



The Fall of Ventaris

Book Two of *The Grey City*

NEIL MCGARRY & DANIEL RAVIPINTO

The Fall of Ventaris

Book Two of *The Grey City*

NEIL MCGARRY & DANIEL RAVIPINTO

Learn more at

www.peccable.com/duchess

This is a work of fiction. All names, places and people are products of the authors' imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved

©2013 Neil McGarry and Daniel Ravipinto

Cover illustration and map illustration © 2013 Amy Houser

www.amyhouser.com



She sat in that room of reflection and running water with the unasked and unanswered question like a living thing and the single eye of the facet gave no quarter. She could come up with a lie, but to what end? She sighed. Her request had been made and the price set. All that remained was to pay it.

“My name... is Marina.”

The facet straightened in her chair, suddenly bereft of all grace, and lifted one hand to her throat, where she plucked at the collar of her robe. Looking up, Duchess saw that the facets passing before the doors to the great chamber had all stopped and were looking directly at her. She felt a chill and wondered if she had somehow offended, and if she would ever leave this place alive.

“Marina...Kell?” the woman asked.

Chapter One

Amongst the soulless

It took her two full bells to realize Lysander wasn't coming.

Their plans had been vague, she told herself as she paced back and forth across the packed mud of Beggar's Way outside Hector's shop. She'd arrived at tenth bell, long after the morning fog had burned off. The beggars had already made their daily journey from the bottom of the great hill through the Shallows to Temple District and the Godswalk, where they'd beg their bread. Since then her only company were the folk who passed on business, moving along without a word or a glance, and her thoughts, which grew darker as the day wore on.

Lysander was always busy in the summer, attending the endless round of parties thrown at the country estates of various nobles. Lady Vorloi had taken a particular interest in the handsome young ganymede, and had kept her pet even closer this year, pressing him for details about the party at House Eusbius and the theft of the baron's dagger. He'd told that tale a thousand times, no doubt, until the novelty had palled and the nobles moved on to fresher gossip. Perhaps he'd gotten drunk and been delayed getting back into the city, or perhaps Vorloi had demanded he extend his visit.

After all, he had promised he would be here.

Eleventh bell caught her by surprise, and when it rang her excuses melted more quickly than the morning fog. Having already paced a path in the mud, she forced herself to sit on Hector's doorstep and slow her breathing. Lysander understood how important this was to her, and how pressing it was that he be here.

The Grey Highway had not, it turned out, been an immediate path to riches. Hector had placed a cloak on her shoulders, marking her as one of that group of gossipmongers and thieves. It even now hung in her new apartments above Nigel's shop and when she'd placed it on its hook she'd imagined that opportunities for fortune would quite naturally present themselves. Although she'd shown audacity and wit in stealing Baron's Eusbius' prize possession and won a place in the Grey, fortune had yet to follow. Perhaps Hector had been right that her dealings with Uncle Cornelius, the widely feared chief of the Red, had tainted her reputation. She'd been on the Highway only two months or so, but in that time she'd learned that those who had fallen from grace were often the last to know. One of the many things Tyford was teaching her, although sometimes she only half-believed anything the old thief said.

Perhaps her worries about Lysander were simply a sign of something larger. She had no one to trust

these days, it seemed, including herself. Sometimes she felt as if she were still just a scholar's daughter, hiding behind a gray cloak far too large for her.

She sighed and bit her lip. That cloak was hers, no matter how well it sat on her shoulders, and it was time she put it to work. Whether or not she'd tarnished it before she'd broken it in, she could no longer wait. If she wanted a new opportunity, she would have to go out and make one.

Twelfth bell rang out from the imperial palace at the top of the great hill, and she decided to stop fooling herself. Lysander wasn't coming. It was her own fault. Things had not been the same between them since the night she had left him to Malleus and Kakios' tender mercies. Oh, they still giggled and gossiped, but every conversation since had felt slightly false. They never once spoke of the hurt she'd dealt him, and every time she caught his eye she wondered if part of him was still back there, on the stairs, being dragged off by the Brutes, his ears full of their dreadful threats and whispers.

She stood and dusted herself off. The day was passing, and if she were going to venture into the Deeps by herself, it was best to do so while the cloud-hidden sun was still high in the sky. Her father would doubtless have fainted at the notion of his youngest child wandering alone into the most dangerous district of the city, but it was either that or turn back empty-handed. Besides, it wasn't as if she would be wandering blind through the streets. She'd fruned that the girl lived right along Beggar's Way, almost within sight of the Shallows. She could be there in moments.

She set off down the hill, away from the Shallows that were now her home and the higher districts that were no longer. She dove into the Deeps, full of nothing but doubts, with no certainty of her place, her present, her future. Worse, she held no certainty in Lysander, nor herself.

All she could lay claim to was the knowledge that she was no longer what she once had been. Whoever she might be, she was no longer her father's daughter.

* * *

"You are just one?" the young woman asked through the warped and scarred door. The building was like many in the Deeps: old and dilapidated, leaning heavily against its neighbor, and unlike most of the city, made entirely of wood. The lower level had been obviously vacant, its door missing and its windows broken, but a staircase that crawled up the side of the building gave access to the apartment on the upper floor where the weaver made her home.

"Just one," Duchess replied with a sigh. The girl was wise to check. Those who lived in the Deeps and opened their doors unwarily often did not live to regret it. Fortunately for Duchess — she fingered a rising bruise on her cheek — those who came into the Deeps alone without an escort sometimes did.

After a pause Duchess heard the clacking of locks disengaged, and then the lifting of a large, heavy bar. The door opened a crack and an eye peered out, verifying that Duchess was indeed by herself. The crack widened, revealing a small Domae woman — Jana, no doubt — perhaps a few years older but an inch or two shorter and so petite that Duchess felt positively muscular in comparison. She wondered fleetingly if the girl ever had trouble of the sort Duchess had encountered on the way down.

The girl's hair was black or nearly so, parted down the middle and long enough to fall past her shoulders, and her skin was a rich brown. *Quite pretty*, Duchess thought. Her clothing — skirt, tunic, scarf — was made of many different pieces of brightly colored cloth, all wrapped and cleverly sewn together. Her brown eyes were wary but not hostile, and they looked at her curiously.

"You are hurt," the woman said simply. It was neither a question nor an accusation.

Duchess shrugged. "A little disagreement over my boots," she said lightly, looking down at the muddy

things. “A very large woman decided they should be hers, and when I disagreed she threw me into a wall.”

Jana blinked. “A wall.”

Duchess grinned ruefully. “Fortunately it was wooden. Further up the hill it would have been stone and I might have lost a tooth. Still, I decided to run away before she could take a second turn.”

The girl did not smile back or laugh at the joke. She simply stood there, watching.

Duchess coughed, uncertain. “I’m here to see your cloth,” she tried, by way of explanation.

The girl blinked again. “My...but you are edunae...Rodaasi.” Her accent seemed stronger than other city-dwelling Domae.

Duchess nodded. “Is that a problem?”

The girl’s eyes suddenly went wide as if she feared she’d given offense. “No problem, but...” Jana shook her head. “Rodaasi do not buy my cloth. May not buy my cloth.” She tried again. “I sell to Domae, and sometimes Ulari, and those who are from the east, the Ahé...”

“Well, I’m not like most Rodaasi.” Duchess smiled at the understatement. “So? May I see?” Jana hesitated another moment, glancing over Duchess’ shoulder as if to ensure she was truly alone, then opened the door wider, gesturing her inside.

Duchess stepped into a room barely larger than her own bedroom but far more crowded. Thick rugs and pillows of unusual red-and-yellow patterns covered the floor, complemented by wall hangings trimmed with black. The hangings portrayed natural scenes – grasslands, mountains set against sky. The largest covered the entirety of the back wall, depicting a goat-like creature emerging from tall grass to drink at a river, its thick, enormous horns entwined with the branches of a nearby tree. Everything in the tapestry seemed alive: the clouds had faces, the river eyes, and the animal a strangely human expression. There were several small tables here and there, most of which had seen better days, and a thin mattress in one corner, piled with blankets of light green and pale yellow. On several of those tables were wooden frames bound with bands of cloth at top and bottom, with slender threads between. Duchess was reminded of the looms in her mother’s day room, although these were smaller and less familiar. The room smelled both sweet and sharp, like apples and vinegar mingled. Strange, but not unpleasant.

“Please, be seated,” Jana said graciously, barring the door behind them. “I have no chairs, but...” She gestured to one of the large floor-pillows. Since the chairs in Duchess’ own apartment, and indeed the apartment itself, were all on loan from Uncle Cornelius, she wasn’t about to complain. While Duchess had a seat, Jana busied herself at the hearth, and Duchess saw she was preparing something to drink. She even had cups and saucers, although they seemed old and mismatched. It was a welcoming scene, but Duchess tried not to get too relaxed.

She’d fruned everything she could about Jana, but what she hadn’t been able to learn was more interesting than what she had. That subtle dance of unspoken insinuation and occluded query was fantastic for ferreting out general gossip, but fell flat when it came to detail. There were a few foreigners on the Grey, but the Domae who wore the cloak had been notably unwilling to say much about the young weaver. Duchess could not imagine what they might be afraid of. Jana seemed innocuous enough.

Jana carried over two cups with enviable dexterity, handing one to Duchess and seating herself neatly on a nearby pillow, all without clattering the cups against the saucers.

“I am Jana,” the woman said formally. “Your presence honors me.” Duchess fidgeted. Was she supposed to say something back? Her experience with Domae was limited to brief transactions at the market or over Noam’s bread cart.

“I am Duchess,” she replied, settling for a smile and a nod. She took up her saucer and realized the

strange scent was coming from the cup. The tea inside was darker than she was used to, and appealingly aromatic.

Jana tilted her head curiously. "I have never heard that name before," she said, holding her cup with a practiced hand. "But I am certain that my name sounds as strange to you."

Duchess smiled, curiously at ease with Jana's unselfconscious honesty. "Trust me, my name is strange to everyone." She nodded to the tapestries, the rugs. "You've got yourself a lovely place here." She paused and sniffed at her cup. "I, uh, have not had tea for a long time. We don't drink it much in the Shallows." Jana nodded encouragingly and Duchess took a sip. The tea was sweet and rich and strangely thick, as if it were not tea at all. Her split lip ached from the heat, but it was worth it. "Delicious," she said, meaning it. "I've never tasted anything like it."

Jana nodded again, pleased. "I add sugar that has been heated into a syrup." She gestured to a small glass jar by the hearth. "Your people do not use this, but there are Domae in the Foreign Quarter who make it. I buy it there."

Duchess reflected that she might make a fortune just selling that syrup up the hill, but she hadn't come for that. "Speaking of the Foreign Quarter, why don't you live there? It's safer than the Deeps, and there are more of your people about." A bit forward to ask, but either something about the tea or Jana's manner seemed to encourage ease.

Jana's smile faded. "The men who own the buildings will take my coins, but since the guild of weavers will not have me they do not allow me to practice my craft there. If I cannot weave I cannot make money to live." She gestured to the room. "Those who rent in these Deeps, they take the coins and ask no questions." She shrugged. "I am still getting used to all these coins: pennies and half-pennies and sou."

Duchess blinked. "You...don't use coin?"

"Now that I am here, yes. But in the plains things are different. My people trade one thing for another. These metal coins are confusing." She looked suddenly anxious. "I do not mean to say that our ways are better," she added hastily.

Duchess waved off the apology, not offended but interested. Clearly the Domae were more unlike Rodaasi than she had thought. "At the door, when you saw me, you said I was...ehdunay?"

"Edunae. It is what my people call yours." Jana smiled nervously. "I am of the people — Dom — thus, Domae. You are not, thus, edunae."

"Edunae." Duchess tried out the word on her tongue. "What does it mean?"

Jana dropped her gaze, as if Duchess had asked something embarrassing. "It is the word we use for those who live in the city," she replied quietly. "Those not of the people." She looked up, seemingly worried. "Other."

Duchess sensed an evasion. "But what does it mean in your language?"

The woman glanced about the room, as if seeking some way out of the question. Her eyes settled on the tapestry, then turned back to Duchess. "It means one without a spirit," she said, tentatively. "Soulless."

Duchess hesitated, while Jana looked on anxiously, obviously afraid she had offended. At first Duchess was offended, until she considered those who trudged along Beggar's Way each morning, past homes more opulent than they could ever dream. Until she thought of the party Baron Eusbius had thrown, with more food than Duchess had ever seen and more gold than she'd ever owned. Until she remembered the story of Lenard and his poor monkey, and the blackarms who had refused to protect them both from the Uncle and the Red. Finally she shrugged. "Well," she replied with a sigh, "I suppose it fits."

Jana smiled in obvious relief. “The name is from long ago, and we no longer remember where it began. The elders say that the world ends where the plains do, and to go beyond means to lose one’s soul.” She shrugged. “If they speak truly, then I am now edunae as well.”

Duchess found herself returning the smile. “Being edunae isn’t so bad,” she quipped, drinking more tea, “and in this city you’ll never miss your soul.” She and Jana shared a small laugh. “I’m always glad to find when my elders and supposed betters are wrong,” Duchess dared, still smiling.

Jana’s smile took on a wry edge, as if she were sharing a secret. “It is refreshing to find how often it happens, is it not?”

They were both quiet for a moment, then Duchess brought the conversation to more comfortable ground. “May I see your work now? I’ve heard much about it.”

Jana paused a moment, watching Duchess intently. Then, as if reaching a decision, she rose and went to a large wooden box, from which she took several bundles of cloth. She held these out for Duchess’ inspection. The first was a thin shawl that at first appeared merely crimson but upon closer examination was woven from threads in a half-dozen shades of red, cunningly blended into a subtle but distinct pattern. Duchess fingered the cloth, which was smooth and light. “Is this silk?” she asked, wondering. She hadn’t worn that fabric since she lived in her father’s house, but she remembered how it felt. Some of the highborn who came to Market Square wore it.

Jana shook her head. “Wool.” Duchess blinked, and the Domae nodded. “Yes. My aunt showed me how to card the wool and spin the thread so it is much lighter than wool I have seen in Rodaas.” Duchess was amazed; not only was Rodaasi wool much rougher, but it almost never appeared in such a nuanced blend of colors. In the city, red was red or it was not. She gestured at the rest of the cloth, which Jana obligingly held up for her inspection. There was more of the impossibly fine wool in blues and greens and yellows, some with beads and others with small pieces of clear glass cunningly stitched. “If someday I am able to have more money, I will have glass made in colors, but for now...” She spread her hands.

Duchess sat back, hands on her knees. “Jana, this cloth is...incredible, as good as any silk or damask that I have ever seen. You say your aunt showed you how to do this?”

Obviously flattered, Jana nodded. “Yes. My aunt showed me all of the things a woman must know.”

A thought occurred to her. “Jana, there are other Domae women in Rodaas...can they all weave cloth like this?”

Jana shook her head. “My aunt comes from a long line of weavers, and they share their secrets only with their own. Adelpha had no daughters, and my mother died when I was small, so she passed her secrets to me.”

At that, Duchess felt a pang. Her own mother had passed away when Duchess was very young, and she remembered her only vaguely. She shook her head, dismissing the memory. “There are women in this city who would commit murder for those secrets,” she said, only half-joking. “I never expected to find such beauty...here.” She indicated the door and the Deeps beyond as they sat again and took up their cups.

Jana smiled sadly. “I never expected to bring beauty...here. But I am glad you like it.” Her smile died. “But the weavers’ guild will not have me, and if they learn that I am selling to edunae — Rodaasi — there could be trouble for us both.”

Duchess looked at her reflection in the last of the tea, then drank it. She looked up into Jana’s expectant expression, the Domae’s eyes somehow both guileless and wary at once. She suddenly realized how much she’d missed sitting and talking without worrying. This simple exchange had been easier than any she’d had with Lysander since...

She suddenly felt a flash of anger, and she placed her hands on her folded legs and made a decision.

“I’m not here just to buy a few pieces of cloth, Jana,” she said. “As it happens, I’m looking for a good investment, and after seeing your work I’m more convinced than ever that this is it.” Jana’s brows contracted at investment, so Duchess sought to clarify. “You have great skill, and I have gold and connections within the city. I can get you a place to work in a safer area, and permission from the guild to sell your cloth to anyone with the coin to buy.” Even as she was saying the words she wondered how she’d ever make good on her promise, but she pushed those worries aside. She hadn’t gotten on the Grey by playing it safe, and she didn’t intend to start now. “I can even introduce your work to Rodaasi who have never heard of it. You’ll make money, and in return we’ll share the profits. A partnership.”

Jana seemed to consider this. “These arrangements happen amongst my people as well, where two combine their talents as one.” She traced a line around the rim of her cup with a tentative finger. “But these partnerships are usually between family and not strangers. And I do not want to offend, but my time in this place has taught me...that sometimes deeds do not follow words.” The admission seemed to make her uncomfortable, but Duchess admired her for saying it. Unschooling in Rodaasi ways Jana might be, but she was wise not to trust too soon.

Duchess grinned. “You’re in the city of the soulless...of course you’re uncertain. You’ll just have to trust my deeds and not my words.” She met the other woman’s gaze squarely. If Lysander were too busy for Duchess, perhaps she should be busy herself. “If I get you permission to operate from the guild, would you consider my offer?”

“How can you do this? The guild turned me away because I am Domae, and you cannot change that.”

Duchess remembered how impossible the task of stealing the baron’s dagger had seemed when Hector laid it before her. And it had been nearly impossible...until she did it. “Jana, although you may not think so, I am a bit of an outsider as well, and I know about closed doors. I’ll speak to the guild and convince them to open one for you.” When Jana still seemed unconvinced, she added, “Ask around about Duchess of the Shallows and you’ll learn that I am a woman who gets what she wants.”

Jana was silent for a long moment, and Duchess found herself tensely holding her breath. Finally, the Domae woman bowed her head. “If you could make the guild accept me, I would know that you were —” she paused, as if searching her mind for the words “— a woman of trust, edunae or no.” She went back to the wooden chest and produced a wide, fringed purple scarf. She handed this over and Duchess found it as silky smooth as the other cloth. “And you shall know me by my deeds. This must be yours.” Duchess reached for her purse but Jana forestalled her with one brown hand. “This is — I do not know the right word in your tongue — a promise-gift,” she said. “It is given along with one’s word, the promise made real in the world. Such a gift binds the one who makes the promise and reminds the one who accepts it. As now it will bind you and remind me.”

Duchess found herself swallowing against a sudden lump in her throat. She had not received such a heartfelt gift in a long time. She nodded gratefully, surprised by the sudden rush of emotion, and rose to leave. “Then it seems we both have something to do. I have a guild to persuade, and you —” she swept a hand around the small, crowded room “— will soon have a lot of work to do.”

* * *

She nearly skipped down the swaying wooden stairs, buoyed by schemes and hope. The cloth was lovely, the finest she’d encountered since she’d been Marina Kell. She ran her hand over the scarf one last time, then folded it carefully into a pocket. Wool was far cheaper than silk, and if Jana could produce it quickly, and if Duchess could bring it to the attention of the right people...well, a river of gold would flow,

and Duchess would ride that particular current as far as it would take her. Even if the profits were less than she hoped, they might be enough to provide a safer income than stealing. Wearing a gray cloak was all well and good, but for every Naria of the Dark or Looselimb Llarys there were a hundred who ended not as legends but as just another neck in a noose. Heists and thievery, cons and cleverness might strengthen her reputation on the Grey, but a sure, steady flow of coin would strengthen her finances, and let her live longer.

Getting the word out would be important, of course, but perhaps Lysander could help. The aristocracy had an endless appetite for the next new fashion, and Lysander could use his golden tongue to persuade them that Jana's cloth was it. Perhaps he could even wear some of the cloth, to demonstrate just how lovely the fabric was. He looked good even in soiled clothing. Dressed in Jana's wool he'd have tongues wagging up and down the hill.

But would he? His absence felt like an ache. He should be here now, should have shown up hours ago. He'd never left word with Daphne or tried to contact her. He'd simply not been there. She hated to think what that might mean.

She was just stepping down into the street, her mind awash in worry, when she caught sight of the lazy-eyed, frizzy-haired woman and pulled up short. She looked much the same as when she'd swung Duchess into the wall. Duchess had fled from her before, but her annoyance with Lysander and her success with Jana left her feeling bolder. Perhaps talking might save her another run.

"Didn't we just go through this?" she sighed. "The boots are mine, and if you'd just — huh!" She scrambled out of the way just as the woman's hand lashed out in a great roundhouse slap that would have sent her to the cobbles. So much for negotiation. She'd been a fool to come down here alone, she thought as she regained her balance. Even in Lysander's absence she might have paid Zachary or one of the other Tenth Bell Boys to escort her. She risked a glance around at the street, which was empty even though the sun was at its cloud-obscured zenith. Not that she expected any help here in the Deeps, but you never knew.

The time she'd been thinking she should have been dodging, and the woman's next swing caught her ringingly on the side of the head. Duchess' hair was long and thick, but not quite enough to cushion the blow that sent her reeling to the side. Duchess was no stranger to tussling — when she was younger she and Lani had had some fine old fights — but Noam's eldest daughter had never hit so hard. As the woman seized her by the front of her jerkin, Duchess decided she'd had quite enough.

"Take 'em off," the woman growled, yanking her close. Duchess smelled stale breath and unwashed hair. "Take 'em off and I'll let you keep your —" She froze.

"Knife?" Duchess suggested, holding her blade to the woman's neck. "Why don't you just calm down before someone gets hurt?" She pressed ever so gently, and the woman's eyes flicked toward the blade she could not quite see. She relaxed her grip and Duchess pulled away, keeping her knife between them. "The only way you're getting my boots is right in the face." She pointed at her own cheek. "I'll give you a bruise to match this one." The woman made as if to charge and Duchess flicked her blade out towards the woman's eyes. "Careful now," Duchess warned. "I've been cutting Shallows thieves since you were just a small, ugly ogre. If you want to grow up to be an old ugly ogre, you'll tromp right back into whatever hole you came from, or else you get the blade and not the boots."

"Or maybe we'll take both, then," came a voice from behind. She whirled to see a man, even larger than the woman, slide out from between two buildings, blocking her way back to the Shallows. He was unarmed but each of his hands looked large enough to grasp her entire head. "Your coin as well, and maybe you in the bargain. I've only had this one recently." He nodded towards the woman. "Not easy

fucking someone who looks two places at once.” He guffawed at his own joke and advanced a step.

Fear lanced through her, and she turned sideways to keep them both in view. The woman she could have handled with her steel, but not both together. The woman moved to flank her, and Duchess pivoted, keeping one blade at the ready and drawing the second from her boot.

“How many of those godsdamned things you got?” the man spat as he circled around as well, and she realized that no matter which way she turned one would be at her back. So stupid to have come down here by herself, stupid, stupid...

A call from above caught her attention. She risked a glance up and caught sight of Jana, a blaze of color at the top of the stairs, her arms crossed and wearing a grim look, so strange on her delicate features. “There will be no fighting at the bottom of my stairs,” the weaver said sternly, not in the least frightened. Duchess gaped at her audacity, and was even more amazed to see her attackers edging away.

“Bloody witch,” muttered the woman, looking between Duchess and Jana. She looked at the man as if for support, but he was already fading back into the alley whence he came, clearly in no mood to continue the confrontation. Duchess narrowed her eyes and raised her blades, and after a long moment, the woman evidently decided that a witch and two knives was one danger too many. With a curse she too retired into an alley and was gone.

Duchess released a pent-up breath and looked back up at Jana, who simply nodded and disappeared back into her apartment. She had wondered how a petite, polite weaver lived in the Deeps without trouble, and now she knew. A reputation for sorcery evidently went a long way. It might also explain why the Domae in the city had been unwilling to say much about Jana, she reflected, sheathing her knives. Still, whatever Jana was, the assistance had been welcome. Duchess turned and hurried back along Beggar’s Way towards the Shallows and safety.

As she climbed the hill, she made two resolutions. The first was that this was the first and last time she came into the Deeps by herself, day or night, knives or no knives.

The second was that she was going to have to get someone to frune that she was a witch.

Chapter Two

Grieving before the bier

“...and I said that if he’d wanted big nipples he should have paid the extra sou for a woman.” Brenn took a triumphant sip from his cup as the rest of the ganymedes roared with laughter. The sound of their mirth was swallowed up by the general cacophony that was a typical night at the Grieving Bier. The bar was thronged, every table occupied with men and women from the Wharves and Shallows, and the back room, where a dice game seemed eternally in play, was standing-room only. Duchess had only occasionally been to the Bier, but for some reason the ganymedes had eschewed the Merry Widow that evening. Lysander had thought the ale house oddly named until Duchess had explained the pun. He’d made a sour face and said the barkeep was better with hippocras than with humor, and in hindsight, Duchess could only agree.

She certainly was in no laughing mood that night. She watched sullenly as Lysander, tall, blue-eyed and golden-haired, laughed along with the rest of the “girls.” When she’d arrived he’d given her swelling cheek a raised eyebrow but said nothing. After leaving the Deeps, she’d spent most of the day asking after him, and had found nothing until running into Deneys and a few of the other ganymedes on their way to the Bier. And now there he sat, with no apology, no explanation. He’d simply put a drink in her hand and turned back to telling stories with the others.

In the noise and the bustle of the evening crowd, hers was the only silence. Lysander’s obvious lack of remorse about missing their appointment and her rashly-made promise to Jana both weighed upon her, and she didn’t have the slightest notion how to deal with either. Both Lysander and the weavers’ guild were an utter mystery to her, although some careful fruning might tell her something of the latter.

“I’ll bet he doesn’t know that half the whores in the Shallows are men anyway!” Deneys, tall and lean, exclaimed, and Brenn tossed the dregs of his cup at him. Squeak, tough-looking but girl-voiced, took cover, and Lysander howled at the waste of good ale.

“The leash didn’t even fit me, but he liked me to wear it, so I —” Brenn went on. At that, Lysander began barking, which even in her dour mood brought a smile to her lips. He could imitate man, woman or beast with a facility that would shame even the most legendary mummer.

His broken promise had haunted her all along Beggar’s Way and out of the Deeps, and now she watched his insouciance with angry eyes. He, in turn, seemed to have nothing more on his mind than Brenn’s tale of the oddities of his latest client.

She forced her mind back to the problem her trip to the Deeps had revealed. Minette and Uncle

Cornelius, although their mannerisms and their methods differed, had at least one thing in common: a good deal of help. The Uncle had his redcaps, stern and fearsome, and Minette her network of contacts, with watchful eyes and pricked ears. Duchess, on the other hand, had only Lysander, or at least she had until this morning. If she hadn't been alone on Beggar's Way those thugs might have thought twice about assaulting her.

"And he told me to just close my eyes while he —" Duchess lost the rest of the sentence as a cheer went up from the back room. Evidently, the house was losing. The ganymedes, in turn, roared with laughter, adding to the cacophony.

She needed eyes and ears of her own, and muscle to guard her. Minette had once said that in Rodaas enemies were like wrinkles: live long enough and you were bound to accumulate a few. The problem, she thought, looking again at Lysander, was trust. Those who dealt in secrets often valued loyalty least of all, and she had to be certain that whoever guarded her back would not sink a knife in it.

She felt cold and awful even in the warmth and cheer of the bar. Her best friend sat across the table and she'd never felt so alone. She needed Lysander's advice, but didn't even know how to ask. Worse, she knew better than to bring up any such subject in front of the girls. Deneys was too clever even in his cups, and Brenn, now apparently much recovered from his torment at the hands of the Brutes, gossiped as only a ganymede could. Squeak would of course promise to keep any secret he was told, but like a dog that had had the fight kicked out of it, he would roll over for anyone who patted him. Weary of worrying at her problems, she tried to lose herself in the conversation.

There was enough conversation to lose ten Duchesses. In summer, gossip ripened like wheat, and this season was no exception. Lysander, fresh from the latest round of parties in the countryside, had the most to contribute. Lady Vorloi, he confided, was involved in the beginnings of what appeared to be an escalating war of fetes and feasts, each bigger and grander than the last. Lord Levering was apparently getting deeper and deeper in debt, much to the consternation of his two sons. "I'm sure they're hoping his life runs out before his money does," Lysander laughed. Deneys told a tale that the lord of House Davari, one of the oldest in the city with a seat on the Imperial Council, had been caught in a shouting match with his eldest son during a particularly important banquet. Squeak brought up the story of what had happened at Baron Eusbius' first and only party. The awkward silence that fell told Duchess that Squeak was the only one who hadn't gotten wind of her personal involvement in that turn of events.

Lysander artfully changed the subject with an intriguing tale of a group of keepers who'd abandoned the Gardens of Mayu and set up a rival sect in the Narrows, the poorest and most desperate part of the Deeps. No one knew if such keepers were simply involved in a political game or this was the first sign of a true religious schism.

The ale flowed, the tavern grew noisier, the ganymedes drunker and through it all the stories unreeled. Lords and ladies and bastards and thieves all caught up in a romantic rush. Banquets and masques stretching through nights of intrigue and scandal. Balconies and gardens filled with hedonistic revels and riches to beggar the imagination. She glanced at the tables around them and wondered how many others were telling the same tales, here or in a thousand other winesinks scattered about the Shallows. How many rubbed their hands over such stories, like jewels, gloating over each before tossing it aside to reach for the next? And how far would they be from such wonders when the morning fog rolled in and it was time to head for Wharves or Market or Trades for another long day of work?

"...and no one knows what the empress will do," Lysander was saying to Brenn and Denys, pulling Duchess out of her musing. Squeak was oblivious, head on the ale-puddled table, snoring softly. Squeak had never been able to hold his drink.

"What do you mean?" she asked, straightening in her chair. Lysander gave her a remonstrating look,

aware that she'd been woolgathering instead of hanging on his every word.

"I mean that a White who breaks his vows is a scandal even Violana can't ignore." He took a sip of wine, his expression unreadable.

Brenn frowned. "So what? She can just have his head off, or throw him in a dungeon, or whatever she wants. She's the empress, she can do as she likes." Duchess shook her head. She and Lysander knew well enough that in Rodaas, no one did just as he liked.

Deneys was red-eyed from drink, but his wits were still about him. "I'm not so sure. The Whites have been chaste for...well, for a long time. If one breaks his vows that means something even to the empress." As the official guard of the imperial family, Whites were held to a higher standard than mere blackarms or army-fodder.

Lysander nodded. "He's right, although I don't think this is the first time a White has kept a mistress. The problem here is that this mistress had a child."

Brenn scoffed. "You'd think she'd have done the smart thing and gone to a midwife to be rid of it, but that's a mother for you." Brenn was notoriously unsympathetic to the plight of women. "Would have been better for her and better for...what did you say his name was?"

"Pollux," Lysander said. "I hear he's a dream though, the kind to make any woman witless – and a few men, as well. Tall, strong, and eyes like..." His words were drowned out by another roar from the gaming tables, but Duchess could imagine the rest.

"So this Pollux has a child?" Deneys interrupted, trying to catch the thread of the tale again. He shook his head sadly when Lysander nodded. "Living proof of the crime, you might say."

"I still don't understand." Brenn was getting haughty. "She's the empress. She makes the laws." Duchess rolled her eyes, and noticed Lysander doing the same. No one with any sense truly believed the empress did anything other than sit her throne and nod off from time to time.

"It's not that simple," Duchess pointed out. "The Whites are as old as the city itself. According to legend their order dates back to the founding of Violana's line." One of the many bits of history she'd picked up from her father's library. "Even the empress can't just disregard a tradition as old as that one, and I can't imagine she's happy that something like this has come out." She paused as she noticed all three of them looking at her oddly, no doubt wondering where she'd come by such lore. She shut her mouth and took another swig.

"How did it come out?" asked Deneys, one eye still on her.

"That," said Lysander importantly, "is where Takkis comes in." Takkis was the sheriff of Temple District, she remembered. She didn't even know what the man looked like, but unlike Sheriff Ophion of the Shallows he had a reputation for unimpeachable integrity. His men were referred to as the Saints only somewhat ironically. "Somehow Takkis found out about the child, although what he was doing investigating a White I don't know. In any case, Pollux is now sitting in a cell in the sheriff's guard house, until either he dies of some mischance or the empress finds a graceful way to dispose of him. I imagine she's hoping for the former."

"I still don't understand why an empress can't stand up to a blackarm, but it's none of my affair." Brenn yawned hugely, clearly done with the conversation. "I'm off for home. I spent every sou I had with you ladies and I need to work tomorrow. Can't look pretty if I'm up all night." He rose unsteadily to his feet, gesturing imperiously. "Walk me home, Deneys, and help me carry this one." He waved towards Squeak, but Duchess knew Brenn was hoping to end the evening in Deneys' bed. A vain hope, she thought, as Deneys conducted all between-the-sheets activities as business, and by his own admission

Brenn was out of money. Still, Deneys went along readily enough, and between them they hoisted Squeak and dragged him from the tavern.

After they'd gone, Duchess drained her cup. "I never heard of blackarms spying on Imperial Whites," she said at last. "Sounds to me like someone's using Takkis for reasons of his own."

Lysander picked up what was left of Deneys' drink. "To embarrass the empress, right? I suppose it's the reason you keep someone like Takkis around in a place like Rodaas. Then again," he added flatly, "these days you see cat's-paws everywhere."

She didn't know how to take that comment, no more than she knew how to make things between them right again. "Did you just move to this city?" she replied. "I can't help seeing what's already there. Take a man known for integrity and put him between the empress and her own guards...."

Lysander laughed, almost naturally. "Now you sound like Minette." He signaled to a serving girl for wine. "Next you'll be beating me at tiles, too."

"So if Pollux is in jail," said Duchess, refusing to be baited, "where is this mistress?"

"Dead of fever, or so I'm told. I was about to get to that before Brenn rushed off in another sad attempt to bed Deneys." He held up a hand. "Before you ask, I don't know her name, or the name of the son Pollux gave her. The boy's six summers or so, which means Pollux must have moved heaven and earth to keep a secret that long."

"He must have loved the mother very much," Duchess said, for the moment all Silk. She wondered what it would be like to have a man so in love he would flout centuries of tradition. Most of the men she knew lacked any honor to discard, and cared little for tradition. Steel was more practical, however, and was already making connections. A man who could keep a secret, trained in all the martial skills an Imperial White required, willing to risk his very life for a bastard child. Temptable, but with a sense of honor. Such a man could be a useful lieutenant...assuming of course he were willing, and not locked in a cell and surrounded by blackarms.

"I suppose so. But she's gone now, and Pollux must have been trying to find someone to take care of the boy when Takkis found him out," Lysander was saying. "Now the court is in a terrible fix. They can't very well approve of what Pollux was doing, but if they execute him publicly it brings shame on the empress herself." His wine arrived and he drank as deeply as if it were his first and not his fifth. "The only thing sweeter than summer wine is summer gossip," he gloated. Then he looked away, out over the crowd.

Still not fully there with her, then. No talk of anything real. She pushed aside her dismay and toyed thoughtfully with her empty cup, focusing again on the practical. "Lysander," she asked after a moment, "what would happen if Pollux were to die in prison?"

"Most like the court would probably breathe a secret sigh of relief, quietly hand the body over to the cult of Mayu, and then forget the whole thing happened. Saves them a world of trouble." Although well in his cups, he did not miss the gleam in her eye. "I've seen that look before. It's usually followed by, 'Lysander, I'm about to suggest something insane.'" He eyed her with suspicion as Duchess sat quietly, her mind whirring. "If this is about Takkis, don't even start. Someone might be using him to hurt the empress, but you don't have a shred of proof."

She tried to smile, but it wasn't in her. "Who said I needed any?"

* * *

They left the Bier just before the owner threw them out, spilling into Pike Street with the other patrons. Although she and Lysander left under their own power, others were less able and some had to be heaved into the street by the Bier's staff. By morning those unfortunates would be picked clean by the

lightboys, who were as adept at cutting purses as they were at guiding nobles.

Her apartments were larger but Lysander's garret was closer, so they turned in that direction. She tried several times to bring up his failure to appear that morning, but each time something stopped her. Instead she found herself approaching the topic sideways, by mentioning how, like Minette, she needed help.

"If you want spies, you don't have to look very far," he said after hearing her out. "But chances are that any spy in your pay is taking coin from three more people, and selling out each to the others." He gazed up at the sky thoughtfully, although the stars were, as usual, hidden by the cloud cover.

She winced. He was correct, of course, and she'd never know the true from the treacherous. She bit her lip. "All right, maybe I don't want spies around right now. I'm thinking about someone to watch my back. A sellsword?" she said.

Lysander shrugged. "That's simple enough. There are lots of blades in the Deeps, and if the gold is good every one of them is for sale."

"For sale to my enemies as well," Duchess pointed out. "I don't want some thug who's as likely to stab me as to save me. I need someone with...a code of honor."

Lysander hooted laughter. "Honor in the Deeps is like virginity in a whorehouse: for enough money, everyone will claim it." He rubbed his neck. "Whoever you hire is going to be getting involved in some shady business, right? Nobody with honor would have helped you with the Eusbius job." It was said lightly enough, but she sensed sharpness beneath.

They climbed the stairs to the garret, which was, as usual, a mess: clothes stacked to knee-level and empty wine bottles scattered about. The hearth was cold, but in summer no fire was needed. Lysander lit some candles while Duchess picked her way through the mess and took a seat on his bed. They sat in silence for a long time. Duchess watched Lysander in the flickering candlelight. He did not look back. Finally she could take it no longer and her anger burst out of her in a rush.

"You and the girls don't usually drink at the Bier. Must have been a special occasion to make you forget our meeting." Lysander did not reply for a long moment, then he simply nodded, which just infuriated her all the more. "No worries though," she snapped, touching her bruised cheek. "Got into a bit of a scuffle, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle."

He said nothing.

She found herself babbling. "Worked out fine in the end. I've got a whole plan in motion already. The girl worked out fine — just has some problems with the guild, but I've already got something going there, too. Didn't need you at all, in the end, it turned out. So it was all for the best, really."

Lysander sighed and turned away.

"I guess I'll just have to take it that way from now on, then? That's just how things are now that..." Her voice caught and she felt tears forming. She was not going to cry in front of him, not now. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, trying to calm herself. "I didn't see Poor Gabe tonight, nor Pete," she said, casting about for a new line of attack. "Are they too good for the rest of us?"

"For us? No." His emphasis on us excluded her. "Gabe's got some client in the Foreign Quarter." Lysander's voice was flat, his expression blank. "A Ulari merchant who likes to tell Rodaasi boys what to do." A candle went out and he relit it from one of its brothers. "And Pete's dead."

She gaped. "Dead?" She almost laughed, it seemed so ridiculous. "Manly Pete? I thought...but he...there's no way. I mean, he was seeing a woman now. The one with the husband who's always away?"

"You know that wasn't trade, and a ganymede's got to work, doesn't he?" Lysander's expression was

unchanged. “Women are always safer, but most of them don’t feel the need for a ganymede, and most of the rest don’t have the silver. So when the man’s a bit shady...well, we all take our chances.” He stood and moved to the window. Lysander hadn’t survived the Deeps without being careful, but even so his kind lived a precarious existence. They went unprotected by the blackarms or even a brothel-keeper like Minette. The girls relied on Lysander’s guidance to keep them safe. Thanks to him none of them had died since...well, since she’d known him. Until now.

“We all told him this job was a bad idea, but he wouldn’t hear it,” he said reflectively, staring out into the Shallows. “Men who fuck women always think they’re invulnerable, like the world wouldn’t dare stand in their way, and Pete was no different.” Bitterness tinged his voice. “But he forgot that to anyone up the hill he’s just another ganymede.”

Duchess stood. “Wait...you all knew? Denys and Brenn and Squeak?” She stopped. Oh gods. “This just happened. That’s why you weren’t in the Deeps.”

He rounded on her. “Believe it or not, Duchess, the whole world does not revolve around you.” He kicked over a pile of clothing. “Anyway, I never thought you’d go running off into the Deeps alone like an idiot.”

“I didn’t just...I mean I...” She had no ready answer, because if truth be told, she had been an idiot. “How was I supposed to know? You’ve been so...since...”

He said nothing, but his hand went to his own cheek.

Guilt blew away her anger like a gale, and they sat in silence for a long time. “So he’s dead,” she managed at last. “And you just drank the night away?”

“I guess you think we should have wept or asked the radiants for a funeral pyre?” He kicked away a wooden cup and the roach that had been hiding beneath it scurried between the floorboards. “Pete’s not the first of us to die, just the first you know about.”

She blinked, uncertain how to feel about that revelation. “What happened to him?” she asked, unsure she wanted to know.

“Adam Whitehall happened to him,” Lysander replied dryly. The name was vaguely familiar, and she took a moment to refresh her memory. Then the tale came flooding back, of knives, blood and murdered boys, leaving her cold.

“He did it again,” she muttered, feeling weightless. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We’ve all got our secrets, haven’t we, Duchess?” His words were another blow in the belly, a strike far worse than any she’d gotten from that woman in the Deeps. She struggled to breathe, tasting smoke in her mouth. Lysander made no move to comfort her and the cold silence went on forever. Despite herself, she felt the tears running down her cheeks.

“You know, don’t you?” she croaked. “I loved you from the first, that day in the alley in Market...do you remember?” Something in her tone must have caught him, for his eyes softened. He nodded wordlessly. “I loved you because you were this shining golden boy who listened and took me seriously and who never asked me for the truth. You let me have my lies.”

She put her face in her hands to hide her tears. She wanted to go to him, touch him, and wished he’d do the same, but neither of them moved. She took a shuddering breath. “Don’t ever think I’ve forgotten what I did to you. In my dreams I hear the Brutes and their voices and I wake up thinking I’ll never see you again. And then I do see you again but it’s different. Because of me.” She looked up at him nakedly, certain he could see her tears but no longer caring. “I don’t know how to make it right, Lysander. Maybe I can’t make it right because...you called me Silk and Steel, but I don’t think either of us really understood

just how cold and hard that part of me is. Because no matter how much I love you, no matter how much I regret it” — she took a breath — “I think I would do it again.”

He watched her for a long moment, candlelight shining in the blue pools of his eyes. “Honesty at last,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

“You were right...I have kept secrets, and you do deserve better than that.” She wiped warm wetness from her eyes and took a breath to steady herself. Everything the old baker had ever taught her, every instinct he’d instilled, rose up as if to choke her. She swallowed it down. “My name’s not Duchess, but I guess you knew that.” He was silent, watching her. “Everything I told you about how I came to live with Noam was a lie, too. The old man pounded it into my head to never, ever tell anyone the real story. Gods, I spent so much time being Duchess that for a long time I forgot I was anything else.” She clenched her hands into fists, watching her knuckles turn red, then white. “Before I came to the bakery I lived in Scholars District. With my sister, and my brother, and my father. He was a scholar himself. His name was...Marcus Kell.”

Lysander’s eyes went wide. “*The Marcus Kell? The War-of-the-Quills Marcus Kell?*” He sat back, mouth dropping open.

She nodded, trembling. “He had three children, and I’m the youngest. My name — my real name — is Marina.” She paused. “I know this must sound strange, but...” She trailed off as a rueful grin split his face. “What?”

“Actually, it explains a lot,” he admitted. “Of course I knew from the day we met that you were no cobbler’s daughter. How many of their like are friends with Minette?” He sat beside her. “And all that history you knew, emperors and empresses and laws passed a hundred years ago...sometimes it was like talking to a scholar!” He laughed gently. “I figured you for some noble’s by-blow that he hid in the Shallows from a jealous wife. I never imagined...” He shook his head. “Marcus Kell’s daughter. Mayu’s mercy. How did you wind up in Noam’s bakery?”

And so she told him. The night of the fire, and the hurried trip with Nurse Gelda to the Shallows and Noam’s bakery. The years of silence as she learned to be not Marina Kell but Duchess. The mysterious letter and the coin. The realization, spurred by Minette, that Marcus Kell had not been killed by the Deeps gangs he’d unleashed on the city but by his own hand. And, finally, about the whispers of the old Domae woman on the Godswalk of He Who Devours and that moment in the tunnels when she was certain He’d found her. By the time she was finished the candles had burned down to pools of wax, and the windows were pale with dawn.

Lysander was silent through it all, drinking in every detail and not interrupting with questions. When she was done he sat quietly for a long time, looking into the empty hearth as though seeing her tale there, played out by mummers only he could see. Finally, he smiled. “We’ve stayed up all night before, but this is the first time I didn’t greet the morning by vomiting on my shoes.” Duchess giggled and threw her arms around him, and when he returned the embrace her laughter dissolved into tears.

“In a way, I fell in love with you that day,” he said, against her hair. A tremor ran through his body. “With all of you. The part of you that left me on the stairs included.” He gently disengaged from her grasp. “And now I know Steel better, and Duchess too. And now Marina, I guess.” He smiled. “You have more names than Iris Davari, and that woman’s been married and widowed twice.” She giggled again, feeling as though a great weight had fallen away, and her heart sang. He did know her better, and if that meant understanding certain hard truths, so be it. They were not children any more, and she was not his keeper, nor was he hers.

They sat in companionable silence for a long time, while dawn stole in through the dirty windows

and the Shallows came to life outside. “Your father’s city house burned,” he said, out of nowhere, “but you said he had a country estate, right?”

She nodded, uncertain where this question had come from. “We spent every summer there, regular as fog. It was called...the Freehold, I think.” How long had it been since she’d thought of that?

“Well, what happened to the Freehold? That never burned, and if it’s still there, it should belong to you now.” He looked sheepish, evidently realizing what he had implied. “I mean, you never heard anything about your brother or sister claiming it...”

She waved away the apology, considering. She hadn’t thought of her father’s wealth in a long time, much less considered the matter of inheritance. Truth be told, with two older siblings she’d never thought to inherit much. Even if Justin or Marguerite were still alive, she’d heard nothing about a long-lost Kell claiming the country estate. “I guess it would be mine. I wouldn’t even know how to begin asking about it.” But that wasn’t quite true, was it? The very night she’d stolen that dagger she had a dream about Ahmed. He had always looked faintly familiar, but only then did she recall he had been one of her father’s servants. Ahmed had not been there the night of the fire. He never accompanied the family into the city. He would either know what had happened to her father’s country house or could point her to someone who did.

Lysander was watching her. “You’re thinking about something,” he accused.

She laughed ruefully. “Guilty.” So strange. Only this morning she’d been so certain she’d left all of these memories behind when she had taken up the mantle of Duchess and the Grey. Yet not ten bells later the old ache was back, and with it musings of what might have been, and what might yet be. She shook her head. “But let’s talk about inheritances later...I’m starving.”

His lips curved into a grin. “Well, you can start spending all that money by buying me some breakfast,” he told her. She smiled at his smile, feeling better than she had in weeks. “Assuming there’s anything clean to wear in all this.” After some searching, they found a shirt and pants that weren’t too badly stained, and then they were off to see what the market had to offer.

The Shallows were busy under the gray dawn sky, and they had to wait while a crowd of beggars passed on their way to Bell Plaza. It was never wise to walk amongst a crowd of beggars, half of whom were expert pickpockets and the other half amateurs who were willing to try anyway.

“Last night, at the Bier, we were talking about sellswords...” she ventured, eager to talk about anything other than House Kell.

“Oh great gods...are you still on about that?” he laughed. “You’re looking for someone good with a blade who will have no qualms about working for a member of the Grey but one who also has a code of honor that will keep him from betraying you. That kind of man doesn’t just climb out of the harbor.”

“Not out of the harbor, no,” she replied quietly.

Lysander knew that tone, and he moved to block her way, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’re not thinking...”

“Thinking what?” Innocence never sat well on her face, but she thought she’d try it anyway.

“All those questions about Pollux...” He shook his head. “You truly are mad. You realize that, right?”

“But just think of it!” She said, leaping from innocence to excitement. “All the honor and fighting ability of a White, combined with the willingness to break the law when necessary...it’s perfect. You said yourself the court would like this problem to go away. In a way, I’d be doing the empress a favor.”

“I doubt Violana would see it that way. Or the imperial headsman, for that matter.” He cocked an ear at the sky as if listening. “What’s that? Yes, I know. You’re absolutely right, no question.”

“What are you doing?”

“Listening to the gods. They’re telling me you’re crazy and that I should hide in the Deeps until you come to your senses.” He stared at her with mock severity until her giggles got to him and they both collapsed with laughter in the middle of the street drawing irritated looks from the usual morning parade of beggars, tradesmen, washerwomen and other Shallows folk who had to step around them. It seemed like years since they’d shared that kind of moment, and it was like gold.

Lysander recovered first, wiping tears from his eyes. “You are completely mad, but that’s what I like about you.” He pulled her to her feet. “So what’s this plan of yours, Madam Lunatic? The blackarms aren’t just going to hand you the keys to Pollux’s cell. How are you going to break him out?”

She grinned as they resumed their walk. “If the only way everyone will be satisfied is if he’s dead...well, I suppose I’ll have to kill him.”

Chapter Three

At the end of her rope

“Making friends as usual I see,” Tyford remarked as Duchess entered his “office.” She grimaced. Midwife Marna had helped her with the worst of the damage she’d received in the Deeps the previous day, but the bruises had nonetheless turned the most lovely shade of purple. “Funny how you’ve got that way with people.”

“I must be picking up your charm,” she replied, her voice echoing throughout the vast warehouse where Tyford made his home. One of many low-district properties the old thief owned, if she’d *fruned* it true, although she doubted any cargo had been stored here in years. These days Tyford ran a different sort of business.

“Glad to hear you’re picking up *something*.” He was short and bowlegged, with wispy gray hair and icy blue eyes. From the Nerrlands, she guessed upon first meeting him, a land far beyond the plains the Domae roamed, in an area most commonly referred to as the Southern Duchies. She’d remembered once asking her father if Rodaasi and Nerrish looked so much alike, what was the difference? “Eight hundred years of history,” he’d replied. “The Nerrish are clannish, not given to living in large groups...much like Rodaasi before we came to the great hill.”

“Oh, I’ve learned plenty from you, my dear Tyford,” she replied smartly, removing her cloak, folding it and placing it on a nearby table. “Most particularly, I’ve learned how much of my silver can vanish while you drink bad wine and make worse jokes.” Sniping aside, Duchess knew she had been lucky to retain the services of the crotchety old thief. By all accounts, Tyford had once been a highly ranked member of the Grey, but that had been years and years ago, before he’d scored a major coup by stealing a wagon full of newly minted florin right from under the noses of the Whites. After that he’d settled into a life of quiet retirement, investing in rental properties and selling the benefit of his experience to those with the silver to buy it. He hadn’t had a student in years, she knew. What she *didn’t* know was why he’d agreed to take her on.

“That so?” He led her into the warehouse proper, where their lessons were held. The place was laid out like a classroom for thieves. One wall was outfitted with ledges, loops and other handholds, and along another was a series of wooden cabinets, each with its own lock. There were forms like one might find in a tailor’s shop, dressed in cloaks and tunics and other apparel and hung with small metal bells. Ropes hung in a line from the rafters, five to ten feet between each, some knotted along their length, others hanging smoothly. He gestured to one. “Well, here’s a joke for you. Try getting up one of those in less time than it takes me to finish a cup of my bad wine and maybe I won’t make you climb them all.”

Unlikely, she thought, as she rubbed her hands together and began to climb. Tyford was as merciful as he was kindly, so she suspected that no matter how quickly she climbed, this rope would not be her last. She'd always considered herself fairly healthy — tough and light and quick on her feet — but these lessons had convinced her she was a pathetic weakling, a notion Tyford was always ready to reinforce. “You’ll spend a good deal of time on those ropes,” Tyford had assured her at their first meeting. “Or, more likely, falling from them, unless those chicken arms are stronger than they look.” He plucked disdainfully at her sleeve. “But it’s your silver.” It was, and she kept handing it over in return for their nighttime lessons.

“Up, up,” Tyford chided from below. “If you were climbing a wall in Garden you’d have already been caught by the Whites.” Duchess gritted her teeth and pulled herself up as quickly as she could.

It’s not like the man hadn’t warned her when they’d started.

“Don’t make any mistake about what we’re doing here, girlie,” he’d told her over a cup of wine. He’d poured none for her. “I’m not tutoring you in the harp or the bells. I’m teaching you how to *fucking steal*, and the blackarms take that kind of thing very seriously. Most thieves get caught, and when it happens to you, you don’t know me. You don’t know my name, or where I live, or why they’re asking about me.” His eyes narrowed. “The whole Highway knows you’ve been asking after me, just like they’ll know if you give me up to the ‘arms. The day that happens you lose your reputation and your cloak, and shortly after, your life. Get it?”

“Yes, yes,” Duchess had said impatiently. “I’m not new at this, you know.” At the time she’d worn the cloak for only a few weeks, but she disliked being threatened by this annoying man. “Do you want a mark?”

Tyford had snorted. “What part of *retired from the Grey* don’t you get, girl?” He laughed. “Your mark is probably worth shit to the Highway, and even less to me. Your coin’ll do. Now let’s get started before I change my mind.”

The long rope was made fast to a ceiling beam, and with a scream of muscles she pulled herself to the top. She swore that beam got farther from the warehouse floor every time she climbed to it. She’d barely had a chance to rest when Tyford called up from below, “Before you get too comfortable, *Contessa*, or whatever you call yourself, get back on that rope and swing over to the next.”

Not exactly a new exercise, but she’d only done it once or twice. It was also a nervous business, swinging around twenty-five feet from the floor, and Tyford didn’t put down straw to break a fall either. “You think the blackarms are going to spread out some nice silk pillows below that window you’re trying to climb to?” he’d asked when she suggested it. “You fall here and you just break something. Fall out there and you break something and wind up in jail.” All of Tyford’s warnings ended that way. “Then you fall and wind up in jail” or “Then you get backstabbed and wind up in jail” or “Then you trip over those pails you call feet and wind up in jail.” She lowered herself back to the rope — fortunately this one was knotted — and began to reach for the next.

Tyford had a thousand little exercises. One day she’d be picking her way across a carpet of crushed walnut shells, with Tyford mocking her each time he heard a crunch. (“Sometimes it’s so dark you won’t be able to see those gods-awful big feet of yours,” he remarked, cracking another walnut and tossing the shell in with the others. “Be thankful you’ve got a light for this.”) Or she might dangle by her arms from one of the climbing ropes, hanging on so long that her muscles trembled with exhaustion. (Tyford gave her discomfort no heed. “Some day, when some guard on patrol pauses longer than he should, it’ll be your endurance against his ability to chop off your fool head when you lose your grip.”) Or she might be edging her way along a narrow ledge he’d had built fifteen feet above the floor, with a cup of water in

each hand. (“I see one drop fall,” he warned her sternly from his comfortable perch below, “and I’ll send it back up to you on a stone.”)

Even the cranky old thief had to admit her lockpicking skills were passable, no surprise since she’d learned from Lysander. If the golden ganymede was adept, however, Tyford was a master, handling the wires and other tools as if they were parts of his own body. He had promised to teach her about unusual locks as well, such as those that required more than one key, or locks that opened only when a certain combination of panels, levers and knobs were turned or twisted. Puzzle locks, he called them, but he’d said those were for later. “When you don’t handle those picks like meat-axes.”

“You know,” he remarked casually, as if she weren’t scrambling from rope to rope a heart-stopping height over a very hard floor, “posing as a servant to get inside a house is one of the oldest tricks in the world.” He was always engaging her in conversation in the middle of an exercise, trying to trip her up. Usually he was critiquing her work inside the manor house of Ivan Eusbius. Retired from the Grey he might be, but he’d heard the story. “You’re lucky that the house steward didn’t have the wits the gods gave a pile of manure or it never would have worked.”

“Yes, I was...very lucky,” she grunted, catching hold of the next rope. Years of working in Noam’s kitchens had firmed up her arms, but these exercises reminded her there were muscles she’d never known existed. She paused for a long moment, hands on one rope, feet lodged against the knot on the other, and when she was sure her grip was solid, she let go with her legs. The rope swung back and forth and the floor below spun as she scabbled for a hold with her feet, finally finding one.

Tyford grinned up at her, exposing a mouthful of crooked teeth. “So how’d you know where in the house you’d find the dagger?”

She hung until the rope began to settle. Tyford told her over and over again that thievery was all about patience and the wait, so she would wait. “I got some...inside information,” she replied without looking down. Best not to mention Brenn’s name here, and even if she had she doubted that Tyford would be impressed that most of her inside information came from a ganymede.

“Had a map, did you?”

She shifted, the rope digging into her legs and side. She still had marks from the last time she’d tried this. “Not exactly,” she managed, “but I knew the third floor was the place to look.”

“Anywhere on the third floor? How much time’d you waste going from room to room? You check them all?”

“No,” she snapped, reaching for the next rope. “Once I got up there I found the art gallery pretty easily. Big wooden doors with columns on either side are...” she snagged the cord and pulled it over “...hard to miss.”

He chuckled. “And all this wandering around didn’t bring any guards? Or did you just go invisible like Naria of the Dark?”

She swung over to the next rope, finding her hold more smoothly this time. “My accomplice,” she grunted between reaches, “distracted the guards.”

“Accomplice?” Tyford barked derisive laughter. “If I had a sou for every accomplice who’s turned on his boss, I wouldn’t need to dip into your purse.” Duchess said nothing, concentrating on reaching the far wall one rope-grip at a time. “Lesson number one,” Tyford proclaimed from the ground, “a distraction shouldn’t be able to talk. You throw a stone to make a guard look the other way, or roll some marbles, loose a mouse, but nothing that can turn you in.”

She swung to the next rope, irked at his smug certainty but refusing to show it. The old thief had to

know what he was talking about, or else he wouldn't be an *old* thief. Besides, she couldn't risk offending him, not today. Her offhand intention to make Pollux dead was easier said than done. She'd no idea of how she might pull it off. Hells, first she'd actually have to get to him. Takkis' hold in Temple was well guarded, and infiltrating it would be far more difficult than entering Eusbius' manor. Tyford would have forgotten more about getting into forbidden places than most people ever learned, and he must know *something* that could help her.

Finally, she reached the far wall and lowered herself slowly down the last rope to the floor. Duchess shook out arms that felt as loose and floppy as a stuffed toy's. "Then maybe *you* have some wisdom about how to get into places you don't belong. Since I did such a bad job and all."

Tyford squinted at her. "So you want a story, eh? Well, I'll give you one. You rest those chicken arms and I'll pour some wine." She blinked. The crotchety old man rarely offered her even a sip, but she followed him back to the table where he handed her a cup. "I'll give you one about a fine old break-out. Those are always more interesting."

She said nothing, trying to conceal her disappointment. She'd have preferred hearing about break-ins, but she dared not press him lest he forget the story and set her to climbing again. Maybe she'd get something useful out of him anyway.

Tyford settled back into a chair. "The moral of this story comes at the beginning: *always know who the fuck you're working for*. And I'm not talking about just names either. You have to know who they are, what they are, and what they want. Anyone who hires a thief's a liar to the core, and most anyone in this city's playing at least two games at once.

"I took the job because I was young and stupid. Like you, come to think of it. A pretty simple bit of business: steal some jewels belonging to a certain lady while she and her lord were at some party up the hill. Simple it wasn't, though. The man that hired me was on the council, you see, and a friend to the sheriff of the district — his name was Bellis or Bellin or some such — and he'd decided to help out his friend by setting up a thief for him to catch in the act. Bellis-or-Bellin gets a nice collar, and the friend gets a boost for putting him in his job. Everyone makes out.

"Except no one *knew* anyone. The friend didn't know Bellis wouldn't just be happy with a collar. Bellis didn't know that catching me was just too easy and that his friend had set up the whole damned thing. And when I took the job I didn't know that these two were going to bungle the whole business and leave me caught in the middle."

Duchess drank some wine and grimaced. She had been right; it was awful. "And I suppose that's how you ended up getting backstabbed and wound up in jail?"

He snorted, but didn't dignify the question with a response. "Bellis turns me over to the Whites, who plant me in the imperial dungeons to wait for the inquisitor to get to me. This friend on the council nearly pisses himself, because when they hang me up by the thumbs the first name I'll give them is his. Later I found out that he had something on the inquisitor, and he trades his silence for a delay in putting me to the question. None of that got me out of that cell, mind you, so there I sit. My hair's full of lice and my stomach's in knots because every godsdamned morning I wake up thinking that's the day they put me to the question and *next's* the one they hang me. That goes on for weeks." He drank from his cup. "Either my employer couldn't figure out how to spring me, or he decided the best thing was to just leave me to rot. I didn't know any of this, of course, but after a few weeks I realized the only one getting me out of that cell was *me*."

"As you can expect, I was thinking about escape before they'd even closed the door. Getting out of the cell was the easy part, but how to get out of the dungeon once I did? The door to the whole area

was locked from the outside and guarded day and night not by some damn fool blackarm but a White. You don't want to mess with a White and that's for sure.

"I sat in that cell long enough to see that there were about two jailors for every prisoner, and there were a *lot* of prisoners. Back in those days — just like today, I'll warrant — when a man pleased someone important at court he'd be given a job working for the empress. The high-born became maids or clerks or secretaries, but the low-born...well, they couldn't be seen around the palace no matter what favor they'd won, but they could be *under* it. So they became jailors.

"Course, the problem with all these jailors was that most of them didn't know who all the prisoners were, and the Whites who guarded the door didn't know who all the jailors were. And they were coming and going at all hours. So I watched and waited, and when I learned when the shifts changed, I made my move." Tyford laughed again and poured himself some more wine. "I tickled open the cell door — any thief worth spit can hide a lockpick on him — and when one shift of jailors was on the way out, I just walked right on out with them."

Her brow furrowed. "You just...in disguise?"

"Nope. Just walked out." He laughed, obviously relishing her surprise. "Girl, going unseen isn't just about knowing where the shadows are and sticking to 'em. Sometimes if you *look* like you're supposed to be doing whatever it is you're doing, people won't even give you a second glance."

"But what about your clothes! You couldn't have looked like a jailor!"

"The imperial quartermaster was slow in getting the jailors their livery, maybe because there were so godsdamned many of 'em, so some of them were dressed like either one of us right now. I just turned my shirt inside out to hide the worst of the dirt, but most of them were just as dirty as the prisoners anyway." He swirled his wine. "It's all about knowing what people expect, girl."

She suddenly remembered that spring day in Temple, when she'd been looking for information about Eusbius. The old Domae woman had caught her attention with her certainty, the powerful, visceral force of her belief. She acted like any other priest, and Duchess, in turn, had treated her like one. She thought of the thousand gods at the center of the walk and the sweetness of cake on her lips. A smile blossomed on her face, and Tyford seemed to take that as appreciation for his story.

"Besides, escaping prisoners don't line up with their jailors to file past a guard, right? So when none of the others raised the alarm, neither did the White at the door." He pointed his cup at her. "A good thief has the right skills, girl, but a great one has the right skills and the right attitude. Learn that and you might someday be worth the time I'm spending." He gulped down the rest of his wine.

He'd given her more than one lesson, and she'd gotten her money's worth today. There was one piece of his story still missing, though. "So what did you do about your employer? The one who left you to rot?"

Tyford's mouth twisted. "That was back when I still wore the cloak, remember, so I couldn't let it go by unanswered. I would have lost standing on the Highway, and for someone in my trade that could be death." He nodded, looking grimly into the distance. "I showed that bastard Tyford wasn't one to fuck with, and made sure everyone on the Grey knew it.

"Though *there's* something interesting," he went on, gesturing for the start of her next lesson. "Me telling that story seems to have gotten us off the subject we'd been on. Half the Highway seems to know everything about how you got *into* Eusbius' manor, but no one's talking about how you got *out*." He gave her a shrewd glance. "Funny that you still haven't mentioned that."

"Yes," she replied, savoring his evident, burning curiosity. "I'm funny like that."

* * *

For a moment, she thought she was dead.

Duchess was just approaching the wooden stairs to her apartment, her mind buzzing with plans concerning both Jana and the fallen White, when the big man lurched out of hiding, nearly upon her. She froze in her tracks, only barely stifling the startled shriek that bubbled up in her throat. Her hand twitched toward her dagger, but just in time she saw the red cap and held back. She hadn't seen Antony since that fearful day she'd met with Uncle Cornelius, but there was no mistaking that chin scar and those huge hands. She eased her hand slowly away from the weapon. Draw steel before the second-in-command of the Red and she'd dance with Mayu within a heartbeat. She composed what she hoped was a politely attentive look.

"Antony," she said, after her heart had resumed its normal pace. "How good to see you again. What does the Uncle need from me?" She even sounded calm, thank the gods.

Antony swept his cap from his head with a massive paw and bowed slightly, glancing about as if afraid of prying eyes. "I am here of my own volition," he said diffidently, "and my appearance should not in any way imply a connection to anyone I may work for." He frowned, as if coming to the end of a script and uncertain of his next line. He coughed into his hat and placed it back on his head. "I wanted to talk to you," he said finally.

Strange and stranger, she thought. She couldn't imagine what business Antony would have with her that did not involve Uncle Cornelius. "Why don't you come in and we'll talk in private?" He nodded and she led the way up the stairs, which creaked under his weight. As she was unlocking her door she glanced at the red hand painted on the sill. Everyone in the Shallows knew that mark signified protection by the band of thugs and murderers known as the Red. She hoped it also meant protection *from* the Red.

Antony closed the door behind them and scanned the room as if expecting an ambush. Here was a man with fighting instincts, and she wondered briefly if anything she could do might wean him away from the Uncle and into her service. Then she regained her sanity and instead lit a candle and gestured for him to sit.

"I was about to have a cup of wine. Would you care to join me?" He nodded briefly, taking a chair on one side of the splintered wooden table she'd inherited with the apartment. The chair creaked beneath his weight, but held. She lit a few more candles and brought out two wooden cups and a clay flagon of wine. Not an impressive vintage, but she hadn't expected to host a redcap that day. And it was still *vastly* better than the cup she'd shared with Tyford. Antony seemed to have no complaints, and as he drank she settled on a bench opposite him.

"What can I do for you?" She sipped calmly, as if she had such visitors every day.

Antony toyed with his cup, absurdly tiny in his massive hands, looking desperately uncomfortable. "I, uh...my Uncle said that you might be able to do something for me."

"Any friend of the Uncle's is a friend of mine." It seemed the safest thing to say.

"Do you know Julius?" he asked, looking anywhere but at her. She took another drink to buy time for thought. There was a man named Julius who ran the dice game in the back rooms at the *Grieving Bier*, and she seemed to recall hearing he was Grey, although she had never spoken to him. "He has something of mine and I need it back," Antony went on. He finished his wine in a single swallow and thumped his cup onto the table. "I need it back *now*."

She tried to hide her surprise. Antony was clearly upset with Julius, which could only mean that Julius was being uncooperative. She could not imagine why any man would be so foolish as to refuse a high-

ranked member of the Red. “What is this thing?” she asked warily.

“Rosamile’s ring. She’s my fiance, Rosamile is, and I’d finally saved up for the perfect ring. Gold with a black stone, engraved with her name on the inside. Rosamile’s not lettered but she can read her own name, and there it was.” He fiddled with the frayed cuff of his tunic. “It was my own fault. We were celebrating, me and some of my boys, and they’d convinced me to try my luck before Rosamile had me by the purse-strings.” He smiled sheepishly and Duchess blinked; Antony’s face was not made for such expressions. “I started out winning again and again, and then something just changed.” He sighed and his fists tightened until his joints popped. “A dozen rolls later, I was out of sou and well...the boys were looking at me and the ring was in my pocket, so...” Duchess could fill in the rest. Julius was on the Grey, and when Antony entered the game, he was tacitly submitting to the rules. For a member of the Red to pick a fight with the Grey over an honestly incurred gambling debt...it was a tricky situation, not unlike the one the Uncle himself had been in over that dagger. The Grey had fairly stolen the thing, but when the baron had demanded his friend the Uncle get it back, Cornelius had found himself caught between colors. Odd that the Uncle’s lieutenant should so quickly find himself in the same straits.

She knew little about the Color War — even Minette refused to say much about it — but from what little she’d heard the conflict had begun over a dispute about the respective rights of the Red and the Grey. That fight had ended over fifteen years ago, but even today any member of the Grey who felt that the Red had overstepped could “call the color” and summon his cloaked brothers (and sisters) to his aid. Such a conflict would result in a loss of coin and life, and could possibly invite imperial attention, which would be disastrous, so the members of both sides took pains not to tread on any toes. That explained why Julius dared to tweak the nose of a redcap, and why it was dangerous for her to intervene. “I’m sorry to hear of your...misfortune,” Duchess said carefully. “I could find a jeweler who could quietly make you another ring...”

Antony shook his head. “I need *that* ring and no other. Rosamile was with me when we took it to be engraved. She’ll know the difference. Besides, Julius has been blabbing about how he’s gotten the better of me, so sooner or later she’ll hear about it.”

Duchess was amused that Antony was so fearful of his fiance, and more so that he seemed certain Duchess could save him from her wrath. “Julius still has this ring?” she said, refilling his cup.

He nodded curtly. “He won’t sell it back for any price. Normally I’d have cut his throat for him,” he said as if talking about the weather, “but there’s enough trouble in the Deeps without making more in the Shallows.”

“Trouble?” She wanted to buy time to think, and in any case Lysander would never forgive her for passing up the chance to winkle some news out of a redcap. “The Deeps gangs are always trouble, I’m sure.”

Antony shrugged, taking another drink. “They are, but now they’re working together...and bearing steel, although Mayu knows where they’re getting it. Haven’t seen anything like it since the damned War of the Quills.” Duchess perked up. The last time Deeps gangs had been armed and organized had been at the instigation of her father, in his struggle against the nobles. In the end the guildsmen he’d led had gotten representation on the imperial council, but the cost was his life and his House. It was disturbing that so similar a situation should arise. Conflicts between the Colors and weapons in the Deeps...too many cases of history repeating for comfort, it seemed.

“I could pay you,” he went on before she could pursue the topic. “I offered Julius twenty florin, more than the damned thing is worth. I could give that to you to give to him.” He looked at her, his expression of desperate hope so out of place on a face normally so blunt and threatening.

She thought quickly. If Julius were willing to anger a redcap over a gambling debt he was unlikely to be open to persuasion from her. She was also reluctant to risk her fledgling status on the Grey by developing a reputation for involving herself in petty disputes. Yet did she dare risk Antony's ire, or the Uncle's, by refusing? She was still living on the Uncle's florin in a rent-free apartment, a fact she was sure had not been lost on him. On the other side of the coin, this was a chance to get into Antony's good graces, an investment that might prove as profitable as her dealings with Jana. Besides, gold was gold, and if she could somehow get back that ring for less than twenty florin she could pocket the difference. That decided her. "Antony, my friend," she said soothingly, "put your worries aside. The ring will be yours."

* * *

She sat up a long time after Antony had taken his leave looking at the small pile of florin he'd left. Three plans, two promises, and not one notion of how to make good on any of them. Commitments to Jana and Antony, not to mention her little scheme about Pollux...perhaps Lysander was right. Perhaps she truly was mad.

Noam had once said the only way to eat a flock of sheep was one bite at a time, and since Antony had put gold on the table, she'd make recovering Rosamile's ring the first item on the menu. Although Julius was no redcap, he might still be dangerous. She wasn't going to brace him without further information, and she knew of at least one person who could tell her all that she'd need.

And, now that she thought on it, not just about Julius.

Chapter Four

A thorn amongst roses

Despite the name, the Common Gardens were anything but. Only those with sufficient title or wealth could obtain space there in Temple District, and it was mostly given over to petty nobility — those with an interest in cultivating plants and flowers but without a large enough estate to support a garden of their own. That morning, Duchess found the wide stone pathways thronged with the wives of the well born, moving sedately and directing attendants in weeding, watering, and pruning. The silk and satin of their gowns were no less colorful than the floral blooms of yellow, red, and orange.

The gardens were enclosed by thick stone walls and a glass ceiling, which kept the area warm in winter and stifling at any other time. Despite the airways created by panels propped open here and there, Duchess mopped sweat from her brow, but Minette seemed untroubled by something as unseemly as perspiration. In no case would someone from the Shallows, particularly one who owned and operated a brothel, be permitted a plot in the Common Gardens.

Nevertheless, Minette had a plot in the Common Gardens.

She moved among her botanical charges even now, with Duchess trailing behind, carrying a basket half-filled with an explosion of blossoms in white, red and pink. Yarrow, Minette said they were called, and Duchess thought them quite pretty. She remembered them from the garden on her father's estate, and that they had been Marguerite's favorites.

"So when do I find out what's got you practically *bursting* with questions?" Minette murmured, bringing Duchess out of her memories. The elegant woman was taller than Duchess and far more full-figured, yet she moved amongst the flowers with a comfortable agility. Her freshly powdered face was a stark white in the rare Rodaasi sun, particularly against the black ringlets of her hair and her even blacker eyes.

"Don't tell me I drew you away from a good song," Duchess replied archly. A gentleman had been serenading the Vermillion's mistress when Duchess had shown up earlier that day, desperate for a meeting. Her request had been granted in exchange for assistance in gathering flowers, hence the trip to the gardens.

"Anything that's got you in such a state is worth missing a verse or two. In any case, Marvis had just about used up his time."

Duchess gave her a look. "His time? Don't tell me he's a *client*?"

Minette lifted an elegantly arched eyebrow. "Don't look so surprised, my dear. Not every man who passes my parlor ends up between the sheets. Some want only to be held, others simply want someone

who will listen to their woes. Marvis, for example, loves the thrill of the hunt but the prey holds no special interest for him. He loves the idea of love. He comes to the Vermillion not to be fulfilled but to be tantalized: eyes met, words whispered, a stolen touch. The game of romance and not its reality, in so many words. He's not unusual. Some of my visitors are happy to pay me simply for the pleasure of my company. Which is more than I can say for others." She glanced at Duchess significantly as she fingered a cluster of orange daylilies.

Duchess reflected that since her own elevation to the Grey Minette had certainly been more forward. She threw up her hands in surrender. "I don't come empty-handed. You have one of my marks in your desk, and I have another in my pocket for you if you'll answer two questions."

"Only two? Well, don't hold back. Waiting makes my mouth dry and there's no wine to be had in the Common Gardens."

"No wine? Did the empire lose a war?"

Minette smiled. "Only with the gods. The radiants felt that spirits served here might induce the wives to do something presumptuous. Of course, some would say this city could use more presumption from its wives. Now, your questions?"

Duchess shifted the basket to her other arm. "I've been hearing about someone named Julius, who hangs about the *Grieving Bier*." She fiddled with the yarrow, hoping Minette would fill in the rest, but as usual the woman was too wise to fall for such maneuvers, damn her. "He runs a dice game there. Does he own the *Bier*?"

Minette laughed. "Good gods, no. He's made arrangements with the owner to host his game — one of several he owns — but that's all. Honestly, I can't imagine how a man as unpleasant as Julius managed to make even that small a deal." She produced a small pair of garden shears and cut daintily at the daylilies. Duchess imagined that Minette knew quite well how the deal was struck, but she doubted the older woman would tell her for only one mark. "Apparently, there's been some recent nastiness between him and the Red."

So Minette already knew about Rosamile's ring. Duchess resolved that one day she would surprise the wily woman. "I've heard lots of nasty things about Julius." She'd done some *fruning* since her talk with Antony.

"Julius wouldn't have it any other way," Minette said, handing her some of the daylilies. "Even with *fruning* the trick is determining what's true and what isn't." She smiled enigmatically, and Duchess was amazed that Minette had made even circuitous reference to the Highway. Most of the Shallows believed the madam was Grey, but to Duchess' knowledge she'd never confirmed that belief...or denied it.

"I heard he and Pete the Pearl had some sort of falling out over one of those games." Pete owned the largest circle of floating games in Rodaas, which moved like some traveling circus amongst the winesinks and alehouses of the lower city. In addition, he was rumored to own a great deal of property in nearly every district, and was reportedly in the highest echelons of the Grey, if that fellowship *had* echelons. Duchess still wasn't clear on the hierarchy of the order she'd joined, although if the Uncle were to be believed, there was somewhere a secret leader of the Grey. Not that Minette would confirm or deny *that*, either.

Minette chuckled. "My dear, to have had a *falling out* with Pete, Julius would need to have first fallen *in*. However, there was some difficulty there that's really not important" — Duchess was sure it was — "but after some byplay Pete had unloaded a lesser game on a man desperate enough to take it."

"Then Julius is all bark?"

“Oh, he can bite, certainly. He’d not have his position if he were *utterly* toothless. But a man who brags about an entanglement with Antony is barking entirely too loudly.”

“Is he reasonable?”

Minette laughed. “My dear, in Rodaas *everyone* is reasonable...for the right price. You’ll simply have to find his.” She finished with the daylilies and placed the shears back in the basket. By that last comment, Duchess guessed Minette had heard about Antony’s visit to her apartment, but how much she really knew was an open question.

Duchess decided to change the subject. “Enough about Julius. I need a priest.”

Minette glanced at her inquisitively. “Have you gone devout on me, dear?”

Duchess shrugged. “They tell me a woman should always be concerned with the state of her soul. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve looked for answers on the Godswalk.” She could be enigmatic too.

“Any priest in particular?”

“A keeper.” Minette blinked, and Duchess felt a small satisfaction. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d actually seen Minette *surprised*. She’d try to remember it.

“I see,” Minette said, considering. “You seem quite hale, my dear. You aren’t planning to die any time soon, I trust?”

“I guess that’s up to Mayu. I’m just looking for a little professional assistance.” She decided to be a bit more forthcoming, lest Minette come to the conclusion she was planning to have someone assassinated. *That* kind of reputation she did not need. “I just want a quiet conversation with a keeper who is, ah...*flexible*. Do you know of such a man?”

“Flexibility is a virtue, is it not?” Minette surveyed her plot for more flowers. “As a matter of fact, I do. There is a keeper of no minor rank who frequents my own humble establishment and who, as it happens, has a fondness for Daphne.” Duchess was surprised. Although keepers were not by tradition celibate, few would care to be seen in an establishment like the Vermillion.

“Can he keep a secret?”

“That would depend on the secret, I suppose.” Minette moved on to a light blue cluster of phlox. “I happen to know that Jadis is of late rather occupied, having just risen to primacy in his order.” Minette crouched elegantly, clipping here and there. “His superior died recently, as did his chief rival for the title. In fact, with so *many* keepers interested in advancement it took some time to work out the succession. Jadis prevailed in the end, but the effort no doubt exhausted him financially...and otherwise. I imagine he’d be grateful for any chance to replenish his coffers.” She smiled and handed Duchess some phlox. “Is that flexible enough for you?”

“This is *First Keeper* Jadis?” Duchess hesitated. She’d hoped for someone less prominent, but then the more important the man the more help he’d be able to give. Of course, if Minette’s hints were to be believed the man had murdered his way to the top. Did she truly want to take up with someone like that? On the other hand, Antony and Uncle Cornelius had probably sent more men to Mayu than an imperial headsman, and that hadn’t stopped her from cutting a deal with them. “I’d like to meet him,” she said at last, putting away the flowers and handing Minette a triangular piece of silk embroidered with a *D*. “You’re going to die a rich woman, Minette.”

“I’d prefer to *live* as a rich woman,” Minette replied, tucking away the mark. She hunted amongst her flowers for other prospects. “You know, Jadis’ recent promotion came about quite suddenly. The death of his primary rival was unexpected for one so healthy.” Duchess’ ears perked up. Minette was in a mood for gossip, never a thing to miss.

Minette settled on a stone bench and gestured for Duchess to join her. “Jadis had been involved in a long-standing feud with Keeper Malachar for longer than anyone could remember. Once the First Keeper died and the opportunity to head the order came around, things just got worse. Keepers being keepers, the preferred method of contention was poison, and they went back and forth through porridge and wine and anything else that could possibly be consumed. Before long it got so that neither would eat nor drink anything he hadn’t either prepared himself or seen prepared. Then it was envenomed clothing and other personal items. After a few temple servants unaccountably died after handling laundry or changing bed sheets, the other keepers decided that things had gone far enough, and they sent a message, subtle but unmistakable, that the issue had to be either settled or dropped.”

“And that ended it?” Duchess asked.

“Of course not.” Minette gestured to a water boy, who rushed over with a dripping bladder and filled a wooden cup. “It did force both of them to be more circumspect, and in the bargain ruined a good deal of gossip from Temple District. Still, the best was yet to come.” She sipped thoughtfully and offered Duchess the cup. “You’ve heard of the Feast of the Many?”

Duchess took a drink. The Feast was not celebrated by the common folk, but amongst the well born it was a yearly ritual. Held just before the harvest, the Feast of the Many was a great banquet at which the food was provided not by the host, but by the guests themselves. Each attendee was required to bring a dish already prepared, to share with the other diners. The original intent was to show humility to the gods, and to curry favor in hopes of a good harvest, but as with all things noble, it became another chance to outshine one’s peers. Duchess remembered the Feasts her father had hosted, and the wide array of mouth-watering food the guests had brought. She had only been allowed to attend the opening of the meal, and the next morning Justin and Marguerite, who were allowed to stay up later, teased her with tales of what she’d missed. Well, Justin teased. Marguerite had always been too proper for such antics. “I know of it,” she replied, fighting back the sudden wave of nostalgia.

“The keepers always attend, and figures like Jadis and Malachar, both candidates for First Keeper, were of course invited to the most popular events. So it was last autumn, when Lady Vorloi hosted the Feast at her city estate. Very few can turn down one of her invitations, and so there was no question that either Jadis or Malachar would decline.” Minette smiled obscurely. “She’s a saucy one, our Lady Vorloi, and not one to be trifled with.” Duchess waited to see if Minette would elaborate, but of course she didn’t. “In any case, everyone who attended that dinner was wild to see how Malachar and Jadis would behave. After all, the two had spent much of the last year avoiding eating or drinking anything the other had prepared, and at the Feast it’s bad form to refuse to sample anything. You don’t have to eat much, mind you, but it’s expected that each guest try at least a nibble of every dish. To do otherwise is to insult both the host and the person whose dish was refused.”

“So Malachar ate the food Jadis brought?”

“Hardly.” Minette sipped more water and rested the half-empty cup on her knee. “All through dinner Malachar kept a wary eye on his rival, making certain to eat only what Jadis did, which of course was everything. Jadis seemed quite unfazed by the scrutiny, and dined as if nothing were amiss. He even ate the food Malachar had brought. He himself had brought a dish that not only looked delicious but was exotic as well, a Domae delicacy known as *yaggat*. Some kind of fermented goat’s milk, I’m told, thickened with cheese and sweetened with honey and almond paste. The guests were wild to try it. Malachar, of course, held off as long as he could, attempting to turn aside attention with clever conversation, but all eyes were on him. He fretted and fidgeted and sweated, but when the *yaggat* was finally set before him he put down his spoon, red-faced. He held his life in higher regard than his reputation, you see.” She

shrugged. “In the end he lost both. Two days later, he died of a bad belly.”

Duchess was lost. “But how could that be?”

Minette produced a fan and fluttered it before her powdered face. “How, indeed? Half the nobility in Rodaas had eaten that *yaggat*, even Jadis himself, and none of *them* wound up dead, and of course Malachar never even tasted the stuff. It was quite the mystery, and finally even the most suspicious had to allow that perhaps Malachar had simply succumbed to some mysterious illness.” She smiled enigmatically and examined her nails. “You know, I had a conversation with Midwife Marna about that, later, and she knew of any number of poisons that could have caused Malachar’s illness. She really is a wonder when it comes to that sort of thing, and it’s a pity the keepers hadn’t called her to attend Malachar, because she might have saved him. Not only had she heard of such poisons but of their remedies as well. Some, she claimed, were often mixed with milk before they are administered to the patient. It helps the body absorb the remedy more quickly.” She left off her fanning and looked at Duchess, her face a mask.

Duchess felt a dawning realization. “So Jadis put the remedy in the *yaggat*, and the poison was in...great gods. He poisoned everyone at that table, including himself, and then put the remedy in the one dish he knew Malachar wouldn’t eat.”

“Did he?” Minette said, all innocence. “That would be quite a risk. Still,” she mused, draining her cup and setting it on the bench between them, “very few would ever suspect a man would risk killing forty-odd nobles and other noteworthies, himself among them, just to get at one enemy. After all, remedies don’t always work as promised, and someone might have turned up a nose at a Domae dish, tradition be damned.”

This gossip, juicier than most, was disturbing, and Duchess wondered why Minette had chosen this moment to share it. Since the day Minette had revealed what she knew about that mysterious *P* coin, Duchess had been well aware the wily madam was playing a long game against an unknown opponent. Minette had hinted that Duchess was a piece in that game, and was investing early. “So you’re saying Jadis is dangerous?” she asked at last.

Minette sighed. “Jadis plays two games of tiles at once, and knows how to use an enemy’s expectations against him...or her.” She rose, clearly done with her story. “But I will arrange your meeting. Jadis will turn up at the Vermillion within a day or two, no doubt, and when he does I’ll send for you. I assume you’ll make yourself easy to find. Not *too* easy, though. You should probably wait until the good keeper is finished with his recreations. I should think you wouldn’t want to interrupt. I find men are at their most pliable immediately after their appetites have been sated.” She tucked her fan away and plucked a flower from the basket Duchess held. “Besides,” she said turning the blossom in her hands, “Daphne does so love her work.”

“Shedding,” Duchess muttered, “is something a dog does.”

Jana nodded. “The word is different in my tongue, but here it is the same as when an animal loses fur. That is confusing, but...” She shrugged.

“When in Rodaas, do as the *edunae* do?” Duchess smiled. In truth, she was feeling a bit out of her element. When she’d asked Jana to show her the basics of weaving, she had done so assuming that it was something she herself could quickly pick up. She had gone from being a scholar’s daughter to a baker’s assistant easily enough, hadn’t she? Surely moving to a weaver’s apprentice would be no more difficult.

She could not have been more wrong. There were several different types of loom, she learned, although Jana possessed only two. The back-strap loom was a four-foot-long network of strings, called heddles,

which ran between two horizontal bars, one of which had to be strapped to the body. The weaver used her body weight to pull the straps taught, leaning back as she drew the raw wool through the heddles. “But since the cloth I make with this is not large, I can make only enough for small things like belts and bags,” Jana had explained, demonstrating.

The other type of loom was called a Domae word that Duchess could not even begin to pronounce, but in Rodaas was known by the outrageous name of a *warp-weighted loom*, a more elaborate device of thick upright beams, narrower horizontal sticks and a device that resembled a rolling pin. “The warp-beam,” Jana explained when Duchess pointed that out. This device, too heavy to easily carry, was set at a slant against a wall, with the threads hanging down from the top, near the not-rolling pin. The fabric was woven from the top down, and the weaver could move around the device as necessary. “With this, I can make enough cloth for shirts or trousers, cloaks and dresses.”

And things only got more complicated from there. Weaving, Jana explained, consisted of three basic steps: shedding, picking and battening. This was true regardless of the type of loom one used, and of course each process looked different depending on the loom. Then there were motions to let off and to take up, as well as various stops, like warp stop and weft stop. The tools had strange names like *pirn* and *shuttle* and *picking stick* and seemed far less comfortable to her hand than the rolling pins and wooden spoons she’d used in Noam’s bakery. Jana, naturally, handled these devices as if she were born with them.

Finally, Duchess threw up her hands. “It would be easier just to learn magic and conjure up the stuff!” She gestured to the piles of cloth Jana had produced.

The Domae flashed a rare grin. “This is easy. Soon I will show you how to felt.” Duchess groaned.

They’d been at it most of the afternoon, so when Jana proposed to make tea Duchess eagerly took her up on it. She was amazed by the way Jana explained the complexities of weaving so easily in a language not her own, and said as much. “It is not something most of my camp learned,” she explained, pouring steaming brown liquid into cups. “My aunt insisted that I be fluent, and she is not a woman who understands *no*.”

Duchess grinned and took up her cup; the contents smelled divine. “I’ve known a few women like that myself,” she said, thinking of Minette. She sipped and tasted mint and perhaps also orange. “Did your aunt raise you?”

Jana nodded, taking a seat on the other side of the low table. “My mother died when I was very young, from a fever.” She gave Duchess an appraising look. “Something I have said has made you sad.”

Duchess tried to pass it off — she’d never even discussed this with Lysander — but something about Jana’s manner made such conversation almost natural. “My mother died, too, in childbirth. I never knew her.” Her father rarely spoke of it, and she had followed suit.

Jana nodded again, sympathy clear in her liquid brown eyes. “I was only three years old then, so I do not remember her well. My aunt Adelpa took over and saw to me.” She sipped neatly from her cup. “Did you have an aunt to raise you?”

Duchess hesitated. Although she’d already revealed her real name and history to Lysander, Noam’s training was hard to gainsay. Still, she found herself strangely unwilling to lie to her new business partner. Finally, she said, “My father didn’t have any sisters, so he raised me himself. Me and my brother and sister.” She felt suddenly shaky, and took another sip of tea. “I haven’t seen them in a long time...oh, eight years or more.”

“They did not grow up in a baker’s house, like you.” It was not a question.

She shook her head. “There was a fire when I was just a girl, and my father died when my house

burned. Then Noam the baker took me in, but my brother and sister vanished.” There was more to that story, but she didn’t want to go into the *who* and *where* and *why* as she had with Lysander. It was still hard to speak of openly.

Jana seemed to sense this. “You must miss them very much,” she said quietly. “My own brother and I did not always get along but we share something no one else can. We have not seen each other since I left for the city, but I cannot imagine the world without him.” She held her cup in both hands. “Do you think of them often? Your own family?”

Duchess shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t remember them much. My father, mostly. He was a — ” she almost said *scholar* and caught herself at the last moment “ — very smart, and he taught me to read and write and...well, all sorts of things.” She smiled sadly. “My brother Justin was always getting into trouble, *that* much I recall. He used to steal food from the kitchen and play pranks around the house, things like that. He never listened to anything Father said.”

Jana smiled. “Boys are like that, are they not? If they are not breaking some rule they are not alive.” Her smile turned playful. “I think that is true of men as well.”

Duchess giggled, unable to help herself. “But then they grow up to *make* the rules! It’s like some joke from the gods.”

“Only here,” Jana pointed out without rancor. “Among the Domae women are different. No man made rules for Adelpa.”

“Sounds like a woman I should meet,” Duchess observed, grinning. Jana did not return the smile, looking pensive.

“Adelpa...died a few summers ago,” she said, looking away for a moment. “I came here some two years after.” She tilted her head, appraising Duchess. “You are strong, more like a Domae woman than *edunae*...Rodaasi. Was your sister the same?”

Duchess did not miss the change of subject. “Great gods, no,” Duchess looked upward, remembering. “Marguerite was a proper lady of the empire. She knew how to dress and sing and not speak out of turn, the way a Rodaasi woman should. She did everything Father expected, except when she decided to begin following Anassa.” She smiled, remembering a heated argument at the dinner table about *that*. “She and Justin used to argue all the time, I remember, usually when he’d teased her about something or another. When she got flustered she’d fiddle with the collar of her dress, like this.” She demonstrated with her own shirt. “I can’t believe I remember that.” Reminiscing was somehow less painful in Jana’s presence. Perhaps there was even some good to be had from remembering old times.

She shook her head. She’d hadn’t been this open with anyone in *ages*. Perhaps it was finally unburdening herself to Lysander. Perhaps such things became easier the more one did them. Or perhaps it was Jana herself. She seemed guileless and without secrets.

That brought her up short. Something in the girl’s tale had bothered her ever since she’d first heard it. “Jana,” she said quietly, running a finger along the rim of her cup, “you’ve been weaving for awhile now...ever since you got to the city.” The other woman nodded. “What I’ve seen of your cloth is amazing, and it seems to me that you could make a living by selling it quietly to foreigners. Why bother applying for a license at all?”

Jana’s hands, which had been running over her own cup, suddenly stopped, and Duchess wondered if she’d presumed too much on her new friendship. The girl kept her head down for a long moment before replying. “I came to this city a stranger,” she said at last, her voice soft, almost melancholy. “I knew the language, yes, but I did not know the *people*. I had no family, and nowhere that I belonged. I do not mean this” — she gestured around her — “but, rather, a place where one’s name is known and one is

welcome. I looked for others that I could share something with. A family of common ties, if not blood.” She looked up at last. “I...did not do well with the other Domae, here. I do not know why.” There was something in the way she said the last that rang false, but Duchess nodded for Jana to continue. “I searched for something I could share with the people of my new home. And I learned of the guilds, and of the weavers, and it became, to me, something I could be a part of at last. A family of my own.” She took a sip of tea and fell silent.

Duchess remembered her first days at Noam’s bakery, amongst strangers who did not know her family, or her life, or even her real name. She had felt as though she was living someone else’s life, looking out of the eyes of a stranger. She had never truly felt at home in the Shallows until she met Lysander. She had never felt welcomed.

“Yes,” Duchess said at last. “I imagine it could be.” She gave the weaver a reassuring nod. “I’ll take care of this license business, never fear. It’s just...a few things have gotten in the way.” She briefly considered telling Jana about Julius or Pollux, but she decided that the weaver was still too new a friend for *that* kind of trust. In any case there wasn’t much to tell: Julius was out of town and Pollux must sit in his cell until Minette arranged a meeting with the First Keeper.

“Before we get back to demonstrating my ignorance of weaving,” she said, setting down her empty tea cup, “we should talk about getting you a new place to work...*and* live. If we’re going to expand this business we’ll have to get you out of the Deeps. A reputation for witchcraft might scare off a thug or two, but it won’t attract customers.” She smiled. “And once you become part of the family of weavers, you’ll be too busy to worry yourself about such things.”

Jana returned her smile and Duchess found herself wondering if perhaps it was not just Jana who might have found a family.

She brushed herself off, and stood. “But all that will have to wait, unfortunately. Right now, I need to see a man about a horse.”

*If you like what you've read, why not buy the entire book?
To purchase *The Fall of Ventaris*, in paper or electronic format,
visit www.peccable.com/duchess*