

Chapter One

Winter was on the way out; the winds that blew around the streets of Gilford in the evening were noticeably warmer. Despite this, Artus felt he could get away with wearing the cloak. *Fashion is no friend to comfort*, his mother had often told him. *It's about the look you push onto the world, and how you use that to affect others.*

The length was perfect; the cut of the deep blue fabric just right. Coupled with his fine shirt and pants, he knew he would turn heads on the busy streets. The embroidery on the leather belt around his waist was exquisite. The jewelled, golden handle of the dagger in its sheath was the finishing touch.

He felt satisfied at the man who started back at him from the mirror. Despite his 52 years of age, his short brown hair showed no grey. His facial hair was meticulously trimmed. His brown eyes were as sharp as ever. Together with the clothes and accessories, he felt as good as he looked.

Extravagant? Yes. Artus didn't care; it was all about the look. In his line of work, perception was everything. He felt good with the cloak billowing around him as his strides carried him through the door and out into the evening. His boots made an impressive *click* with every step on the cobblestone street, and the commoners moved to get out of his way. Artus eyed them as they scattered. Merchants. Notaries. Builders. They all spent their days doing menial tasks for other people, getting paid a small sum of chits at the end of the month. Some of the commoners had swords strapped to their belts. Artus figured they were mercenaries; barely one rung up the social ladder than the other commoners. Even they got out of his way with haste as he walked.

Artus had worked hard to earn his lifestyle, and now he was reaping the rewards of that hard work. Though he remained a member of the (absurdly named) Shadows Guild, he hadn't needed to do a job for many years. With a sigh, he remembered that was all about to change.

Entering the gaming house, Artus immediately felt too warm. Wiping his brow with a silk cloth from his pocket, he decided to leave the cloak on despite the heat. Gazing around at the usual mix of fine clothes and bewildered looks, he noticed the tell-tale signs of those who dressed far above their meagre income. In contrast was the minority of calm, collected patrons with whom Artus felt an affinity. These were the people who belonged here; people who, like himself, didn't have to save up for months just to afford a night out at the gaming house. These were the people that he could have been friends with, if he was so inclined. If only he had time for a social life these days.

Usually he imposed limit on himself at the gaming house. If he was ever down fifty chits, he would walk out. Tonight was special, though. Given that he was about to go back to work after so many years, he was allowing himself 100 chits to burn through before he would leave.

Something told him that tonight was going to be lucky. He wouldn't be able to earn enough for his guild dues, but it would be enough to make himself feel better about life for another few days.

The cashier changed his chits into clinks. The idea was to make people think

less about the money they were losing. Despite this, he always found himself sadder to lose the clinks than he did real money. He enjoyed the reassuring jingle and weight the metal discs had that real wooden chips lacked.

At the front of the house were the card games that were popular amongst many of the patrons. Such games bored Artus, as he could never win very often. He understood which combination of cards beat which. However, he could never get his head around the concepts of betting and bluffing. Whenever he had an impressive combination of cards, other people at the table wouldn't bet. Instead they would fold their hands of cards letting the paltry pot of clinks pass to him. It was as if people somehow knew when he had cards that were superior to theirs and refused to bet against it.

At the rear of the gaming hall was the Bones table. It was the one game where the margins were much smaller for the house, which was most likely why there was only one table in the whole venue. This was where Artus loved to spend his time.

Approaching the table, he was surprised to see someone who he assumed was a vagrant. The man had his back to Artus, wearing a ruffled coat above a pair of stained pants. It looked like he had been wearing the same clothes for days. How was such a person even allowed in to the place?

The action around the table had paused. Everyone was looking at the disheveled man. Had one of the dealers said something to him?

Bones was a complex game. It required three dealers to keep an eye on the intricate array of bets people placed between rolls of the dice. Surely one of the dealers must have taken issue with the vagrant standing at the table, ruining the atmosphere.

The first thing Artus noticed when he reached the table was that, by the lay of the metal clinks on the table, the game was in full swing. Looking around at everyone, Artus realised that the vagrant was holding the dice in his hands. Everyone was looking at him because he was the shooter, and by the looks of things everyone had a lot of clinks invested in his next roll.

With a shock, Artus realised he recognised the vagrant.

It was Domonik. The man had worked under Artus as his apprentice in the Shadows Guild. Years ago they fell out of contact, and Artus just assumed the man started doing jobs for himself, no longer needing the guidance of a Mentor. Judging by the look of his clothes, the solo career hadn't paid off.

Domonik was staring at the table with intent, like he was trying to weigh up some important decision. He had an enormous pile of clinks in front of him; more than anyone else standing around the table. Finally he reached down and pushed them all towards a spot on the table.

"Double six" he said, looking at the dealer closest to him; a young woman that Artus hadn't seen before. With long hair pulled back in a pony tail and small stature, she seemed surprisingly young to be working the Bones table.

She looked at Domonik apologetically.

"I'm sorry sir, the dice are out. It's too late to ..."

"Please!" Domonik said. "I just know this is going to be it."

She shouldn't refuse. Domonik was wanting to bet all his money that his next

roll would be a double six. The odds were against him, and the house would make back all the money Domonik had presumably won over the evening. It was too late to place bets once the dice had been over to a player to roll, but from a business point of view, she should let him place the bet.

The girl looked at the other two dealers, who shrugged. It was her call to make.

"Okay sir, your bet is placed."

No-one moved as Domonik started shaking the dice. Everyone was invested in the roll. Artus couldn't look away.

Domonik flung the dice up the other end of the table. They clattered against the barrier, bouncing over halfway back down the table towards him. The dealers young voice screamed the results before Artus could even think.

"Seven out!"

Showing a four and a three, the dice had decided that Domonik's luck had come to an end.

Another sigh escaped the crowd, along with a couple of groans of sympathy. Domonik just smiled. His shoulders slumped as the dealers worked fast to scoop up the clinks. They distributed some to the few players who had bets that paid out, then cleared the rest into piles near the edge of the table.

"Domonik?" Artus said, approaching the man.

Domonik looked up. As soon as their eyes met, Artus saw his smile change from a hollow facade to genuine joy.

"Artus!" Domonik said. Artus saw warmth in the man's eyes.

"What's happening?" Artus asked. Domonik came over and patted him on the shoulder. He was a little shorter than Artus, and looked tired and worn out.

"Oh, you know. Just playing some Bones," he said.

"It looked quite ... intense."

"Yeah," Domonik said. He offered nothing more as he looked down at the ground.

"Let's have a drink," Artus said. "I'm buying."

Again, Domonik smiled a genuine smile as he clapped his old mentor on the back and walked with him over to the bar.

They sat in a section removed from the gaming tables, where people could come to just sit and talk.

"You look great!" Domonik said, taking a sip of his drink.

"Thanks," Artus said. "You look ..."

"... like crap," Domonik finished for him.

"I wouldn't say ..."

"That's because you're too nice," Domonik interrupted again. "You were always too nice."

Artus shrugged. He wouldn't have gone that far.

"What happened back there?" Artus asked, nodding his head in the direction of the Bones table.

"I thought ... I don't know. I really thought it was going to be different,"

Daren said, staring into his glass.

"The game?" Artus asked.

"My life," Domonik said, taking another drink. "And the game. I suppose. I don't know. It all seemed to be going so well. I'd built up so much, and then took a final wager. I'd come in with so little and built it up to something big and then ... I don't know. I guess it's all gone now."

Artus looked at him for a moment, taking a small sip from his drink. "Are you still talking about your life, or the game?"

Domonik smiled and thought about it for a moment. "You know, I guess that applies to both. Ha! All these years and my life has become a metaphor played out on a Bones table."

"What are you talking about?" Artus asked.

"It's all gone," Domonik said. "All of it."

"All of what?"

"The money. My money."

"What do you mean, gone?" Artus couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

"I've run out. Today was going to be my last chance to make something back."

Artus was amazed. Domonik had never exactly been the brightest star in the night sky. In fact, Artus now remembered the man had never been able to plan for the future. Despite constant advice from Artus, Domonik had never really saved any money during his time as an apprentice. He always claimed to spend what he earned, though on what Artus had no idea. It certainly hadn't been his clothes.

Artus knew that a day like this would come for Domonik. He was surprised to see it happening so fast, though.

"Domonik, I don't understand. How can you possibly be out of money?"

Domonik shrugged. "I thought I had enough. And I suppose I did. The last job I pulled gave me more than enough for the next few years. But then there were ... expenses."

Artus paused, recalling their past. "Domonik? You're not still on the snuff, are you?" Artus raised an eyebrow.

"Of course not, Artus!" Domonik said. The way he absently scratched his legs and looked away, sniffing, made Artus question the truth behind his claim.

When Artus had pulled him off the streets, Domonik had been addicted to Stardust, stealing from Gilford's elite to support his habit.

While the guild didn't have a problem with any such habits, Artus certainly did. He had heard of people developing psychoses from regular use of the opiate. The last thing he had wanted was his deranged apprentice stabbing him to death in his sleep. He had insisted that Domonik get off the stuff, and he had agreed without argument. Domonik's logic had been if the man could be a successful thief while he was high on 'dust, surely he would be even better with a clear head.

At that time, Artus had a lot more respect for guild rules. Once you took an apprentice, you were supposed to wait at least two years before ending the relationship regardless of what might happen. Their problems became your

problems.

"Why don't you do a job?" Artus asked.

"I don't know," Domonik looked around again. "I thought that maybe I wouldn't have to."

"Wouldn't have to?"

"Well, you know. I mean, I had a little bit of money. I remembered what you taught me, about Bones. Thought I might give it a try, first."

Over years of playing Bones, Artus had developed a certain play style that he enjoyed. But it wasn't a guaranteed system, and involved slow, methodical play. At no point did it suggest a player lay everything they had on the next roll being a double six.

"It didn't look like it worked," Artus said.

"No, it certainly didn't," Domonik said. "I thought it was, for a while there. I was going really well, and everyone was cheering for me. Even the dealers."

Artus couldn't argue with that. At least now he understood why everyone was so invested in the game. Domonik had always had a way with people, which was one of the things that made him such a great con man.

"I noticed that." Artus said.

"Well, it didn't help in the end, did it?" Domonik leaned forward and took another drink.

"What ever possessed you to bet like that? You certainly didn't learn *that* from me."

"I don't know. It just felt right. And ... you know. I prayed this morning."

"Oh come on!" Artus was surprised that this superstition was still around. "You know that Mercantile doesn't touch gambling. It's written that he refuses to alter the outcome."

Mercantile had never actually spoken out against gambling, nor did he forbid it. He just stated that he wouldn't influence the outcome.

"That's not what I meant," Domonik said. "That wasn't who I was talking about."

"Then who?"

"The Farmer."

Artus laughed.

"Oh, come on! Are you serious?" Artus was waiting for Domonik to break out in a smile.

"Yes, I'm serious." Domonik took another drink.

"But, Domonik, it's no more than a fairy tale!"

"You don't know that!" Domonik said.

Farmer cults had been popping up all around the place. He realised that Domonik must have found himself pledging all his riches to their cause.

"Now, it's nothing like what you're thinking, Artus!" Domonik said, as if he could read Artus's mind from the look on his face. "I'm not caught up in some group! It's more like ... well, it's more like I found him after I lost everything."

"You mean they found you when you were most vulnerable?" Artus didn't care if he hurt the man's feelings.

"No, Artus!" Domonik seemed more surprised than defensive. "It's not like

that at all. No-one found me. I found them." He reached into his pocket. "In fact, I just found this."

He pulled out a small piece of cloth with a painted design that Artus had seen before. It was a picture of a man in simple clothes tending to his crops in a field. Underneath the image was a statement in bold letters.

"To sow is to reap?" Artus asked.

"Yeah, it's what they're all about. They believe in doing good things for people now, which pays off in the future."

"In the future ... on this world?" Artus asked.

"Yes, Artus!" Domonik said. He laughed, like he was expecting the question.

And he should have. Though he had been cast down centuries ago, Wrath's reign was still strong in the collective memory of the people. It was hard to believe that there had been worship of such a hate filled god who's rewards were ambiguous and ill-defined, involving a loose promise of some paradisiacal afterlife but whose punishment was clear: everlasting pain and torment.

"Domonik, from everything I've heard, I figured that Farmer worship was just another peace cult popping up to sooth the wound that Wrath left behind."

"Come on, Artus. Wrath was deposed almost two thousand years ago! There's no more need to try and defy him as there is to remain vigilant of elves!"

"And yet we still have walls around our cities made of Indilium, to protect ourselves from elvish blades."

Domonik shrugged. "Some traditions are still around, sure."

"And you really don't think it's just another way for people to try and prove to themselves that they're so much better than their long dead ancestors?"

"No, Artus, I really don't think it's like that at all."

"And the Farmer, he himself takes care of you after you've done enough good? Or does he send little creatures to do it for him?"

"Does it matter?" Domonik was standing firm. "What matters is that I think my life has taken a positive turn ever since pledging to the Farmer. Every now and then I sacrifice a part of my time to serve him, and I think it pays off. At least, it seemed like it did."

Artus glanced back towards the Bones table. "Maybe the Farmer was distracted by a butterfly or something while you were betting all your money just now? He wasn't quick enough to make the dice roll a double six for you?"

"Yeah," Domonik said, looking down. He took another big gulp of his drink. "Maybe I was meant to loose."

"Meant to?" Artus was confused.

"Yeah. As in, maybe that was my lesson to learn."

"You can't be serious."

"I don't know." Domonik looked up at Artus. "Anyway, here I am now. With nothing. And I gotta be honest with you, Artus. I'm scared."

"Why?" Artus took another sip from his drink. He had a feeling he knew what was coming.

"I'm really broke. I mean, really." Domonik took his final swig from his cup, emptying it. "I have no money at all."

"None?"

"No. I really mean it. I don't mean none in savings or none stashed away. I mean none at all. None on me. None in trust. Nothing."

"Domonik, why don't you just pull a job?"

"I don't know anyone any more. I've been so out of touch. And you know the rules, Artus. If I rob a place that's marked as another Guild member's target, One will come after me."

Artus rolled his eyes. He was pretty sure that One, the legendary head of the Guild of Shadows, was a fable. For years, Artus had made a tidy sum by skimming chits from his apprentices' payouts. Mentors were supposed to pay their apprentices in full, but Artus' little trick of paying them eighty percent had never had any repercussions.

As Domonik was one of the apprentices he'd ripped off for years, he thought it best to not mention that as evidence of One being fiction.

"Artus ... are you training at the moment?" Domonik asked.

Artus hesitated, weighing up whether to lie.

"No," he said, truthfully. "Why?"

"You gotta take me back." Domonik looked hopeful now. Pleading.

"Take you back?" Artus didn't need the clarification. He was stalling, trying to think of how to turn him down.

"Yeah, take me back. As an apprentice. You need to get me back in."

"Domonik, you know I can't do that! Maybe you could get in touch with one of your own apprentices that you took?"

"Artus, I never took an apprentice," he said.

"What?"

"I just did jobs, that was it. I could always afford my dues. And I just didn't see the reason for it. I mean, what's the point? Why not just do it yourself?"

"Wait a second, you mean to tell me you never took a mentoring position?"

"No."

"You've never had an apprentice at all?"

"No, I really didn't see the point."

"The *point*, Domonik, is that you don't have to pay such high guild dues. The jobs they do count as jobs for you, too. You know how that makes it better, right?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten," Domonik said, seeming to lose his cool for the first time. "You think I don't remember? Guild dues goes down with every job done by you or your apprentice. Five jobs done means no dues."

"Ten chits," Artus corrected him. Years ago, the system had changed to that all members had to pay a minimum, symbolic fee.

"Yeah, ten chits. As good as nothing." Domonik looked down at the table. "Well, it doesn't seem like nothing now."

Artus didn't say anything.

"Anyway," Domonik continued, "for that to work you have to give them jobs and pay them in full. Which means that you don't get any chits from a job you could have done."

Artus almost felt a twinge of guilt, reminded again of his fortune made from unsuspecting apprentices.

Was there any way that Domonik could know this? Was this some elaborate ploy from an old apprentice that now sought retribution for all the money that was his by rights? Artus looked into Domonik's eyes, still full of the puppy-dog hope they had shown when he first asked if Artus would take him back. While he was an accomplished thief, this man was no master schemer.

"Look, it's not that I don't ..." Artus started.

Then it hit him. The Devlan job.

If Artus had an apprentice do the Devlan job, he could skim some chits off the top *and* pay less on his dues this year. Doing the job himself might net him more money, but this way he could do less work.

"Yes?" Domonik asked. "You don't what?"

"Actually," he said, returning his gaze to Domonik, "there is something that could work out for both of us."

"Really?" Domonik looked too hopeful. Desperate even.

"Really," Artus said. "How much are you owing on your dues?"

"I'm owing eight hundred," Domonik said.

"You *what*?"

"I've done no jobs this year," Domonik said.

Artus sighed. No jobs meant full dues.

"So if you do one job, it drops to seven-fifty," Artus thought out loud.

The Devlan job was set to pay around 2000.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Okay. Well, as luck would have it, I have a job that will pay seven-fifty. Exactly."

"Really, Artus? You'll take me back?"

"Yes, I'll take you back," Artus said, reaching across the table to shake his hand.

"You gonna give me the contact? Or will you ..."

"I'll handle it," Artus said. There was no way he wanted Domonik anywhere near the client.

"Yeah, good idea," Domonik said. "You always were better at handling all that stuff."

Artus smiled and gave him a little nod.

Now he felt better. He was going to get what he wanted, without having to put in anywhere near the effort he thought he was going to have to do.

"Let me buy you another drink," Artus said, smiling. It had been a lucky night after all, and he hadn't even placed a bet yet.

Chapter Two

Artus sat in his living room, watching the darkness gathering outside the window. He sighed. It had been three days since he had seen Domonik. The deadline for the job was tonight.

Artus went about his usual nightly ritual of closing the drapes and lighting the lanterns within the house. As he passed through the kitchen he poured himself a glass of brandy, glancing again at the door to the larder.

Soon, he thought to himself. Soon it will be full again.

Artus walked down the hall and back to the living room. A fine silk overcoat, folded perfectly, lay on the table. The material was as colourful and vibrant as the foreign land it came from; definitely worth the 500 chits he had paid for it. At the time, he didn't have enough chits to buy the coat, so he had borrowed the money. He felt calm reassurance as he gently stroked the overcoat. It was worth the risk. And worth the wait. It took great restraint to not wear the coat, but Artus felt it was only proper to wait until he had paid off the debt. Until then, it wasn't really his.

Turning, he rose his glass to the small portrait of his uncle which hung above the table. A toast to the man responsible for his lifestyle. Artus was sure that if his uncle knew he was the one who had bought the house after his death, he would be most disappointed.

Artus jumped as a loud knock startled from his thoughts. Excitement rising in his chest, he moved down the hall as quickly as his dignity would allow, and opened the door with a smile.

It wasn't Domonik.

Standing at the doorway was Jack Raber. Leaning on the landing rail with a toothpick between his teeth, the heavysset loan collector looked like a nightmare tightly bound in well-fitted clothes. Artus knew the chill he felt wasn't just from the cold night air spilling in through the open door.

"Artus Mentat the Second, as I live and breath!" Raber's face looked like he was seeing a long lost friend, though his eyes looked the same as always: cold and dead. If the eyes truly were the windows to the soul, Jack Raber's spirit had long since departed.

"What are you playing at, Raber?" Artus hissed, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

"Now is that any way to greet a friend?" Raber asked, his face a melodramatic vision of disappointment.

"We're not friends." Artus finally met his eyes and instantly regretted it.

"Oh no, Artus," Raber said. He stepped forwards to put a hand on Artus' shoulder. "We are the very best of friends. You see, I only do business with friends. When you do business with me we become friends for life."

"I'm not your friend," Artus said again. "Now piss off."

Artus hated the intimidation he felt at the sight of the man. A man like Artus should look down on people like Raber.

"Oh Artus!" Raber said. He was smiling again, and Artus thought the man couldn't look much worse. "Do you have my money?"

"What?" A shiver of ice shot down Artus' spine. Had he missed the deadline?
"Not yet, no!"

"Alright, relax, *friend*." Raber said. He glanced around, then peered through the doorway into the house. "Just thought I'd check. Save me coming back to this neighbourhood tomorrow."

Relief flooded through Artus. He made sure that none of it showed on his face.

"I'll have your money tomorrow, as agreed. Now leave. If anyone saw you here ..."

"Sure thing, Artus. Just one thing." Raber looked to either side of the street again before his arm shot up, grabbing Artus by the throat and lifting him through the door. Raber turned and pinned him to the wall, his feet barely scraping the ground.

"Do I have your attention, Artus?" Raber asked casually.

The only noise Artus could make was a gurgle.

"Normally I only kill people when they don't pay on time. You speak to me like that again, and I'll just kill you for fun."

Raber released his grip. Artus fell to the ground clutching his throat, gasping for air.

Raber had stopped trying to force a smile, and now his expression matched his eyes.

"See you soon, Artus," Raber said. He turned and left.

As much as he hated to admit it to himself, Artus was terrified. He hated himself for that. His security had been compromised in his own home.

"Artus?" came a voice out of the shadows.

It was Domonik. He was standing in the street, watching as Artus spluttered in his own doorway. People were walking past, some alone, some in couples or groups, locked in conversation. Everyone managed to not notice Artus laying there.

Everyone minded their own business in Gilford.

"Come in," Artus said, raising himself to his knees and indicating deeper into the house.

Domonik glanced around himself before stepping into the house. Artus got up and closed the door, still holding his throat.

"What was that about?" Domonik asked, concern on his face.

"Don't worry about it," Artus said. He indicated that they should continue through to the main lounge.

"I am worried, Artus," Domonik said, seemingly oblivious to the prompt to move. "Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"No, not at all," Artus said. He walked past Domonik, down the hall to the lounge, assuming that the other man would follow.

"It looked like it," Domonik said, finally getting the hint to move. "I know that man."

"Don't worry about it." Artus slumped down in one of the big leather chairs. Domonik didn't sit.

"Fine then." Domonik stepped towards him, reaching into his coat.

"Domonik, are *you* okay?" Artus asked. "You still look like a hobo."

"It's the cover," Domonik said. "I spent a couple of nights around the target's house in disguise, to see what he was all about."

"Right," Artus said, reminded again how desperately he didn't want to go back to doing jobs. "How did it go?"

Domonik pulled out a small battered book. "Very well."

Artus reached out, and Domonik handed it to him without a word. It certainly matched the description the client had given him. The marking on the outside showed a simple figure of a person surrounded by the outline of a shield.

Artus flicked through it, skimming over the columns of letters and numbers. He had no idea what it all meant, and really didn't care. In the mind of his client, Devlan, this book was worth 2000 chits; that's all that mattered to him. Ultimately, as was made clear by Jack Raber minutes ago, this little book was going to save his life.

"I wonder what it all means," Domonik said.

"It means that you can afford your dues," Artus said, snapping the book shut and standing.

"How long do you think ... you know." Domonik looked at the floor.

"Tonight," Artus said. It was still pretty early in the evening, long before the midnight deadline. He would have plenty of time to visit his client, hand over the book in return for the money, drop his own cut into his private vault, and then get back to Domonik.

"Give me a few hours, Domonik, and you'll have your payment."

The look on the Domonik's face was almost enough to make Artus feel sympathy.

Almost.

Chapter Three

The night air was already cold, but Artus could feel it getting colder as the sun slipped down and evening came. Artus was sure Droopy Joe hadn't noticed him.

The hobo had taken up residence outside Uncle Rory's house a week ago. Artus had nicknamed him Droopy Joe on account of half the man's face drooping down, like the muscles under the skin had decided to stop trying.

It did strike Artus as odd that the city watch hadn't moved Droopy Joe on by now. He belonged in the Market Quarter, competing with the other beggars trying to scam chits from travellers.

Artus hated Droopy Joe. He had managed to avoid the man completely during the week, coming and going via the rear door, accessed from a small laneway around the block. It was a slight inconvenience, as Artus hadn't had to visit his uncle too often this week. But it was worth it to not have to put up with the beggar.

The problem was, Artus knew that he hadn't seen Droopy Joe in at least forty years. He also knew that he now lived in his uncle's house, Rory himself having died years ago. Which meant this familiar scene was a dream. His mind was replaying a memory from long ago.

It wasn't dark enough yet, but Artus couldn't wait. Patience had never been his strong suit. In fact, it was his lack of patience that had him here now, standing across the road from the house. He was here for what belonged to him, and he wanted it now.

For too long Uncle Rory had kept his share of the family fortune to himself. And besides, it wasn't like Artus wasn't going to get most of it when the man died. He was only taking what was going to be his eventually.

Lucky for Artus, his uncle had chosen the Glens Arbour district of Gilford to live, and few people roamed these decadent streets in the evenings. In fact, the residents of this neighbourhood rarely walked anywhere; they had drivers and their own personal coaches. At this time of night they would be sitting down to a meal at one of the fancy dining halls in the Private Quarter, his uncle most likely amongst them.

Droopy Joe was fumbling around in his bag, distracted by something. The man didn't notice Artus move across the street. As he slipped around the block and down the laneway, Artus felt the tight clothing he was wearing press against his skin. He gained courage from wearing the black cloth, knowing it made him look the part.

Opening the back door with his key, Artus headed down the hall and into the kitchen. To his surprise, the larder door was open. So was the secret entrance down to the vault. It was odd that his uncle would go out for dinner and leave the vault open.

Sitting on the counter was a simple sandwich, the remnants of its preparation nearby. Artus felt his heart freeze.

Uncle Rory was home!

"What the hell are you doing here, you jumped up little shit?" came Uncle Rory's voice from beside him.

He hadn't noticed the man come in through the other door. Rory, well dressed as always, regarded Artus in his all black getup.

"Uncle?" Artus said, immediately feeling stupid.

"I'm not your bloody aunt, that's for sure," the man said. Artus felt the scorn that always accompanied a look from his uncle.

"Are you here to *rob* me?" Rory asked. It wasn't shock or fear in his voice that Artus heard; more like laughter. Artus now felt self-conscious about what he was wearing. In fact, he felt like an idiot.

Still, he wouldn't let his uncle bully him. "Uncle, I am here to claim what is ..."

"You little turd!" Rory interrupted. "All my life I've done my best to help you not turn out like a spoiled little shit."

"Me?" Artus shot back. "You're the one with all the money!"

"You think I have all the money? You think your parents don't have money?"

"I've never been given the chance to ..."

"Artus, you live in the upper echelons of Gilford society. You are more well off than you have ever understood."

"Well off?" Artus almost screamed the words, feeling his anger rise. "I know the truth. I know that my mother and father are running out of money, while you sit on your fortune like a ..."

"I choose to work hard to build on our family fortune," Rory interrupted. "My lazy brother, your father, just sits around and spends his share. You think you've had it tough? Are you going to have to stop eating at expensive dining halls seven nights a week?"

"I've never been able to have what I want. I'm always told what I can and can't spend money on. Money that's rightfully mine to spend on whatever I want!"

"Rightfully ... *rightfully* yours?" His uncle shook his head. "Can you hear what you're saying?" He eyed the sack slung over Artus' shoulder.

In two quick strides, Rory crossed the room. Before he realised what was going on, Artus felt the stinging slap of his uncle's hand across his face. The man yanked the sack out of Artus's grip.

"Is this what you want?" Rory asked. Artus felt pain and embarrassment. He looked up to see his uncle disappearing down into his vault.

Artus stood there trying to think of what he should do. Moments later, Rory was bounding up from his vault. The sack was now full.

"This what you want?" Rory repeated. "This what you think will make you happy?" Uncle Rory threw the sack full of chits at Artus's feet.

"You have two choices. You take that now, and it's all yours. All of it. And that's all you or anyone else in your family will ever see of it." Rory paused, letting his words sink in.

"Alternatively," he continued, "you can leave empty handed tonight. Come and see me for a job first thing in the morning."

Rory strode over to the bench, picking up the sandwich. Artus felt surreal, like they were discussing the weather over breakfast during one of Artus' occasional visits.

"You'll start off with little in the way of salary, and the first few months will see you working in an office with the notaries, keeping records and shuffling papers. I guarantee you," Rory continued, "that if you stick with it, by the time you're my age you'll have more than double my worth now. And you'll be a better person by then, too."

With that, Rory turned and walked out of the room. He didn't even wait to see what choice Artus would make.

Artus walked out the front door and headed across the street, sack full of chits slung over his shoulder. The mere suggestion of him turning up to a job was an insult to Artus. In fact, he was sure that that was how his uncle had meant it: a backhanded insult.

Too late, Artus realised that he had left his uncle's house in full view of Droopy Joe. Sure enough, the hobo looked right at him as Artus crossed to his side of the street.

"You did it!" Droopy said. He was staring at Artus and his sack of chits. Strangely enough, his face didn't seem to be drooping anymore.

"Did what?" Artus asked, immediately regretting it. He didn't want to engage him in conversation. He kept walking.

"You did the job. You robbed Rory Farmerton!"

Artus remembered what he was wearing.

"No ... I ..." he stammered.

"Ha!" Droopy Joe said. "Don't worry, I'm guild too!"

"You're what?"

Droopy Joe's face went from gleeful to serious.

"Boy, are you kidding me?"

"What?" Artus realised something was wrong. The homeless man was strangely coherent, and frighteningly serious.

"You're saying you're not guild?" Droopy Joe asked, still keeping pace alongside Artus as he walked down the street.

"Not only am I not guild," Artus replied, "but I have no idea what it means to be guild."

Droopy Joe stopped walking and grabbed Artus by the arm, bringing him to an abrupt halt.

"Rory Farmerton wasn't an open job," Droopy said. "I have the assignment, and I've been staking the place out for a week. And now you swan in here and walk out with a sack full of chits, and you're saying you have no idea what the Shadows Guild is?"

Artus just stared at him, trying to tell if the man was being serious. Shadows Guild? Everyone had heard about the supposed guild of thieves that operated in Gifford and beyond. But it was a legend, like the Farmer. Everyone talked about it but no-one really believed it.

"Boy, you do a job in this town without guild sanction, you're a dead man. Once One finds out about it, he'll bring the heat of Wrath himself down upon you."

"Who?" Artus asked.

"You never heard of Wrath, either?" Droopy Joe's face turned showed an even deeper level of concern.

"Of course I have. Who is One?"

"Boy, this is your lucky day." Droopy Joe smiled like he was telling Artus the best news in the world. "Turn's out I don't have a 'prentice. Now if I did, then there wouldn't be much for it. But as I said, turns out I don't, and I can offer the spot to you."

"The spot?"

"Boy, I know how hard it is to pull off jobs like this when you don't know what's going on in town. As far as I'm concerned, you proved yourself by walking out of Farmerton's with a sackful of chits over your shoulder, strolling down the street like you're out for your evening constitutional. What if I told you that I could line you up with as many jobs as you wanted, and you get to take as much as you want? A few hours work a week, and you'll be making ten times the amount you have in that sack there every month?"

Artus couldn't believe what was happening. Not only was the Shadows Guild apparently a real thing, but he was being offered a place within its ranks.

Well, uncle, Artus thought to himself. Maybe I will take your advice and get a job.

"Tell me more," he said to Droopy.

Droopy Joe opened his mouth to answer, but all Artus could hear was a loud thumping, like someone was pounding on a door.

The knocking on the door came loud and fast, ripping Artus from his dream. The room was dark, and Artus felt that it was early morning, before sunrise. Who was at the door at this hour? He was sure he had only been in bed for a couple of hours, having gone and collected the payment from his client, dropping the 750 chits off to Domonik, then returning home to put his own share in the vault.

A chill ran down his spine. Was it Raber? He wasn't due until the afternoon. What if the man had decided that midnight on the morning a debt was due was an appropriate time to collect it? Artus had the money now, but he didn't want Raber seeing the vault. He would have to make the man wait outside as he went and got the money.

Artus hesitated, slipping on a robe and moving slowly down the stairs towards the front door. He wished there was some way to tell who was there before he opening it.

As if in answer to his wish, a voice came from behind the heavy oak.

"Artus?" It was Domonik. "Artus are you home?"

Artus felt relieved as he opened the door.

"Oh thank the gods Artus!" Domonik said. He looked terrible. His hair was a mess, and from the red circles around his eyes it looked like he had been crying. Or drinking. Maybe both.

"Domonik?" Artus said. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"Artus, you've got to help me!" Domonik looked desperate. Again.

"With what, Domonik?" Artus asked.

"The dues, Artus!"

Artus allowed his confusion to show on his face.

"I thought we had that covered," Artus said. "Surely you haven't spent the money already? It's only been a few hours."

"It was my rent, Artus!" Domonik looked scared. Really scared. "I forgot about my rent money!"

"You mean, when you said you needed 750 chits for the Guild dues, you weren't factoring in all the other money you would need?"

"I just wasn't thinking right!" Domonik said. "I mean, you know. I was so upset, I just fixated on the 750. I didn't think about the rest. Anyway, I got a visit, just after you left tonight. From that man!"

"What man?"

"The man who was here the other night! Talking to you at the door here!"

"Jack Raber?"

Raber collected debts. If you couldn't pay your rent, then you got kicked out by a city magistrate, not a debt collector.

"He's not a lawman," Artus said. "Why would he be there to serve notice on your rent being overdue?"

"Well, it's not that the rent was overdue. You see, I kind of ... well ..."

Artus raised a hand to his face, realising what Domonik was saying.

"You borrowed money to pay your rent?"

"Yeah. And I forgot that I had to pay him off. I mean, the interest was great, I could afford it. I was going to pay it off within the month and it was barely another fifty chits on what I had borrowed. But I just ... forgot. It's one hundred chits for the month. "

For the briefest moment, Artus thought of the chits in his vault, which included what was technically the rest of Domonik's payment. With the money he had in there, he could pay off his debts, pay his guild dues and still have some spending money left over. Technically, he could give Domonik the hundred chits and still have spending money left over.

Then again, one hundred chits went a long way. Not to mention that Domonik would probably just find himself in the same situation in a months time. Besides, Artus had no intention of keeping the arrangement with Domonik. He didn't want an apprentice. He had used Domonik as a tool to get what he needed. In fact, Raber might actually be able to provide Artus with a solution.

"I wish I could help," Artus said. "I don't have any money to spare."

"Can I come in Artus?" Domonik asked. He'd stopped looking around the streets and was looking at Artus with fear.

"No, I don't think so Domonik."

Domonik looked at him for a moment, and Artus thought that surely the reality of the situation was penetrating that thick skull.

"You really don't have any money?" Domonik asked.

"Oh that's not what I said." There was no point mincing words. "I have plenty of money, Domonik. I just don't have any spare. I have none that I intend to give to you."

"But ... Artus, you're my mentor!"

“Only as long as you live, Domonik. And it sounds we could measure that time in hours.”

“But we’re both members! The guild, Artus! What about the honour among ...”

Artus cut him off with laughter which he didn’t even have to force.

“Oh come on, Domonik! You know that’s all crap! I didn’t get to where I am today thanks to being a good little guild member.”

“What about ... One? If he finds out ...” Domonik trailed off. Obviously he realised the futility of that argument.

“Yeah, Domonik. Maybe One and the Farmer are out together on a dinner date, and forgot to watch out for you. Again.”

“Artus ... I don’t know what to do. That man is going to kill me.” Domonik stood there, finally understanding.

“Yes, it would seem that way.” Artus stood there for a moment. A cool wind blew through the open door, and Artus decided it was time to end this conversation.

Domonik didn’t even look up as Artus let the door swing shut.

Chapter Four

Artus woke gently, sunlight streaming through his windows. He opened his eyes, laying still in his huge bed while he thought about the day. He felt a strong sense of comfort at what the day would bring. Last night he had cut off one loose end, removing Domonik from his life. This evening he would cut off the final one, paying back Jack Raber what he owed.

Though he was yet to pay the debt, Artus decided that today counted as the first day of owning the exquisite coat. He would allow himself to wear it, having a day out in town before returning home to pay. He quickly dressed and headed downstairs.

Artus savoured the experience of putting the coat on over the top of his finest suit, which he had purchased from the Royal Tailor himself in the capital a few months ago. He spent some time in front of his full length mirror getting everything just right, then took a deep breath and stepped outside, locking the door firmly behind him.

He glanced over to the other side of the street, seeing the spot where Droopy Joe sat all those years ago, his dream having stirred up memories he hadn't thought about for many years. The man's real name had turned out to be Tomlin, and Artus served as his apprentice for three years before he realised that the man had nothing more to teach him. The fact that he had missed Artus coming and going on all his prior visits to his uncle and thought he was a thief was the first indicator that the man wasn't exactly on top of his game. Three years later Artus left him behind, striking out on his own and becoming a mentor to four apprentices over his years as a thief, Domonik being his second.

Artus knew he looked silly, standing there staring at a point across the road, but he couldn't help the memories flooding back. He had only ever known Tomlin and his own four apprentices. Tomlin had told him that that was how it worked - the guild never met at any location, and you never knew who else was a member. But somehow, when you were a mentor, people would know - clients would come to you with jobs, and you could either do them yourself and claim the fee, or pass them to an apprentice. That was it.

Artus shook his head to clear it, letting the past slip back into the past. Today wasn't about dwelling on what had been. Today was about the future. He felt a lightness in his step as he wandered slowly through the market district towards the private quarter, where the usual trash on the streets weren't welcome. Glens Arbour was where the wealthy lived, and the Private Quarter was where the wealthy dined. Incredibly exclusive, it had always baffled Artus that the Market quarter sat between the two.

He took an early lunch at a small establishment that specialised in exquisitely crafted dishes from far away. The chef here was a personal friend, and he didn't disappoint.

From there, he headed back through the Private Quarter to the gaming house.

The amazing thing about the gaming house was that it always looked the same inside, regardless of the time of day. It was like time never touched the place; the light was always at the same level, the temperature was always the

same.

A couple of quick games was what he was here for this afternoon. Wouldn't want to miss his evening appointment with Raber.

A sudden thought occurred to him: what if Domonik was here? Instinctively he looked over at the bones table. There was a crowd around it, but no Domonik. He spent a few moments looking around to see if he could see him. Then he realised how foolish he was being. Artus didn't have any money, and would be quickly ejected by the guards. Either you were playing games and drinking, or you were tossed out.

With a smile, he headed towards the Bones table, crossing paths with a serving girl. He ordered a drink, indicating that he would be over at the bones table.

The scene at the table reminded Artus of the other night, minus Domonik. A large, well dressed man was holding the dice. All the other players were looking at him.

With a flourish, the man flung the dice. A second later the entire table erupted in a cheer. Two players nearest the man slapped him on the back.

With a smile, the dealer slid him over a huge stack of clinks. Artus recognised the dealer as the same girl from the other night.

There was a flurry of activity as people placed their bets down on the table. This was what Artus loved about this game. When there was a crowd of people that were in to it, and a buzz of someone winning, you couldn't beat the atmosphere. This was when people seemed to have the most luck.

He laid down a couple clinks himself on the table, just as the serving girl returned to him with his drink. The dealer slid the two dice back over to the man as everyone else finished placing their bets. The man held the dice up to his mouth in his fist, eyes closed, muttering what Artus assumed to be a prayer. Then he released them with another flourish towards the other end of the table. Artus craned his head to see the result, but his vision was obscured by a player who leaned further down.

"Six!" the dealer yelled out. "Hard six."

Double three. Artus's bet stood. He thought about raising it a little, but held himself back. Looking at the man in the impressive suit, there was something that just didn't seem right about him.

Sure enough, caught up in whatever luck had been with him to this point, the man shoved his pile of clinks towards the table to place them all in one spot.

"Twelve!" he said with enthusiasm, indicating that he expected the next roll to come up as a double six. Again, everyone gasped. Artus waited, amazed that he was seeing an almost exact replay of what he saw the other night. The outcome would have no effect on his own bet, and he was fascinated as to why the man felt so confident.

There was a flurry of movement around the table as clicks were pushed around and bets were placed or raised. Everyone felt the energy of the table. Artus found himself smiling.

"Dice out!" the dealer said, pushing the dice towards the well dressed man. The brute picked them up and, this time with no ceremony, flung them up the

other end of the table.

Artus didn't watch.

"Seven Out!" the dealer screamed at the top of her lungs. Even she seemed caught up in the excitement.

Rolling a seven, the man had lost his bet, and his chance to continue rolling the dice. Artus had also lost his bet, though he wasn't concerned about the tiny sum.

He was surprised to see the man laughing, reaching out to slap the player next to him on the back. Did the guy not understand what had just happened?

"Well that was fun!" the guy said. A few of the other players agreed.

"I'll buy you a drink, friend!" Another player had moved around to shake the guy's hand, and they all headed off towards the bar.

He couldn't understand. Artus wouldn't be able to handle suddenly losing that much money. As he watched, there was a mass exodus of player from the bones table. The dealers started packing it up.

"Is it that time already?" he asked the girl. Again, Artus was struck by her youthful appearance. The complexity of the game and the amount of quick maths involved meant that normally it was older, more experienced dealers that worked the table.

"Yes, sir," she said, looking up and smiling. "For the next few hours it'll cost them more to pay us to run it than the table will make. So it's break time for me."

Artus watched them for a moment as they slid all the dice and chits into their proper little lock-up drawers built into the wooden table.

"That was some show," Artus said. "But I'm sure there's no way he was going to win that roll."

"The odds were against him," the girl said. The other dealers had moved away, probably heading out the back to the staff area for food.

"That's not what I meant," Artus scoffed.

The girl looked up at him with a half-smile on her face.

"What did you mean, then?"

"Oh come on!" Artus said. "He'd have made, what, thirty times his money if he'd made that roll. No way you guys are going to let him walk out of here with that kind of money. In fact, in all the years I've played Bones at this table, I don't think I've ever once seen someone win from that bet."

The girl threw him a smirk. "You're not suggesting that the game could be *rigged* somehow are you?" Her tone suggested she knew damn well that's what he was suggesting.

"Ahh, I'm sure you've seen some crazy things in your time here." Artus smiled at her. "I didn't mean to suggest anything nefarious might be happening."

"Oh I've seen things that you wouldn't believe," she said.

Artus was starting to like her.

"Really? Care to bet on it?" he asked her. All he really wanted was to move this conversation over to a table by the bar.

She raised one eyebrow. "Bet what?"

"Bet that I believe your story."

"No, I understand that. I'm asking, what are you betting?"

Artus scooped up the remaining clinks that he never got to use at the table.

"I have all of these," he said. "Must be at least thirty chits worth, give or take. How about we continue this conversation over there?" He inclined his head towards the bar.

"Ha!" she let out a single laugh. "You normally have to pay women to sit and have a drink with you?" She turned to follow the other dealers.

"Wait!" Artus said. He was actually curious about her story. "Okay, we can talk here."

She eyed the little pile of clinks in his hand, then leant forward on the table. Her voice was low so no-one else could hear.

"So how's this. Guy comes in here a few nights ago and pays me a small fortune to rig the game so he *looses* a midnight roll."

"Midnight?"

"Yeah. Double six. Twelve?"

"Oh right. Twelve is midnight. Well that's not *that* weird. Maybe he was proving a point to a friend or something."

"I'm just putting it in context for you. That's not the weird part." The girl leaned in closer to Artus. "The weird part was he came back and offered me the same amount of money again, so long as I told you the story the next time you came in."

It took a second for Artus to register what she had just said.

"What? Me?"

"Yeah you." She smiled at him. "Ain't that weird?"

Artus stared at her for a moment. "Who was he?"

"How should I know? You do, though."

"I do?"

"Yeah. Well, I assume so. You sat and had a drink with him."

Domonik? Artus didn't understand what it meant.

"The man I was with paid you to tell me that?"

"Yes." She stood up straighter.

"How much did he pay you?"

"Well, look at it this way. I'm going out the back, getting changed, and walking out of this dead end job for good. And you can keep those." She nodded towards the clinks in his hand. She gave him a wink and turned around, walking away.

Artus didn't watch her go. He was too busy thinking about what all this could possible mean.

He felt uncomfortable. Had he somehow been played? He had to get home to think clearly.

Returning home, Artus immediately noticed that his front door was unlocked. It wasn't forced, the lock wasn't broken. It just wasn't engaged, like he's walked out without locking it.

In his thirty-five years of living in the house, he had never once forgotten to lock the door.

He entered with caution, his hand clutching the hilt of the dagger at his side. Old instincts flared at the back of his mind, screaming at him that there could still be someone in the house. But the only thing he could think about was the vault.

The hidden door in the back of the larder was closed. Nothing looked like it had been disturbed as Atrus moved the key in his shaking fingers along the rear wall, seeking out the disguised keyhole that would open the fake floor, revealing the vault below.

In the middle of the vault, laying on the floor, was a single chit. Everything else was gone. Artus bent down to pick it the little disk of dark wood, seeing that it was a normal, nondescript chit. On one side was the brand of the Royal Mint, and on the other was a number denoting the chit's value.

A single 1, branded into the middle of the chit.

Artus's mind reeled. What did all this mean? He couldn't think straight.

Three loud, measured knocks came from the front door.

Artus felt cold fear spread from his chest out to his arms and all over his body. He had no money. He had nothing.

And Jack Raber was here to collect.

But Jack wasn't a stupid man. Obviously he wanted his money, and obviously Artus had the money, it had just been stolen. It wouldn't take long to catch the thief. Not once Artus got in contact with some old friends. And then Jack could have his chits (plus a little extra for his troubles) and Artus could have the coat.

The coat! Jack would want it back. He quickly pulled it off and rolled it up. Jack wouldn't know that he had worn it.

A thousand things raced through his mind as he closed the vault and headed to the door. He could escape. He knew how to blend in to the shadows. In fact, he used to be a very adept fighter, better with a dagger than any man was with a sword. Except it was all so long ago. He hadn't practiced for years now. He felt a twinge of regret at letting himself slip. He hadn't even prayed to Mercantile for years.

But Artus knew he was a master of conversation. He could talk his way out of any situation. He didn't need to run or fight.

Opening the door, he was met with the dead eyes of Jack Raber sitting above a wide, fake grin.

"Artus Mentat!" Jack said. "My old friend and so-and-so! What's the news on this glorious day?"

"Now listen to me, Jack," Artus said. Raber wouldn't do anything out here on the street. Far too many witnesses. He needed to stay out here until he knew he'd be safe. "There's something you have to know."

Jack's smile didn't drop as he turned around and whistled. A shadow detached itself from outside the front of the house opposite and headed towards them, resolving into the shape of a small person.

"Jack I need to tell you ..."

"It's okay, Artus. This is my friend, Relph. He needs to be witness to what we talk about. You know, new terms and all that."

"Listen Jack, it's not like I ..."

"Hey! Artus!" Jack put his arm over his shoulder as Relph stepped up to the doorway. "It's fine! This happens all the time!"

"But there's ... really?" Artus felt a measure of relief.

"Sure thing! I mean, I'll need a little more in interest, but people miss payments! That's fine! After all, I want the money, right?"

Artus smiled. "Yeah Jack. I guess you do."

"We just need to formalise the new terms. That's what Relph is here for."

Relph was as tall as Artus' chest. He wore a black hooded robe that obscured his face.

Again, Artus felt the scream of old instincts warning him. Again, the urge was shouted down by years of not listening to them.

"Okay, sure." Artus turned and headed into the house, the other two trailing behind. He turned as he heard Relph closing the door behind them.

"Here," Artus said, handing the robe to Jack. "That's worth almost the whole amount, and I figured you can hold it in ..."

The fake smile disappeared from Jack's mouth as he ripped the robe in half. Artus almost screamed.

"No, Artus," Jack said, fake enthusiasm gone. "I think we'll stick to the original terms."

Artus realised he should have stayed outside.

Relph darted towards him, slipping past Raber. Artus finally realised what was happening and turned, putting all his effort to running away. With enough speed, he could make it to the back door.

Two steps in to his escape, he learned Relph was faster.

Chapter Five

"You don't think it's cowardly?" Meline asked. She was still watching the door to the house across the street. The man from the gaming house had just gone inside with the two debt collectors. Dumb move, she thought. Should have stayed outside in the open.

"Cowardly?" came the reply. The man was standing behind her.

"To not do it yourself," she said, turning to look up at him.

He held her gaze. "You think I don't do it myself because I'm afraid?"

She thought about it for a moment. "I don't really know you."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, no," she conceded. "I don't think that's the reason."

The man nodded and looked back at the house.

Funny how things work out, Meline thought. One day you were working a low paying, dead end job in a gaming house, and the next minute something like this happened. Though she wasn't really sure what this was.

"Subtle manipulation of the people around you is key to my success," he said. "In the end, I all but slid the blade into Artus Mentat. His soul will join the others that haunt me when I sleep."

"I thought they say you never sleep."

"They?"

"Yeah. You know. People." Meline turned back to look at the house, as if something would happen.

"Who'll find the body?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Who cares?"

Meline didn't have an answer to that.

"You know why he had to die?" he asked her.

"To send a message, I guess." Meline said, hoping it was the right thing to say.

"No. I don't care what people say and think. I don't care what stories they tell. Artus had to die because he had become corrupt."

"Surely if people knew for sure what would happen to them, it would stop them from being corrupt in the first place."

"Ha!" the man let out a single bark of laughter. "Fear doesn't stop corruption. It just drives it further underground."

"What stops corruption then?"

"Death. Or, very infrequently, a change of heart."

"Do you think that everyone is beyond redemption?" Meline thought of the current craze of the Farmer. That was all about forgiveness and being passive.

"Redemption is something that people give you, and is largely irrelevant. What matters is the actions. I don't care if people feel sorry or not. During his peak, Artus was a great thief. Years ago he pulled a job that scored him thousands of chits. After that he became lazy, to the point where he just sat around buying clothes and eating fine foods. He forgot that he was part of something bigger, and forgot what the price you paid was when you turned your back on that."

"So you keep up to date on everyone that's part of your club?" Meline asked.

"Guild," the man said. "Not club. And yes, more or less, I do."

"It just seems like a lot of work to me."

"It is a lot of work."

She looked up at him. "How do you get time to do it?"

He smiled, looking down at her, and said in a low, drawn out voice, "I never sleeeeep!"

"Well then," she said, unimpressed. "Do I call you Domonik?"

"No. That name had it's use, and now it's come to an end."

"What should I call you, then?"

"You can call me whatever you want. It doesn't matter."

Meline sighed. "Is it always going to be like this?"

The man placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You understand why it has to be this way, right?" he said.

"Kind of."

"I have run this guild for years. But I wasn't the only One. There was One before me, and One before him, and so on."

"Why don't you just pick a member of your guild to take over from you?"

The man nodded towards the house in front of them.

"All guild members become excellent thieves, or die trying. Some turn bad, like Artus. Others don't. But even those that don't will only ever be exactly that: excellent thieves."

"And so ... why wouldn't one of them make a better leader?"

"Because being good at something and leading those that are good at something are two different things. When people rise up a rank they can tend to think that they loose the responsibility of the rank below them. They don't realise that they've gained more responsibility while still maintaining the ones they had before. That thinking leads to apathy. If you know from the very beginning that you are going to lead, you know what will be expected of you."

Meline sighed. "Were you the same age as me?"

He knew what she was asking, without having to clarify. "I was sixteen."

"That's a yes, then," Meline said.

She thought for a moment.

"How do you stop yourself from being lazy?" she asked.

"I remain an active thief," he said. "I do my three jobs a year, minimum. In fact, that's how Artus found me. I was coming out of a house and he spotted me. He said I reminded him of his induction to the guild, and offered me an apprentice position. I took it, figured it would be a great way to keep an eye on at least one member of the guild."

Meline spent a few moments in thought again before asking another question.

"Back a few days ago, when you made the offer. If I'd have said no, would you have killed me?"

The man shrugged.

"Have you ever asked anyone else that question?"

"If they would give up their life to change the realm?" He shook his head.

"Never. You were my first. I guess I know how to pick 'em."

Meline couldn't shake the feeling that he was lying.

"That's enough," he said, turning and walking down the street.

"What happens now?" Meline asked him.

"Now you enjoy the rest of your day. Tomorrow your new life begins."

Meline watched the man disappear into the crowd.

"How will you find me? You don't even know where I live!" she called out.

She jumped as a hand grabbed her arm. The man was standing beside her. Somehow he'd doubled back without her seeing.

"Haven't you heard what they say?" he asked. "One knows everything."

He smiled and melted away into the crowd again.

Meline suddenly felt cold, and clutched her arms around herself and shivered. Not for the first time, she wondered if she was doing the right thing.