another hunter, Stefan, a slender, blue-eyed man, spoke his mind. ‘Zens knows how they’re goin’ to handle them this winter! Even if the snow doesn’t hold the Atan back, it’s goin’ to be murder for the scouts to deal with.’

‘I’d heard that small outposts were being set up along the East ridges during the summer, so that kordens of scouts could stay on the border throughout the snow season,’ Keth interrupted, packing his hand-carved pipe with tobacco. ‘That way, they’ll be in place if the trolls try to break through.’

Another rumble, this time of approval, seemed to indicate that this was considered to be a good solution to the problem.

‘That Vallen is a fair clever man,’ nodded Balkan, the smallest hunter, an expression of deep gloom on his face. ‘But there’s only so much you can ask men to do. Blasted Trolls.’ He spat into a spittoon and then continued thoughtfully. ‘And I still keep wondering what stirred them up last year anyway.’

‘And the Strath, when you think about it,’ added Keth, between puffs on his pipe as he endeavoured to light it. ‘For countless years past, we’ve had no trouble from either quarter, trading goods and food quite peaceably, then suddenly,’ he snapped his fingers, ‘both start these stupid little raiding wars. There’s no accounting for it,’ he said, puzzlement plain on his face.

Having a fair idea of exactly how to account for it, Morgan kept his own council and finished his meal, listening avidly to all the news and gossip the hunters were discussing. Placing his knife on his plate, he pushed it towards Jake who quickly cleared it aside before hurrying to see the two waggoners on their way, collecting their dues in the process.

‘So, it looks like I should find a job up there then,’ he said, turning to face the hunters once more and putting a tinge of eager expectation in his voice.

‘Oh, yes. If you’re not taken on for the patrols, or these new outposts, they also need rangers, don’t they?’ Balkan pointed out.

‘Rangers?’ Morgan queried. He doubted there was anything these three men could tell him that he did not know, but any new piece of information, however small, could be useful.

‘Where on earth have you come from?’ Keth smiled at his ignorance. ‘You must have heard about the rangers.’

Realising he’d made a mistake, Morgan covered his error easily. ‘From the far south,’ he said. ‘I’ve knocked about a bit, here and there, but got bored, so I thought I’d come up here for a bit of adventure.’

‘And you haven’t heard of rangers?’ the hunter said laughingly. ‘They have the most adventures, those rascals, or at least that’s the way I’ve heard it. Should be just right for you then, shouldn’t they?’

Sucking on his pipe and leaning against the counter, he began the story. ‘The rangers are scouts too, but they either work alone, or in pairs, travelling these

northern parts gathering information, spying on the enemy, even going over the mountains, some say.' He shuddered for effect. 'They have like a roving commission, and feed any and all information they can find back to the Grand Master so that he can plan his defences and campaigns against the foe,' he added with relish. 'Yes, they're his eyes and ears, all right.'

Taking a deep drink from his tankard he swallowed and then laughed. 'And his justice. You know, he's a canny man, that Vallen. And I'll bet if anyone knows what stirred up the Atans and the Strath, it'll be him.'

The thought made Morgan's flesh creep, but he took it as fair warning. If he ever got close to this Grand Master, he knew to be careful, very careful. He still hoped to find a way to avoid him, the sorcerers' warnings having first prompted this wish at his briefing in the Tower, but he couldn't quite see how as yet.

The conversation turned to other things and Morgan settled back, stretching out his long legs and watching his companions as they drank their ale and talked of when they had been young enough to join the armies in the Great War. He felt a rare envy for their contentment; not for him this simple life where intrigue and subterfuge had no place, where friendships grew over years of common woe or joy. At twenty-seven years of age, he had no memory of a happy home or family and no hope of ever having one, as he knew all too well. His life had been nothing but broken promises, betrayal and suffering and, though he had survived with little to show for his travails - that having been quite deliberate on Sagar's part - he occasionally wondered if he still had a soul. He knew he had no heart; the sorcerers had seen to that.

Shaking off the thought that he could just forget his mission and stay in this land of kind people, sanity prevailed. There was no escape for him, not even this far from the Tower. He would be tracked down eventually. No one was ever allowed to leave the Order. Ever. And he knew that one such as himself would be sent to find him, either to take him back for re-education - or to kill him.

An arm nudged him and, startled, he returned to the present to find the hunters had started to gather up their belongings, saying that they were having an early night as they were off on the trail at sun-up. Morgan wished them well and watched them leave.

Turning back for his drink, he found Jake holding out a key. 'You're in room ten. It's at the end of the corridor upstairs. Shall I have Michael take your things up?' the innkeeper asked.

'No,' Morgan answered smoothly, taking the key and placing it in the pocket of his jerkin. 'I'll take them up when I go. They'll be just fine where they are until then.'

Jake nodded his understanding and turned away, continuing with his work of clearing tables and taking dirty pots into the kitchen behind the serving hatch.

Morgan leaned back against the bar counter and contemplated the room. The information he had gathered so far had been both useful and interesting, but he wondered if there was more available to him. The silent figure was still in the corner and obviously did not want to be disturbed, but he had a feeling that that gentleman's presence had just been explained to him, albeit unknowingly.

He concentrated on the four card players, almost certain by their furtive and sly glances that they were petty criminals of some kind. Probably just card-sharps but, all the same, that could mean that they might have a different kind of information for him: the kind that opened the right doors and gave access to the right secrets, or even

the right whereabouts of certain persons. However, the very nature of their world would make gaining such information no easy task, and he was contemplating the best approach in order to make their acquaintance and, if not gain their trust, then maybe their co-operation, when the need for any subterfuge vanished.

Noticing his interest, and no doubt taking him for an easy mark, one of the men, a fat, mean-looking individual, called out and invited him to sit in on their game.

For a second Morgan paused, weighing the loss of a few coins and an hour or two of his time against the other rewards he might win. Then he smiled broadly, taking on his open-faced, simple-hearted traveller's mask as he wandered over to their table.

After settling down next to his new companions it was not long before he realised that he was wasting his time. Petty criminals they certainly were, the marked deck of cards could have been read by a blind man, but they were not the kind that could be of any use to him. These four men were not connected to any underworld of crime that might have rendered him help, they were, as he had initially supposed, merely card-sharps who perhaps dabbled in a little pocket-picking or minor burglary when times were hard. Not that they had told him this, it was just something he had been taught to divine by his instructors in the Tower; the ability to interpret look, speech and manner in order to read a man's intentions and goals.

With the thought of a soft bed calling him, he made to leave as the last hand was played out. They had taken several coins from him already and he felt that he had paid enough as the price for his mistake. However, it appeared that his new friends were not prepared to see their chicken leave before it had been sufficiently plucked. First by grinning, smarmy platitudes, they tried to persuade him to stay for further hands, stating that his luck would soon change for the better but then, seeing that he would not be swayed, they turned to reproachful cries of indignation at his lack of courage.

Brushing aside their complaints as unimportant and beneath his contempt, he was caught by surprise as knives were drawn from concealed pockets. The only thought to race through his mind was that they must have been doing very bad business lately to risk taking on a man in such a large and well-known establishment as this. Then he was dancing for his life, weaving first one way and then another to avoid the darting blades.

Keeping four men with knives at bay was difficult and he collected a couple of gashes before his boot connected with the fat man's groin and lowered the odds. Enjoying the exercise now, he whirled aside and caught a second man with a heavy blow to the head. He hit the floor, leaving Morgan with his back to one of his other assailants but, sensing the danger from that quarter, he turned swiftly and saw the glint of a throwing-knife arrowing its way across the room. It buried itself in the chest of the man who had been about to stab him with a particularly cruel-looking dagger.

Not stopping to wonder at this turn in events, he shot out his fist and downed the last of his attackers, the blow catching the man on the point of his chin, after which he lost all further interest in the proceedings.

Chest heaving from the flow of adrenaline, Morgan rapped the fat man over the head with a handy spittoon, silencing his mealy-mouthed mewling and then stood, hands on hips, surveying the remnants of the card party with no small pleasure.

'Oh, by Zens!' Jake entered from the kitchen, the noise of the short fight dragging him from his cleaning. 'What the ...?'

‘It’s all right,’ Morgan said placatingly, cheered by the action; it had been far too long since he’d had any kind of a skirmish that even this paltry one had almost been worth the effort. ‘These ... gentlemen ... are just a little tired after a long day sharpening their cards, and they’ve decided to take a rest,’ he said, not hiding his good-humour.

Jake, under no illusions, bustled between the fallen bodies, exclaiming, ‘I’m so sorry. I don’t hold with card-sharpping at The Royal Swan, and there’s no denying that if they attempted to best you, then they got what they deserved. If I’d known what they were up to, I’d’ve had them out on their ears, and that’s a fact. But they’ve been so quiet all ...’

He stopped suddenly. Kneeling by the body from which the lethal knife-haft protruded, he sat back on his heels, his face a mask of dread. ‘This man’s ... d-dead,’ he stammered.

‘Yes,’ agreed Morgan unhelpfully, his feeling of goodwill unabated.

‘He’s dead,’ repeated Jake, ‘and that means trouble. With the scouts,’ he added, an expression of horror visible on his homely features.

Morgan turned and looked into the dark corner across the room. The cloaked figure was no longer sprawled in the chair, instead a black shadow could be seen standing facing them, still outside the reach of the lamplight.

‘That gentleman may be able to help you there,’ he said, drawing the landlord’s attention away from the corpse, and then waiting to see what would happen. The stranger had had no call to interfere with his perfectly good fight, though that knife throw had been spectacular. Nevertheless, since he had intervened, he could take care of the trouble he’d created. Besides, unless Morgan missed his guess, the man was probably a scout, maybe even a ranger, in which case there would be no trouble anyway; he knew that Tendra Scouts carried their own warrants.

The anxious landlord took a few steps forward. ‘What do you know about this, sir?’ he asked.

‘I know there’ll be no trouble for you, Jake Turner.’ The voice was warm and even, set to put Jake’s worries aside. Then the shadowed figure strolled out into the light, revealing a slim man of about thirty, dressed in soft, black leather garb, silver buckles glinting in the light, his cloak thrown back from his shoulders.

Taking in the black hair that curled around a strong face, Morgan was left breathless by the piercing eyes. Green, and almost luminous, they seemed to give a slightly slanted cast to the face. Though the long, thin scar beneath the right eye probably accounted for that, Morgan thought as his wits returned, the frisson of lust that had swept through him like a fever having robbed him of his senses. No one had ever affected him like this before, not in all his years, he realised with alarm.

The stranger gave him a quick grin, and it was enough for Morgan to understand that his own shock had been noted, and accepted, but not whether his interest was reciprocated. Still held in the man’s thrall, he watched him speak calmly to Jake.

‘If you lock those three men in your cellar, and put the dead one outside in a shed, there’s a scout patrol due about noon tomorrow. They’ll deal with it.

‘Give them this token,’ he added, producing a scout tally from his pocket and placing it in Jake’s shaking fingers. ‘Just tell them what happened. Four card-sharps fell on the wrong party, and a scout killed one before a murder was committed.’

This last statement brought Morgan out of his stupor. 'Hardly murder,' he protested mildly. 'He might have winged me, if he'd got really lucky, but I could've handled him.'

The bright gaze swung round and pinned him for a moment, then swept back to the landlord who was gripping the tally as though his own life depended on it.

'They'll know what to do,' the scout advised, trying to ease the man's fears. 'And you'll soon be rid of all these troublemakers,' he added, looking back at Morgan, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

This time, before Morgan could protest more vehemently, Jake asked his own question. 'Will you not be here then?'

'No,' was the plain answer. 'I have to be away in the morning so I'll miss the patrol. Don't worry though. Just give them the token and they'll know who I am, and why I couldn't wait.'

Satisfied at last, Jake left the room via the kitchen door, shouting for the unfortunate Michael to come and move the bodies.

Leaning against the bar, the scout turned his full attention on Morgan, his expression giving no clue to his thoughts, though his eyes plainly showed some kind of interest as they roamed over him. 'So, you want to join the Tendra Scouts, do you?'

The voice was well modulated and seemed almost indecently attractive to Morgan's ear. As yet, the scout had used the same even tone whenever he had spoken, and Morgan surprised himself with a sudden wish to hear it raised to the heights of uncontrolled passion.

The thought shocked him.

Where the frack did that come from? he wondered in amazement.

Although he had been thoroughly trained in the sexual arts, he never, ever allowed his imagination to spend any time in wish-dreams of that kind. Always being on the other side of such games - the sorcerers being particularly inventive when it came to their own kind and brand of sexual excitement - he dreaded all such thoughts and never gave rein to any carnal imaginings. Even when on assignment he kept tight control of any feelings.

However, he could see that he had given himself away to this disconcertingly astute and confident hunter of information and secrets, and he knew that was dangerous. To cover his slip, he let a mask of smug disinterest cover his expression as he walked over to the chair where he'd left his bags. Remembering belatedly that the scout had asked him a question, he answered it languidly. 'As you obviously overheard in my conversation earlier, I'm making my way to Garton to join your merry band.'

His tone sarcastic, he looked up as he heaved his saddlebags over his arm and saw the same wide gaze still upon him. Once again, he was shocked by his own body's reaction. Unable to deny his attraction to the man, not even to himself, though the thought was causing him some panic, he was also repelled by that superior attitude.

In the end, his own ego drove him to speak again. 'Look, whatever your name is, thanks for the help but, really, I could have dealt with it.'

The man merely stared back, his expression changing to one of amusement as he watched Morgan's face.

'What is your name anyway?' Morgan asked with irritation. 'Or is it a secret only told to other scouts?' he added scathingly.

The lean man seemed to come to some decision and, pulling his cloak about himself, he walked across to the door. Opening it, he glanced back at Morgan, a friendly smile now in evidence. 'No, it's no secret,' he said quietly. 'The name's Adam Pell, and I'll probably be seeing a lot more of you.'

The quick grin that flashed over his pleasant features left Morgan in no doubt that the innuendo in those last words had been intentional, but he couldn't utter a word in response; his breath had been ripped away completely.

Watching the door close, he stood still in amazement, his thoughts roiling one after another, but eventually his mind calmed and he sat down heavily on a wooden chair.

So that's Adam Pell, he thought at last. At least one problem had been solved - he'd found a way to avoid the Grand Master after all - but he knew that this new situation had left him with yet another dilemma, a couple in fact. Adam Pell had saved his life, even if unasked for and maybe unnecessarily, and he was also the first person ever to stimulate Morgan's senses to such a degree that he could hardly cope with them.

Though that is a very minor issue, he told himself sternly.

No, all in all, things could have turned out much worse. He had every reason to be extremely pleased with his evening's work. Indeed, through fortuitous coincidence, he had found Adam Pell much more quickly than he could ever have expected. It may have been more through luck than judgement admittedly but, nevertheless, he had found the man he had been sent to kill.