

## Chapter One

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### From the Ashes

Duchess looked up at the windows where her childhood had burned.

In all the long years since the War of the Quills she had never sought out her father's city estate, never made her way up the long and narrow road in Scholar's District to the place where a different girl with a different name had lived. Standing now before the low stone arch with the rusting iron gates, she wondered how much of Marina Kell still remained and how much had been lost to the Duchess of the Shallows. What else had perished with her father, that night of fire more than eight years ago?

Whoever she had been, it was Duchess who stepped inside.

She wandered the grounds under the morning sun, pale behind the ever-present clouds. The morning fog wasn't very thick this high up the hill, so she had a clear view of the the gardens, blackened and barren in some places and dense and overgrown in others. It seemed that fire, like fate, was a fickle thing.

Every step through the black and the green was full of memories—here she'd hidden from her brother Justin when they'd played heroes-and-monsters, and there she'd lain with her head on her sister Margueritte's lap and watched the sparrows wheel overhead. At the center of the garden stood a round stone table, now cracked and ruined, surrounded by curving stone benches where her father would have lunch set on summer afternoons. Brother, sister, father, all gone, replaced in a single night with a trip to the Shallows, a baker named Noam and a new name. Like the garden, the fire had left her to grow wild and untended.

No one had ever purchased the estate, nor even the land it stood upon. Like the rest of her family's assets, this place had come under the authority of the crown when no living Kell could be found: Justin had vanished without a trace, and Marguerite had been lost to the dreadful unity of the facets, the priestesses of Anassa. Her father's friend, the scholar Terence, who still so dearly held Marcus Kell in his heart, had placed his friend's assets into safety of imperial receivership. One small victory in a war that had ended with her father's suicide.

She had no place here. She was her father's daughter, true, but now she was so much more. She had friends and a life, a business and a future, and while there were a few who knew where she'd come from—Lysander, whom she'd trusted, and Minette, who knew everything—she was certain that where she was headed was far more important.

She heard movement and turned to see Darley step through the gate. While also certainly her father's child, she didn't take much after him; where Savant Terence was tall and lanky, Darley was curvy and compact, with green eyes in a heart-shaped face. Pretty enough, but of course Duchess knew that behind those fine features lay enough greed for three scholar's daughters.

Darley made her way towards Duchess, stepping gingerly around chunks of rock or tangled bushes, and Duchess had time to wonder once more why Darley had requested this meeting—and why she'd insisted it be here. This place was not far from Darley's own home, true, but Duchess suspected there was a message here.

After all, to name a thing was to have power over it.

"You had no trouble finding the place?" the girl asked, glancing up at the ruin around them with a little smile Duchess definitely didn't like. The last business she'd had with Terence's daughter had been blackmail, offering her own silence about Darley's graverobbing in exchange for maps of tunnels beneath the city. She couldn't imagine the girl had forgiven or forgotten, yet for some reason Darley was clearly trying honey before resorting to vinegar.

"Your instructions were very clear," Duchess replied cautiously, "though I confess I don't know why we're meeting here." Darley was an unknown factor, and so it was best to be careful. Cleverness and caution were the watchwords of the Grey Highway, after all, and Duchess had spent no little time playing at the careful art of gossip known as fruning since she'd joined that band of thieves, spies and rumormongers.

Darley's smile sharpened. "You've no idea why we're here at all? You're not happy to be home?" Duchess kept her face a mask, but dismay swirled inside her. It was as she feared: Darley knew who she once had been, her true name and nature. "Well, perhaps not your home anymore," the girl went on heedlessly, sweeping a hand at the garden, the walls, the house. "The estate, the land, the money—everything that once belonged to your father—it could all be yours again."

"So you know," Duchess replied, to buy time to think.

"My father's not nearly as clever as he thinks. After he found out about our... arrangement, I noticed he pulled out everything he could on House Kell: records, notices, all of it. Then I remembered that you had once asked me about estates held in trust by the empire." She tossed her head. "And then I remembered a little girl I knew years ago who once kicked me into a hole, and I knew right away that was the kind of trouble only you could cause... Marina."

Duchess tried not to flinch at the name. She hadn't expected that Darley would remember her from that long-ago childhood fight. "So you're offering—"

"—to broker your return," the girl replied, greed clear in her eyes. "Through me, you can regain your house, your title, all of your father's assets, everything held in trust by the Imperial Council." She leaned in close. "I've seen the documents and I know how much has been invested, how much it's grown with time. You'd be a rich woman."

Duchess had to bite her lip to hold back a gale of mocking laughter. She'd given the girl too much credit. Darley knew who she'd been, but not much more. She resisted the urge to laugh; after all, she needed the girl. "An interesting offer. A shame your father already made it to me not three weeks ago."

"He—?" Darley's smile vanished. "Oh that godsdamned fool." There was the vinegar Duchess had expected, the anger and frustration she'd seen Darley use on her lover Finn

when he had once dared to defy her. The instant you weren't of use, Darley dropped the charm. "He was actually stupid enough to just give you this, wasn't he?"

"I'm afraid so."

Darley was watching her intently, any sweetness and charm gone. "My father worshipped the ground Marcus Kell walked on. After the War of the Quills he put aside everything—his career, his position, his family—to protect your father's memory and property. He managed to lock the Kell holdings away from grasping hands for more than eight years, regardless of what it cost us. And when he offered all of that to you, for nothing, you turned it down?"

Duchess refused to be baited. "I had my reasons," she replied quietly, although in truth turning down that offer had not been an easy thing. The night Savant Terence had offered to make Duchess her father's daughter in truth, she had very seriously considered casting aside her life as Duchess of the Shallows and becoming a woman of leisure. But the price had simply been too high. Becoming Marina Kell would have cost her everything she'd risked and worked for, everything she'd built. All she was and all she owned would be given over to a husband selected for her, and she would be left to sit in a gilded cage for the rest of her days.

Darley was shaking her head. "I don't care about your reasons; you couldn't afford to pass up that deal unless you had something else." She glanced shrewdly at Duchess. "I asked around about you after we made our deal, and even more so after my father caught me in his library and ordered me to stay away from you." She pointed. "You're Grey," she muttered. "You're Grey and no you have no reason to make me Grey."

Duchess gaped. "You wanted me to cloak you?" Darley never failed to surprise; petulant and charming, ill-tempered and persuasive, all at once. The girl had once cozened Finn to help her root around in the Necropolis beneath the city, in search of artifacts she could sell to wealthy collectors, and had even managed to uncover a piece of Old Domani, a dagger thought to be the fabled Key of Mayu. She and Finn had sold the item to Baron Eusbius, and then Duchess herself had stolen it as the price of her own admittance to the Grey. But where Duchess had joined the Grey Highway out of necessity, Darley seemed to seek it from a desire to profit.

Duchess remembered that Marcus Kell had intended for his daughter to live with Darley's father, to be raised to the blue robes, in time becoming a scholar herself. If she had not been taken from this very garden the night of the fire in exchange for a brass coin, she would have lived that life. In a way, Darley was living that life. She had everything that had been denied Duchess eight years ago.

And she wanted to trade all of it away for a gray cloak.

"That was what I had in mind," Darley pouted, "but you've made clear you don't want what I'm offering. So if you're done wasting both of our time—" She turned as if to leave.

Duchess raised a hand. "Perhaps there's another...arrangement we can come to. I have a price you might find easier to meet."

The evening before the Fall of Ventaris Duchess had gone to Meadowmere Manse, sneaking through tunnels dug by the Domae, who had built the city long before Duchess'

own people had arrived. On the way she had passed through the deepest part of the Necropolis, known as the Ossuary. There she had stood on the edge of a great pit and a terrible hollow voice from below had called her fool. Domae mythology held that those who lived in this city were edunae, soulless, victims of He Who Devours, and deep in her heart she knew that voice was his.

She had stood in the darkness of the Domae catacombs as Darley and Finn had argued over the Key of Mayu and had wondered what other riches might lie below. She had watched unbelieving as Darley's blood had smeared across a rough stone wall and conjured the dead to walk on fleshless feet.

She was not Marina Kell, not any more, but that did not mean she could ignore her past. A brass coin, marked with a P had led her from this very house to the safety of Noam's shop. Another had placed her on the Grey. Both were as ancient as the city, the pit, and the voice beneath them both.

Duchess had spent too much time in other matters, too concerned with the Grey and her position upon it, and had for too long ignored the horrors that literally lay beneath her feet. She needed to understand her own history and that of the City of Rodaas, and that required the services of someone who'd chosen the path she had been denied.

"I need a scholar," Duchess said without preamble. Curiosity flickered in Darley's green eyes. "Specifically, I need a scholar who knows when to speak and when to keep silent." She let that sink in. "I'm sure you know a number of blue robes like that."

Darley's smile returned. "And for this you'll cloak me?"

This time Duchess couldn't back the laughter. "Oh no, Darley." She hadn't cloaked Lysander and he'd been desperate to join the Grey since the day she'd met him. She shook her head. "If you had any idea what I had to do to get my own cloak..."

The girl clouded up. "So why should I do anything for you?"

Darley clearly had a great deal to learn about negotiation. "Because you'll be paid." Darley couldn't help but perk up at that. "And, if we are able to work together in this matter, you might gain enough favor to someday earn your invitation." It might happen, for all she knew, so she wasn't lying outright.

The girl's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "If I give you the name, how do I know you won't just take it and forget our deal?"

Duchess shrugged. "You don't, but it strikes me that you don't have much choice. You can either accept my terms or take yourself home."

Darley seemed to consider that for a moment. "Very well."

"And the name of this scholar?"

Darley leaned towards her. "Cecilia Payne."

Duchess blinked. "But that's—"

Darley nodded. "—a woman. She's the city's only female scholar and a disciple of my father's. Well-born, too. Cecilia and I have an understanding. I can guarantee that any research she does for you will be kept to herself."

How strange. Two of them who might have become scholars, speaking of a third who actually had. "Then we're agreed. I'll hand over the money when you arrange the meeting with this Cecilia." Eager to end this meeting, Duchess made her careful way through the overgrowth towards the gate, with Darley close behind. She'd lingered here too long, first in memory and now in truth.

Back on the lane, the girl gave her a hard look. "I'll make myself useful as long as you do the same. Just remember that I know who and what you are, and I can make a good deal of trouble for you, if I want."

"I'll remember. Make certain you remember who and what I am. And what I'm capable of."

Unbowed by this threat, Darley paused before going on her way. "By the by—did I mention how the understanding between Cecilia and I came about? She's a journeyman, working on her final thesis. She needs some help, I understand."

Duchess wasn't certain she wanted to hear this. "Help?"

Darley nodded. "Something in her research requires reference to the work of one Marcus Kell. Seems Cecilia's looking for his heirs, and in fact it was she who told me that Father was seeking information on the Kell holdings." She shrugged. "I told her I'd set up a meeting with a member of House Kell, so I'm afraid your scholar is likely to cost you more than just the gold you promised." With a smug smile, Darley turned along the lane and vanished.

Duchess lingered a long moment after the girl had gone, looking back through the rusted gate into the ash-tinged shadows of days gone by. Darley's words felt uneasily prophetic, and as Duchess left the ruins of her girlhood, she was more and more certain that the cost of disturbing the past would be higher than she ever dared contemplate.

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She arrived home to find Lysander sitting at the bottom of the steps that led to her apartments above the curio shop, a bottle of wine in his hand. Both he and the wine were a sight for sore eyes.

"You look upset," he teased, standing up and brushing off his pants. His blue eyes sparkled with mischief from beneath his blond hair as he brandished the bottle. "I've just the thing."

"Who'd you steal that from?" she grumped, groping for her key. The hand painted on her doorpost indicated the apartment was under the protection of the Red, but in Rodaas it never hurt to lock your door.

"Don't recall, really." Lysander followed her up the stairs. "Let's just crack it open and you can tell me about your meeting with you-know-who." Even on her doorstep Lysander was careful not to name names. Her landlord Nigel was Grey and there was nothing wrong with his ears.

They set up in her office, started on the bottle, and Duchess told him of her uncomfortable meeting with Darley.

"Seems like half the city knows your real name," Lysander noted when she had finished. "At this point you might as well hire a scholar to post a notice on every door."

She gave him a look. "Just because I chose to tell you doesn't mean I want everyone else to hear about it." She sighed. "Minette once said that no one's looking for me, not after all this time. She's probably right, but I still don't like Darley or this Cecelia Payne knowing."

Most of the city believed Marcus Kell and his children had perished eight years ago at the end of the War of the Quills, and even more believed that ending right and just. Her father had called for representation on the imperial council for scholars and other guildsman, and in a city unused to change, this had sparked chaos. The nobility who controlled the council refused, and the conflict escalated. In the end, her father had let loose the gangs normally held in check in the Deeps by the Red. And those self-same thugs had murdered the family to the smallest child and set fire to the estate—or so it was widely believed. In truth, her father had taken his own life as a way to end the war, and had set the fire to make it appear as though he'd been murdered. Had Darley discovered that, as well?

She rubbed her weary eyes, and Lysander's gaze sharpened. "You've been having the nightmares again."

She nodded. If she were honest, they were the real reason she'd sought out a scholar's help. Ever since she was small she'd dreamed of a figure in gray tatters, pressing down upon her, driving the air from her lungs. Last summer those dreams had mercifully stopped, most likely because she'd found other worries to haunt her sleep. But in the weeks since the Fall of Ventaris, the nightmares had returned with a vengeance, although she didn't know why. She was afraid to wonder.

Lysander finished off his wine and refilled his cup from the bottle. "It's just stress. You've had enough of that lately." He took a long draught. "Any word from Castor?"

She knew Lysander was changing the subject, but she welcomed it. "Nothing since the Fall." She sighed. "I don't think we'll be hearing from him again." Lysander raised an eyebrow. Castor had been one of last summer's worries, a member of the White, the empress' elite guard, ejected from his order and imprisoned for the crime of fathering a child. She'd saved him from prison and in doing so had gained herself a strong and loyal right arm. For a time, at least. "I pushed him too hard, Lysander. Helping me against the Brutes was one thing, but moving against the imperial family was a step too far. He couldn't leave behind what he'd been." Unlike her.

Lysander shrugged. "Well, the gossip's the poorer for it. Tales of fallen Whites and their secret lovers have all faded with the summer. All anyone talks about now is this...what in Mayu's hells is it called?"

"Evangelism."

He shook his head. "The Evangelism. Lovely word. Doesn't at all sound like something bloody and awful."

"It's not bloody yet, but give it time." Unlike Castor, this was not a topic she wished to dwell on. The more time passed and the more the tension in the city thickened, the more



certain Duchess became that the fault for the brewing religious war could be laid upon her own doorstep.

After all, if she had not taken up with the weaver Jana, she would never have found herself at odds with the Atropi and their resentment at the admission of a dark-skinned Domae into the Magnificent Order of Tailors, Seamstresses, Weavers, Dyers and Haberdashers. When those three old noblewomen, prominent in the guild, had failed to prevent Jana's membership by normal means, they'd sent Malleus and Kakios of the Brutes to smash Jana's looms. In response, Duchess had struck back against the Atropi, hatching an audacious scheme to destroy the dress they were to present to the empress at the Fall of Ventaris.

Duchess would never forget the tick-tick of the deathwatch beetles as they hatched and fed upon the magnificent cloth of the gown before the very throne of Empress Violana herself. First Keeper Jadis had publicly insisted it was an omen that the time had come for the ascendance of a new religious sect. The empress, in turn, had made things worse by refusing to dispute him. That one spark was all that was needed for the three imperial cults—the facets of Anassa, the keepers of Mayu, the radiants of Ventaris—to begin an all-out struggle for supremacy. The city had not seen such a conflict in more than a decade. Only the gods knew how it would end.

Lysander watched as he refilled her cup, seeming to read her dark thoughts. "Give it time. That's what I love about you; always the optimist." Before she could reply there was a knock at the door.

"Are you expecting someone?" Lysander asked, putting down his cup.

"No one." She rose and headed down the hall towards the door, with Lysander close behind. "Darley probably thought of something else she wants and has come by to make sure I know it." She opened the door to reveal a small, balding, bespectacled man.

"Nigel," she said, surprised. She'd never seen her landlord outside his shop, and she certainly hadn't expected to find him on her doorstep. She made herself smile. "It's good to see you. Lysander and I were just having a bit of wine, if you'd care to join us."

"Ah—yes, that would be fine," Nigel replied. He was a quiet man, always polite and unassuming, but today he seemed nervous. He owned both the curio shop and her apartment. That, and his position on the Highway, made him a man to be treated with respect.

They sat down around the long table in the front room, and while Duchess fetched the wine from her office Lysander tried to set the man at ease with casual gossip. His charms were wasted and Nigel did not unwind even with a few sips of wine. She'd never seen him so uncomfortable.

The man clearly wanted something from her, not a new experience these days. After a bit of small talk, she to business. "What brings you here today?" Nigel glanced significantly at Lysander, and she nodded. "Whatever you need to say to me can be said to him."

Nigel fidgeted, looking not at her but into his cup. "I'm not certain where to start."

"From the beginning," Lysander replied.

Nigel nodded. "It all started with a woman," he said at last, exhaustion and anger clear in his face. "She called herself Lepta," he went on, sipping at his wine. "She told me later that was false, but she said she was afraid to use her true name." He shook his head, and the wan light from the windows glinted in his eyes. "A lie about a lie." He sighed. "That about sums her up." He took another sip. "She brought me the table that's now in the front window of my shop."

"The rosewood table with the puzzle lock?" She'd examined that table herself; an elegant piece of furniture, and expensive, to be sure, but its hidden compartments were a clever way to secure valuables. "She sold it to you?"

He grimaced. "After a fashion. She'd inherited it from her aunt, she said, who died just before the Fall. Or she should have inherited it. There was a will, witnessed by the radiants. But with the Halls of Dawn suddenly out of imperial favor, her cousins had taken the chance to contest the document." Duchess shot Lysander a glance, but said nothing. "She thought she might sell the table, among other things, and use the money to pay off her cousins," Nigel went on. "She wanted me to appraise it. I named a price for the work and she agreed. I told her to have the table brought over."

Lysander was grinning. "I'm guessing you had a visitor not long after the thing arrived, eh?" he asked.

Nigel gave him a sour look. "A tall gentlemen, well dressed and well groomed. He said his name was Hadron, and he was immediately taken with the table, so much so that he offered to buy it then and there. I told him it wasn't mine to sell and tried to interest him in some of my other stock, but no, it had to be Lepta's table and no other. Hadron offered me at least three times what the thing was worth, but since it wasn't mine to sell, I turned him down.

"Still, I was curious, so I stayed up half the night, fiddling with the locks, and by dawn I managed to open one compartment—there were several—and this fell out." He held out a tarnished silver coin, and Duchess shifted uncomfortably. Domae-made, clearly. She'd learned a bit about such things, since she'd received one of her own. This one was very old, of value only to a collector. Although there was no P upon it, nor a snake devouring its tail, it was too close for comfort to the one that currently resided in her pocket.

Lysander whistled in admiration. "Two games at once. Hadron puts it in your head that the table is worth more than Lepta knows, and then inside the table you find a coin that, while not worth much by itself—"

"—made you believe that even more lay inside," Duchess finished. Lysander had seen just about every con ever invented, but even she recognized a good game when she saw one.

Nigel gestured in defeat. "When she came back the next day I made her an offer, a generous one. She refused it. She said one of her cousins had come to her the night before and had offered to buy the table outright—at a smaller sum than the one I'm sure that same cousin had just offered me. Sentimental value, he'd said. She appreciated my offer, but she just couldn't dream of accepting. It wouldn't be fair."

"This woman, this Lepta," Lysander said. "Pretty, I'm guessing, but not too pretty? Just enough to make you feel sorry for her?" He shook his head, chuckling. "First rule of a con:



don't make the honey too sweet, or you'll give the game away. She had your number."

"She did." Nigel sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I finally convinced her to part with it for about a third more than Hadron had offered me. Far more than the table itself was worth, but if there were more coins inside like the one I'd found, I'd still come out ahead. We'd both win, or so I thought. When I finally puzzled open the rest of the table I found nothing but a few pieces of worthless brass. Not old ones, either. And of course, Hadron never returned." He looked at Duchess with tired eyes. "So I was robbed. Not at sword's point, but robbed all the same."

Duchess tilted her head and reached for her wine. "I'm sorry to hear of your misfortunes," she said, taking a careful sip. "I understand why you haven't told anyone of this, Nigel. You don't want it getting around that you were conned." She tried not to let the relief in her voice show. "But why come to me?"

By way of answer, Nigel reached into his pocket and pulled out an oval of carved wood, perhaps the half the length of his hand. Upon its flat surface was engraved a curve bisected by a line, with three small circles suspended below. His mark. He placed it on the table and slid it towards her.

"I want them dealt with," he whispered, so low that both she had to strain to make him out. "I want my money back, and I want them to regret they ever stole it. And before you do it, I want them to know why."

She stared at him for a long moment, only slowly coming to realize what he meant. She exchanged a glance with Lysander. "Nigel, I think someone's given you a very wrong impression of me. What makes you think I do that sort of work?"

"I've heard the stories, just like everyone else." He didn't say how, but of course she knew. Even in her apartment it was best not to speak of the Grey. "They say you dealt with one of the Atropi's men, at Meadowmere Manse before the Fall. They say you were brief with him." He pulled out another mark, identical to the first, and laid it beside its brother. "Two marks. One for each of them. I want you to be less brief with Hadron and Lepta."

She stared at Nigel's expectant face. She'd never dreamed a man so ordinary-looking capable of ordering the death of one person, much less two. Even worse, the man seemed certain of what he thought he knew of her. Somewhere, for some mad reason, someone was fruning that Duchess of the Shallows was capable of murder.

Still, Nigel was well regarded on the Highway, to her knowledge two of his marks were a small fortune. How could she turn him away? She could at least look into the matter and then decide what to do. At worst the task would prove too cumbersome and she'd return his marks. Nigel would never dare to complain; the last thing he wanted was for this story to go on the Grey.

She leaned forward on her bench. "I don't know what you think you've heard, but understand this: I've not killed anyone in my life and I've no plans to start now. I'm happy to assist, yes, but if murder's the only thing that will satisfy you, take back your marks and seek out the Red. I'm sure Uncle Cornelius can accommodate you." She let that sink in, then went on. "Or, you can let me help you in my own, non-murderous way. Which shall it be?"

Nigel sat quietly, and she was reminded fleetingly of her own meeting with Uncle Cornelius. Nigel was frightened of her, she was certain, just as she'd been of the Uncle. What in the name of the gods was being said about her?

Still looking down, he nodded. "Your way," he agreed quietly.

She smiled and rose from her seat, signaling the meeting's end. "Hadron and Lepta will rue the day they decided to play their game with you. That I can promise."

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"Well that was interesting," Lysander said after Duchess had seen Nigel out. He helped himself to the rest of the man's wine.

"Interesting's hardly the word," she replied, heading back to her desk. She opened a drawer and surveyed within the chips of stone, swatches of ribbon, pieces of metal, and tokens of ivory, nearly of dozen in all. Since the Fall of Ventaris her stock on the Grey had risen, and well-wishers and favor-seekers had beaten a path to her door, Nigel being the most recent. Each of these marks had its owner, and each had been given to her in return for some desired service. A thief even newer to the Grey than she had handed over his mark in return for the name of a reputable fence. A leatherworker from Trades District had passed her a mark in exchange for the name of the real owner of the Wynd Brewery. A bentback old man had traded a mark for a promise to locate his lost donkey. Those marks were part of a thousand lives, a thousand needs, a thousand tales that were the City of Rodaas. And each and every one could be turned to advantage.

Duchess might use any one to purchase favors of her own, either from the original owners or from others eager to trade. In a way the Grey's marks were not unlike a moneylender's promissory notes. A man who issued such a note could buy it back but it could also be sold to others. The more respected the moneylender the more likely his note was to be honored, and so it was with marks—at least, for those on the Grey. Given the rumors Nigel had mentioned, she wondered at the state of her own mark.

Lysander wiped his mouth with his sleeve, managing to look graceful while doing it. "There are advantages to being known as a murderess, I suppose. If that story gets around, you'll never have a problem with Julius again." His grin suddenly vanished. "Do you think he's behind all this? You two didn't exactly part on good terms, after all." That was putting it mildly; she'd tricked the man into implicating Preceptor Amabilis as part of the Atropi's plan to ruin Jana. Though she'd settled with the radiant, it was possible Julius was still smarting.

"I don't think so," she replied. "If Julius were trashing my reputation he'd want me to know it." Preceptor Amabilis, however, would be more subtle and he'd been on the Grey far longer than Duchess.

"Amabilis might still be angry at the way you blackmailed him," Lysander suggested, reading her mind, "or maybe the Atropi found out just who turned those deathwatch beetles loose on their precious dress."

It was all too possible, she knew, for those two names were disturbingly intertwined. Preceptor Amabilis was not only a high-ranked priest of Ventaris, but a powerful member

of the Grey Highway, more than capable of making trouble for someone like her.

That seemed unlikely, though. Duchess had gotten the Atropi's name out of Amabilis by blackmailing him; the man had been foolish enough to arm Deeps gangs with steel in an attempt to support a splinter sect of his rival, First Keeper Jadis. No one, particularly the Red, would be happy to learn that little fact.

She still held that secret over the preceptor, and she imagined he would not want to jeopardize their arrangement. As for the Atropi themselves, they were wealthy and powerful, and influential in the higher districts but they lacked the ability to spread rumors this far down the hill.

Julius, the Atropi, Amabilis—all of them were plausible without seeming possible.

She threw up her hands. "So we've established just how many enemies I have, thank you very much." She drained her cup. "Where do these stories come from? To hear Nigel tell it, I was leaving bodies strewn across Meadowmere Manse. I sneaked in to ruin a dress; I'd remember murdering someone."

Lysander shrugged. "Rodaas is full of rumors, not all of them true. You just heard one of the many false ones."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Nigel's too well respected on the Grey. If he takes these tales seriously then so should I."

Lysander laughed. "Oh come now. You're making far too much of this." He shook his head at her frown. "Why do you even care what's being said of you? You once told me you wouldn't have minded if people thought you a witch. What's worse about being called a killer?"

"Witchcraft's one thing, killing's quite another," she replied flatly. "There's a saying both on the Highway and off: in Rodaas, murder is as Red as blood."

He glanced in the direction of the door, the outside of which bore a blood-red handprint. "You mean killing's the domain of Uncle Cornelius." Along with protection rackets, assassinations, and keeping the Deeps gangs in the Deeps.

"Minette told me herself that when the Red and the Grey intersect, the meeting must be handed very carefully." The notorious Color War being the most notable example of ignoring that wisdom.

"You've been careful enough on that score," Lysander pointed out. "Hells, the Uncle's paying for your rent on this place." He toyed with his cup. "Still, surely the Grey kills sometimes." He shrugged with false insouciance. "Life is cheap in the Shallows, doubly so in the Deeps."

He would know, she reflected with a pang. Lysander had grown up in the Deeps, the most dangerous and notorious district of the city. He'd sold his own body to escape that place, and he had been one of the lucky ones. She decided to stick to the topic at hand. "I'm not the most experienced member of the Highway, it's true, but I've worn the cloak long enough to know I'm supposed to succeed by being bold and clever. On the Grey, you're only ever as good as your last job. If it's getting around that I stabbed my way to victory over the Atropi—"

Lysander was not slow to catch on. "Your reputation will suffer."

She nodded. "On the Grey Highway, reputation is everything, and that derives from both your sponsor and the jobs you do." She grimaced. "Being cloaked by Hector was never a sign of distinction, and if I don't have even the good name I won by striking back against the Atropi, I've got nothing—" She was interrupted by another knock on the outer door. She groaned and dropped her head on the table.

Lysander laughed. "Do you want me to send them away?"

"No. It's fine." She rose and stalked towards the door. "It can't be worse than any other conversation I've had today." She opened the door to reveal Castor, a sword at his belt and a small boy at his side. He glanced over his shoulder and down the stairs as if he feared pursuit, then turned back to her.

"I need you to hide him," he said.