

The Nameless Thief

By: Sarah Ford

Chapter 1: Prison

His eyes were shut. He didn't want to open them. His sensitive nose – curse it – could smell the rotting flesh of the corpse below him. It could even smell his own blood, hardening around his gaping wounds. His perfect ears – curse them – could hear the rats scurrying around the room and quenching their hunger on his lifeless companion. His arms – curse them – felt as if they were going to tear. The metal around his wrists and ankles, and the cold, damp rocks against his shirtless, wounded back, felt like cubes of ice. He did not know for how long he had been hanging from the walls, for how long he had been bleeding and shivering in the night's bitter frost, but he knew that the sun's warm rays only brought his final doom. In his half senseless state, it seemed as if he had been hanging for nearly a year now. And yet for only for a minute now.

Then he felt it. A warm sensation. He slowly opened his sore eyes and looked at the barred window ahead. The window lay directly in front of him, as if to gloat about his fate. As if to torment him, to let him see the stars fade and the sun rise, knowing that at any moment he would meet his doom. He did not know if it was placed there for that purpose, but it tormented him anyways. Curse it.

He closed his eyes again. He would not let it torment him. He could feel it, but he would not watch the sun rise. Tears swelled out of his swollen eyes, rolling down his cheeks and onto his chest. They stung him so badly that he cried even harder.

He could not remember the last time he had cried before today. He had never let memories or feelings get in his way – curse the nuisances – because if he did, he would never have been able to live.

The air was getting warmer and warmer. He had cried too much to cry anymore. He had shivered too much to shiver anymore. The morning sun was rising, but things were getting darker. He was dying: good. Now those bastards wouldn't get the satisfaction of lopping his head off. Curse them.

The cold night air was now nearly all gone. The sun could be seen on the horizon. And, suddenly, he could see nothing; he could feel nothing. His body went limp.

Chapter 2: Freedom...sort of...

Darkness. The first thing he could see was a ceiling above him. It wasn't his cell's stone ceiling, it was wooden. He was warm. Very uncomfortable. Were the Mechanists right, then? Had he entered Hades harbor?

Wait. Whose voice was that? It was a girl's, soft and soothing, whispering words of comfort into his ear. Had he then gone to the Builder? No, he refused to believe there was such a thing. He would not give into Hammer superstition. He hadn't died: he couldn't have.

As if to confirm this, he felt a soft hand gently caressing his face. He tried to say something, but his lips didn't move. He tried again. This time his lips moved, but the words didn't come. Her finger touched his lips to silence him.

Things went dark again.

* * *

It was several weeks before the thief could get out of his bed and a few more before he could move around. Everyday he saw her, but she refused to talk to him other than to tell him to refer to her as his "hostess". His "hostess" lived in an expensive house: he was served his meals on gold, glass and bone china. All the food she and her servants fed was rich and delicious wines, fruits, meats and pies. He didn't like to think that he had any weaknesses – curse them – but he knew he had one for fine food. This recovery from the torture wounds inflicted by the Mechs was spoiling him, he told himself, especially when his hostess served him every, or nearly every day.

As the thief examined the gold-rimmed cup of wine in his hand, he pondered that if his hostess wasn't so beautiful and if he wasn't so wounded, he would rob her mansion clean.

He heard many voices in the rooms beside and below him. Some nights they woke him from his sleep by their party laughter and yelling. Other times it was just servants by their cleaning.

Several times a man came to see his hostess. One night, when the thief was at the beginning of his recovery, he actually saw the man. That was the only time he saw his face, though.

He was awoken from his sleep by low voices; this was one time he did not curse his ears for being so sensitive. The stranger and his hostess were standing at his bedside. The stranger was asking her to tell him as soon as he was well.

"Do you think he'll do it?" she asked.

“What choice does he have?” the stranger asked. “We saved his life. If he’s an honorable thief, he’ll want to pay his debt back.”

“‘An honorable thief?’ ” She scoffed slightly at this. “And what if he isn’t an ‘honorable’ thief?”

“We’ll give him back to the Mechanists.”

“We paid enough to get him; I mean, a thousand for a half dead petty thief. You’d think we were getting Garrett,” she said. The thief didn’t like her description of him very much, but the last phrase pleased him slightly.

“Yes...” there was malice in the stranger’s voice. “I would give the world to have Garrett now.” After a few seconds pause, his hostess motioned the stranger to leave.

“We’ll wake him if we talk too much,” she told him. “He’s still badly wounded. I’ll keep you informed of his progress.”

As they were leaving, the thief caught a glimpse of the stranger. The stranger was a tall man, some where in his fifties, he thought, with a nice head of white hair and a clean-shaven face. There was something about his face that the thief didn’t like, though. There was malice, hatred in it, not aimed at anyone in particular, but at the world on a whole. In that sense, the stranger had a creepy similarity to his old landlords.

From that day on, the thief didn’t see the stranger again. He heard him and his hostess talk outside his door from time to time, to check up on his progress. He even heard the stranger curse the mechanists from torturing him so badly. But he never saw him again...

...Until the stranger paid him a visit one night, quite unexpectedly. It was not the type of night anyone would like to be out – not even a thief. The frequent lightning flashes illuminated half the city. The thunder cracked so loudly that, if he was a superstitious person, he might think that the Builder was waging war in the heavens. And the cold spring rain fell so heavily that they felt like little arrows.

That should have warned the thief that something bad was going to happen, but he didn’t seem to notice any of it. His hostess was in the same room, warming herself by the fire. Although she didn’t say anything, he knew she had been outside. Her wet shawl clung to her shoulders and her wet hair clung to her face. A big puddle of water lay at her feet. The thief just sat in his chair, his eyes fixated on her. He slowly sipped his glass of wine, his eyes never leaving her face. She blushed slightly when she noticed that he was staring at her. This made the thief slightly uncomfortable, so he looked away. Then, for the next five or so minutes, she stood there drying her hair by the fire, pretending not to notice that he was staring at her.

Then the stranger came in. No knock. No warning. He gave the hostess a quick, questioning, disapproving glance and sat in her chair across from the thief. She did not object to this rude action, but

in response to his unspoken question, explained: "The cat ran outside. I couldn't let him be found." The cat she was referring to was a thin, wet, black cat at her feet. The thief's hostess couldn't let her pet out for fear that he would be found: black cats were considered evil by the Hammers and white cats by the Mechanists. More Hammer and Mechanist superstitions...

"Well, he's alive," the stranger commented as he glanced over the thief, waiting expectantly for the thief's thanks.

The thief just nodded to the stranger. "You're very observant."

Although the stranger didn't find this particularly amusing, he didn't show it on his expressionless face.

"Our friend here is the one who saved you," his hostess informed the thief. She waited for his reaction; there was none. No signs or sounds of gratitude. He was as expressionless as the stranger. "He would like to ask a favor of you," she continued. Again the thief did not say anything. He was going to let them talk.

"What is your name?" the stranger asked the thief.

He was silent for a few seconds and then said, "My clients always call me 'He' and 'the thief'."

His hostess and the stranger looked at each other. "That's what he told me," she informed her friend. It pleased the thief to guess what they must be thinking.

"Your real name..." the stranger asked warningly.

"When I was younger," the thief answered, "the guards would just call me 'boy'. The people I begged from would call me 'brat' or 'scum'. The merchants I stole from called me 'thief' or 'hey you'. But my clients call me 'He' or 'the thief'. Take your pick."

The two hosts glanced at each other again. There was a mix of disgust and disappointment in their faces, although hers seemed a little softer; it seemed to say, 'We could have gotten someone worse'. The stranger frowned and nodded slightly. They were saying more to each other by not speaking than they were by speaking.

"Now that I've told you who I am, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me to who you are?" the thief asked. The stranger and the hostess looked at each other again.

"We are investors," the stranger slowly began.

"Then you must think I'm a lousy investment," the nameless thief said with a chuckle, noting that his question still wasn't answered.

They didn't deny or confirm this, but the stranger continued, "Sometimes things happen that weren't supposed to. Then the perpetrators have to pay."

“We had invested in something big...” the hostess continued. “Our client met an untimely end. We were never paid.”

“And you want me to...?”

“If we cannot have our pay, we will be paid in the blood of our enemies,” the hostess said, smiling slightly. The thief was taken aback by this. They did not save him because they wanted his skills as a thief; they saved him because they wanted an assassin. He glanced at his hostess; suddenly she didn’t look as beautiful as she did a moment or two earlier.

“I’m a thief. Not an assassin,” he told them.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to decide what you want or don’t want to do,” his hostess said sweetly.

He nodded. “What makes you think I’ll do this? I won’t just disappear and you’ll never see me again?”

“Because we saved your life. Because you’re an honorable thief, and you are going to pay your debt. And, if you don’t, I’ll have you hunted down and killed.”

The thief chuckled slightly and contemptuously at this. “So, who am I to kill?” he asked. “Or do I need to prove myself before you will tell me that?”

Chapter 3: The Test

His test was a nuisance. He couldn't believe he was working for such scum – curse them. He would have been glad to repay his debt if they wanted him to steal anything. But murder? No. True, he had killed a couple of people, but he would not kill someone because they 'ruined someone's deal'. Ordinarily he would have split now and disappeared into the night...but he had a great curiosity to find out who they wanted dead. He knew they weren't telling the truth, and he was determined to find out whom these people were and what their real reasons were for wanting someone killed.

Besides, it wasn't that big of a deal. Rob a big mansion. Find some incriminating evidence on Lord Ramsford. Steal the ring from off his finger. Don't kill the Lord or his wife. Get 1,000 gold. For an ordinary thief that would be nearly impossible; for him it was sissy stuff...more of a nuisance than a challenge.

Still, he couldn't be too good, or else they might realize he isn't as lousy as he pretended to be... Maybe, he thought, he shouldn't get as much gold as they wanted him to...

* * *

It was much warmer that night than the night before. The moon was full, though – curse it – illuminating everything. The thief carefully made his way through the city via the thief's highway, i.e., the rooftops. He stopped once or twice to give his sore body a rest. He couldn't believe how much like a sissy he felt; a little whipping, a little torture shouldn't have affected him so much.

The Ramsford Manor was situated at the end of the city, separated from the old neighborhood and its timeworn buildings by several acres of land. It wasn't hard for him to make his way off the rooftops through an abandoned building, and to find a crack in the stonewall surrounding the Ramsford's manor large enough to crawl through. So far everything was easy enough. Sneaking into the building would be a little more difficult, though.

Up the winding road to the main entrance of the manor were at least half a dozen patrolling guards. The moonlight made it harder to pass by them; he was even nearly spotted once. At the front door stood four guards: he wouldn't be able to come through this way. Curse them.

The best way to enter was through a small shed attached to the back of the building. The door was easily picked, and there were no guards inside – of human form, at least. Instead, there were several spiders – curse them. Maybe Lord Ramsford won't be as upset with him, the thief thought, when he finds out that he took care of his spider problem... Maybe not.

The manor was poorly guarded – many other places he had visited, including tiny town houses – were better guarded than that this. The Ramsfords must have very little money, he decided. Maybe it's just as well that he wasn't going to steal from them. He intended to ruin them enough as it was...

It was sissy stuff making his way from the back of the building to the cellar and then up to the first floor. No servants, no guards. Just a few rats, old furniture and some storage crates. There was a picture down there that looked as if it could have been worth a lot; after careful inspection, he decided it was. The thief had to pull himself away from it and head to the first floor.

There were a few guards on this floor, but they were easily avoided. There was nothing special to be found there, either, but some freshly baked bread in the kitchen, which must have been left out for the patrolling guards. It had such a delicious aroma that the thief had to steal one of the slices on the platter. He might have been a slimy money grubbing thief, but he had a weakness for fine bread. He thought on this a little as he searched the cabinets for a platter of butter or a bowl of jam. If he could have seen into the shadows behind him, he would have seen a slouching figure tensely watching him.

After washing three pieces of bread and jam down with some fresh water, the thief quietly cleaned his mess and headed to the next floor. As he was creeping up the shadowy stairs, trying to be silent in case this was a guard's patrol, he heard someone's careless footsteps behind him. This wasn't the first time he thought he had heard someone, and now he was sure he was being followed. Silently and expeditiously he climbed a few stairs to turn the corner. Leaning against the wall in the shadows, he waited for his stalker to follow him. He did. Grabbing his nemesis, the thief slammed him against wall while covering his mouth and pushing a sword against his throat. The stalker wasn't a 'he' at all, though. It was a girl. It was his hostess. She was clothed completely in taffer garb and had a dagger and blackjack at her side. Other than that, she was completely weaponless.

"What in hell are you doing?" he whispered hoarsely.

Shaking herself free of him, she whispered back, "What in hell do you think you were doing eating that bread? At any moment you could have been caught by a guard. Do you think he'd just ignore some taffer sticking his bread into a bowl of jam?!"

"I was hungry." It wasn't the best excuse he could have given, but it was the truth. "That's beside the point. What the hell are you doing?"

"Following you!" That answer was already a given, so she went on to explain, "I thought I might have been sending you out to your death. You seem like a decent taffer, so I thought I'd help you get out of trouble. I thought I'd have to rescue you after the first five minutes, but you've been doing fine now...until you stop for a snack."

He looked at her with an expression that said he was less than pleased. "I'm fine; now go home."

"Ordinarily, yes. But I can't trust you after the stupidity I saw."

That was not the answer he wanted. Pushing her down a step, he warned, "Leave now."

"Or what? You'll call the guards on me?"

There was no time to answer as they heard the sleepy muttering of a guard as he walked toward them. He was muttering, "Too tired. Can't stay awake. Need a snack. Must have some of Maria's bread."

This made the thief smile a bit as he pushed his hostess against the wall. The guard sleepily walked past them, not even aware of their existence.

"Come on," he whispered hoarsely, tugging on her sleeve. She might have been there to make sure that he didn't get into any trouble, but he didn't trust her for alerting the guards – especially after how pathetically she had been trailing him. If she did get caught, she would probably squeal on him, too. This meant that he would have to baby-sit her throughout the entire mission. He growled a bit under his breath at the thought. Curse her.

There were several large rooms on the second floor and an impressive balcony reaching across the length of the house. There was only one guard patrolling on that floor, and he had already gone downstairs for the remainder of the bread the thief had left him.

The thief and his hostess visited all the rooms but the main bedroom – each being less than impressively furnished and decorated. Then, instead of going into the main bedroom, the thief stopped in the shadows and told his hostess to follow him onto the balcony.

"What?" she whispered hoarsely. "Let's go get our objectives over with: we need to find some evidence on them and get the lord's ring."

"I know – just do as I say, okay?" he answered.

She followed him onto the balcony. They made sure it was clear of all guards before they made their way to the far corner of it. All the while his hostess followed him, quite bewildered.

Then, in one swift move, the thief grabbed her by the arm, pushed her over the balcony railing and held her swaying there by his firm grasp.

"What...what are you doing?" she cried. "Let me go."

"Fine." He let her arm slip through his hand and then caught it again. She let out a shrill gasp. "You have to be quiet or else you're going to get us both caught," he scolded.

Trying to grab onto the balcony with her other hand, she threatened him in a quieter voice; "I swear I'll kill you if you don't let me up right now."

He smiled slightly at this. "I don't think you're in the position to decide what you want or don't want to do," he quoted.

"Let me go," she answered.

"Not until you tell me who you are, who our slimy friend is, and who you want me to kill."

"I told you all that you're going to know."

"My arm is tiring," he said, loosening his grasp on her.

"Wait! Wait!" she gasped.

"Yes?"

"What...What do you want to know?"

"Your real name."

"Is that all?" she asked rather perturbed at the triviality of the question.

"I'd like to be able to call you something more personal than 'hostess' before I drop you," he answered.

"Fine. It's Alexandra."

"And our slimy friend's name?" he asked, referring to the stranger.

"Gregory."

"And who do Gregory and Alexandra want me to kill?" he asked.

"I can't tell you," she answered.

Her arm slipped from his hand and he grabbed her again. "Oops," he said. "I don't think I'll be able to catch you next time."

"Okay, okay. We want you to kill a thief."

"Who?"

"Garrett."

There was a long silence as he looked at her questioningly. "Why?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow – I'll tell you everything tomorrow. I swear. Just let me go now."

He stared into her eyes again to see if she was lying. He didn't think she was – he was good at reading the truth in people's eyes. "Let me up," she begged.

“Fine – I’ll take your word on it, as an ‘honest’ murderer.” In one smooth movement, he lifted her up over the railing and onto the balcony. “Let’s go,” he told her and turned toward the master bedroom.

Alexandra was not going to put up with someone treating her like that, though. She grabbed the dagger from her belt and lunged at him. He drew his sword and hit the dagger out of her hand and off the balcony. It bothered him to see such an expensive dagger being wasted; maybe, he pondered, on the way down he could find it. Or, if he had just dropped her, he could have taken the dagger off her belt later and it wouldn’t have been wasted. Oh, well. Pushing his sword against her throat warningly, he told her, “Let’s go.”

The master bedroom was the largest room in the entire house. Lord Ramsford and his wife were sound asleep when Alexandra and the thief entered.

The thief had found nothing at all that could be used against the Ramsfords, and the only other place to look would be in their desk. He pondered how he was going to search through it and get the lord’s ring off his finger without waking them up.

Alexandra had an unusual solution to their problem. She lit a candle and, borrowing the thief’s sword (which he was very reluctant to let her have), pushed the sword tip into the throat of Lord Ramsford. The lord woke up immediately, and, after being warned to be silent, woke his wife up. They were both very compliant and did not make a sound.

He could have been wrong, but it seemed to the thief that Lord Ramsford recognized Alexandra: looking at him and then at Alexandra, Lord Ramsford asked, “What’s going on here, Al-”

“Shut up and hand me your desk keys,” Alexandra commanded. He obeyed.

“What’s going on?” Lady Ramsford whispered to her husband. “What is Alexa-”

“Shut up,” Alexandra warned, as she rummaged through his desk. Noticing that the thief was watching her intently as she skimmed over the Ramsford’s letters, she snapped, “Get his ring.”

The thief frowned slightly at her tone of voice, but complied. Ramsford willingly surrendered his bejeweled fingers to him. “Sir Gregory sent you, didn’t he? If you give him my ring, he’ll use it to incriminate me,” Ramsford whispered to him. The thief ignored him and took a ring off his finger.

He heard some logs crackling and turned to see Alexandra standing next to the fireplace reading more letters. Not satisfied with what she found, she charged at Ramsford. Grabbing him by his nightshirt, she thrust the sword into his throat. “Are these all the letters you have?” He shook his head to confirm it. “Nothing else? Listen to me, damn it! Where are the other letters?” There was urgency in her voice.

“Did you look behind the clock?” he asked. “I’ll show you.”

Above the fireplace was a handsomely carved clock. Taking its back off, Ramsford produced a pile of letters. He handed them to Alexandra. She glanced at them, then at him, and muttered, “Well, these are no good.” She tossed them into the fireplace.

Things were starting to feel uncomfortable. Something was going on, but it definitely wasn't finding incriminating evidence on the Ramsfords. It seemed to the thief like it was just the opposite; she was trying to destroy incriminating evidence.

He probably would have said something, if the door wasn't slammed open at that moment. Two guards entered. Alexandra grabbed Lord Ramsford and put the thief's sword to his throat. "Drop your swords and leave the room, NOW!"

The guards looked questioningly at their master. Ramsford motioned for them to leave. "Go," he instructed. "Get out."

They slowly and reluctantly started backing up. "Drop your swords," Alexandra warned. Again they looked questioningly and reluctantly at their master. He nodded; they obeyed.

As soon as the door was shut, Alexandra released her prisoner and snapped, "Let's go".

The thief and Alexandra couldn't go through the main doors because there were two unarmed guards waiting for them. They ran out onto the balcony. A guard ran towards them from the other side of the balcony. The thief heard the other two guards open the master bedroom doors and retrieve their swords. They were surrounded; Alexandra looked around, panicked. There was nowhere to go.

The thief grabbed for his sword. "Give me that."

Alexandra resisted, though. "No, I'm a good fighter." They both struggled for the sword; the three guards charged at them. Grabbing Alexandra (who still held the sword), the thief flipped her over his shoulder and jumped over the balcony railing. "What in hell are you doing?" she cried. He let go of the railing and grabbed onto the balcony itself. She yelled again. The guards were baffled by these sudden movements and were slow to react.

"Hold on," the thief told her. And then he flung himself off the balcony toward a large, old tree. Grabbing a rope from somewhere on his belt, he lassoed a long branch. The weight of the two broke this branch and they went falling. It happened so fast that he himself was not even sure how he did it afterwards, but the thief grabbed onto a branch with one hand and grabbed onto Alexandra with another as she slipped off his shoulder.

He was scratched, stabbed, bruised and bleeding in several places, but he refused to feel a thing. His ears – curse them – were still ringing from when Alexandra had screamed in them. He had no idea someone could yell that loudly or that shrilly. His arms were also rather tired. She was definitely not a heavy woman, but he was getting sick of holding her up.

He slowly lifted his arm up until Alexandra could grab onto his waist and cling to him.

Meanwhile, on the balcony, one of the guards had gotten his bow and was aiming into the tree. Lord Ramsford held the guard's arm back and signaled him to stop. The whole house had been alerted by the commotion, and the guards were searching around the yard for the intruders.

“Don’t kill these criminals,” Lord Ramsford told the archer guard. “I want them alive.” To the other guards, he said, “No matter what, do not kill these two!!”

The thief made his way from branch to branch until he was several feet above the ground. Two guards had found them and started climbing up after them – this was especially difficult for them because they were both slightly overweight and in heavy armor.

To the right of the tree was a pond – it was deep enough for swimming. Making his way across a thick branch, the thief jumped into the pond. The guards, who had nearly reached them, now had to make their way down to get them. One fell and didn’t get up for several seconds. The other slowly climbed down.

While they were doing this, the thief and Alexandra climbed out of the pond. Alexandra had gotten some water in her mouth and could not stop coughing and choking. The thief had to drag her out of the pond and along the grass for a ways because she was coughing so hard.

The Ramsford Manor was in an uproar as the thief and Alexandra made their way across the trail, through the gate, and back onto the thieves’ highway.

Chapter 4: The Agreement

Gregory was not very happy. And that was an understatement. He sat in his chair and frowned.

“So,” he said at last, “you got no gold, no evidence and no ring.”

“I got a ring,” the thief replied. He tossed Gregory the ring he had taken off Lord Ramsford’s finger. Gregory picked it up and then threw it back at his feet.

“You fool! I said his ring.”

“I know – that is his ring.”

“HIS ring, fool! The ring with his seal on it!” Gregory roared, and he got up and paced across the floor.

The thief smiled; he glanced up at Alexandra, whose eyes glittered with amusement. “He had so many. How was I to know which one you wanted? Anyways, it was dark...” He noticed that the corners of Alexandra’s mouth widened slightly when he said that, but then she regained her same expression. The thief shrugged his shoulders and examined the ring. “It’s expensive,” he said comfortingly to his pacing companion.

“Expensive?! Is that all you care about, you stupid thief? Anyone could wear a ring like that! Anyone! Only one person would wear a ring with Lord Ramsford’s crest on it, and that would be Lord Ramsford himself! How am I to –” Gregory stopped himself there; he stopped pacing now and sunk back into his chair.

“How are you to frame him?” the thief asked. “I don’t know...” he muttered as he carefully examined the stone on the golden ring. “If you want his ring so much, maybe you should just ask Lord Ramsford for it,” he suggested. It gave him great pleasure to see Gregory’s face twist into such an ugly look of hate and disgust. “Well, since no one wants this,” the thief continued, “I’ll take it.”

Gregory reached over and grabbed the ring. “I guess not,” the thief commented.

After several seconds, Gregory slowly said, “You survived.” He noticed that the thief hadn’t eaten or drunken anything all day. He smiled a little; the thief guessed he was going to poison him. “You made your way into the Manor and out without getting caught. That’s something,” he continued.

“I threatened to kill ‘our hostess’ – that’s something else,” the thief countered. “I didn’t drink your arsenic wine. That’s something else.” Alexandra looked up in surprise at Gregory. His smirk told her that the thief was telling the truth.

“Are you going to tell me how and why I am to kill Garrett?” the thief asked.

Alexandra frowned at him. “If you had waited, you would have found out everything.” The thief didn’t believe she meant what she said.

“No. You couldn’t tell me, because if Garrett gets me, you don’t want your names known.” Gregory nodded slightly, so the thief continued, “Which is why you can’t tell me for what reason you want him dead, either, or else he could figure out who you are.”

“Exactly.” Alexandra agreed. “So now you understand why we won’t tell you.”

“I understand why you don’t want to tell me,” he corrected.

Gregory was pondering this when Alexandra said, “Just tell him. What does it matter if Garrett finds out? He won’t be able to hurt us anyways.”

Gregory looked uncomfortable at and unsure of the last statement, but he complied. “The mechanists are not very popular now. Karras had great visions. He could have changed the world. But...”

“Garrett came along,” the thief finished his train of thought. Gregory nodded.

“Karras and I were best friends. He was the man with the visions; I was the man with the wealth and know-how. When Karras died, everything died with him. All our plans, all our hopes.”

“All our dreams, and a dear friend to both of us.” Alexandra nodded in agreement.

“You’re breaking my heart,” the thief muttered. Gregory’s eyes bulged as he looked at him. “Don’t forget that he would have turned me into a little robot, too. I can’t feel too sorry for him.” The thief paused thoughtfully. “On the other hand, Garrett is big competition,” the thief reasoned. “It wouldn’t really be murder, since he is taking away my living... Hmm...”

Alexandra snorted in disgust at this.

“Well,” the thief decided. “I’ll do it. How much will you pay me for this?” Gregory raised his eyebrows at the impertinence.

“A thousand gold,” Alexandra answered. “And, since that’s how much we paid for you...” she trailed off.

“Why do you think we wanted you to get a thousand from the Ramsfords?” Gregory asked, smiling.

The thief frowned. Only a thousand? That was pretty cheap to get someone like him to do a job. He said out loud, though, “A high price to pay for someone whom you don’t even know will be able to do the job.”

“We needed someone dispensable,” Gregory answered. “Sometimes you have to pay a high price to get what you want. Besides, you are not the first we got.”

“You’re the fifth,” Alexandra answered.

“I wonder,” the thief began on a tangent, “you don’t know my name or who I am. What makes you sure that I am not this Garrett?”

Gregory laughed slightly at this. “Because Garrett wouldn’t have gotten caught.”

That was a hard blow for the thief, but he didn't show it. Instead he smiled and answered, "True."

"And, from what I heard, you seem to have a thing for fine bread," Gregory continued, enjoying seeing the thief send Alexandra an evil glance. "I doubt Garrett has this weakness."

"Anyways," Alexandra sarcastically interrupted, "from what we've heard, Garrett struck the Clayton's Mansion last night while we were swimming in the Ramsford's pond."

"Really? And how do you know that was Garrett?"

"He met with one of our contacts. Our contact sold him the floor plans for the mansion. It would have been completely impossible for any other thief to do this job."

"And you want me to kill him, how?"

"He's meeting with our contact tonight to pay him. You will follow him through the city and execute him."

"Why not do it while he's talking to your contact?"

"Because if you mess up, we don't want our contact getting hurt."

"I'm that incompetent, then?" the thief asked.

* * *

The thief was just about to go to sleep when he heard a knock. He slipped a dagger into his sleeve and swung the door open. It was Alexandra.

She slipped into the room, looking more than a little nervous. "I know you should be sleeping now, because you have a job tonight," she started. "That is what I must talk to you about. When I told you that I was following you to keep you safe last night, that WAS the truth. At least, half the truth."

"Yes?"

"You seem like a decent man. Not at all like any of the other thieves we've hired. All of the others were scum – I was glad to see them go. But you, you've always been honest. A gentleman." The thief was slightly taken aback by this description. "Perhaps a little cocky," Alexandra continued. She looked up to see the thief staring at her, questioningly. "You said you were a thief, not a murderer. Then why are you taking this job?"

"Like you said, I'm not in the position to decide what I want or don't want to do."

She frowned. "Not everything that I say I actually mean."

“So what DO you want me to do?”

“Exactly what you said you would do – disappear into the night. I could arrange it for you.”

“Why? Why are you so concerned that I’m going to kill this thief? Why weren’t you concerned that the other ones were going to kill him?”

“Because they were scum – petty, violent thieves and murderers who would never be able to do it. And they didn’t.”

“But I - ”

“Yes. I’m sure you’ll be able to. Out of all the thieves the Mechs had, we chose you because you were actually found INSIDE the building – because of how much loot you had gathered.”

“I’m sorry,” the thief said. “I told you that I would get Garrett. I intend to.”

She was stunned. “Why?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Just because.”

She looked at him for a second in utter disbelief. She headed toward the door, but then turned and faced him again. “I’ll pay you. I’ll give you a thousand – five thousand – gold, and I’ll help you disappear.”

He shook his head. There was a look of surprise and despair in her eyes. The thief opened the door and motioned her out.

Chapter 5: The Assassin Thief

It was nearly midnight by time Garrett came to see “the contact”. The thief was hiding in a corner, and Garrett entered, paid the “contact” for his map, and left without realizing that anyone else was with them. It was easy to follow Garrett around the city streets, through the sewers and in the shadows, until they finally reached his destination: a crumbly old building in the deserted part of town.

The thief couldn’t help think to himself what a lousy thief this Garrett was. His path through the city was dangerous and nearly got him caught several times. Also, he should have known he was being followed. Or, the thief thought, maybe Garrett WAS a good thief, but he was an even better one. He smiled to himself; that was a better idea.

Garrett made his way into the crumbling building. The desolate, deserted structure had neither doors nor locks. It wasn’t a very nice place to live, but it was a perfect place to hide. The floors squeaked when they were walked on, so the thief couldn’t go in without being heard. “Okay, so he’s smarter than I thought.”

The only light around this area was from a street lamp in the distance, the bright moonbeams, and a fire in Garrett’s hideout. Selecting an area with lots of shadows, the thief picked up a brick fallen from one of the nearby wrecks and threw it against the wall. He heard a sword being drawn and, from the light of the moon, he saw Garrett slowly creep out of the house.

Garrett looked around, tense and ready. There was not a sound to be heard but the crickets chirping in the walls. He smiled. “It was just a rock falling off the wall”, Garrett thought.

Then Garrett felt a blade tip dig into his back. Before the thief knew what had happened, Garrett turned around and swung at him with his sword. The thief blocked this blow and, with one smooth move, knocked the sword out of Garrett’s hand. This took Garrett aback. Then, without warning, his attacker dug his sword into his chest. Garrett’s eyes, full of fear and shock, met the hard, merciless eyes of his attacker. “Why?” he whispered.

The thief removed his bloodied sword and whispered back, “Because I am Garrett.” The wounded thief felt a hit to the head and then he saw nothing. His limp body fell to the ground at Garrett’s feet.

* * *

When Garrett arrived at Alexandra’s guesthouse, both she and Gregory were waiting for him. One was happy to see the bloody body over his shoulder, while the other, Alexandra, burst into tears at the sight. It appeared to Garrett, as he tossed his imposter to the ground, that she had been crying for a long time before he came.

Gregory looked at the body smugly. "Turn it over," he instructed. Garrett did as he was told. "For the first time, I get to see the face of my enemy."

Alexandra, who was sitting in a chair by the fire, cried even harder. Gregory smiled as he saw her reaction.

"You have done well," he told Garrett. He tossed Garrett a bag of coins. "Here, for your fine work." Staring at the body, he went on, "It feels like years that I've been waiting for this moment. And, now, for only two thousand gold, I have it."

"My debt is paid," Garrett told him.

"Yes," Gregory agreed. "You are a man of your word. You are a great thief. A master assassin. I hope that little something is enough for your troubles," he said, referring to the heavy bag of gold. "You have killed your biggest competitor, thief. Now, how would you like a job? I'll pay you for this one, too."

"I'm listening," Garrett told him.

"Unfortunately, we have both been used. I should have known it, actually." He glanced meaningfully at Alexandra. Garrett looked at Alexandra, but she looked away. She glanced at the body and hid her face in the couch as she cried.

"Just after you left, I caught her sneaking after you. She tried to deny it at first, but I've had my suspicions about her for a long time. She confessed to everything: she's been working for the pagans all this time. She sent messages to Viktoria, warning her of our plans. After all that her father did to further our cause; after all the faith Karras put in her; after he forgave her for having a pagan mother, she betrays him to his death! She sells him out." Gregory was furious, getting angrier by the second, as he paced up and down. "But, once a pagan, always a pagan."

Alexandra looked at him defiantly. "I never helped you. My father was ashamed that my mother was a pagan, and he was willing to do anything to stop me from being one. Pagans are stupid. Hammers are stupid. I had no desire to be either. The Mechanists had so many things right; they knew so many things that the Hammers didn't. But Karras... Karras was a nut!" Gregory slapped her face at this, but she continued talking anyways. "I had to find out what Karras was doing. I contacted an old friend of my mother's, the tree lady Viktoria, and I kept her up to date with all of Karras' schemes. She kept me aware of all of Garrett's moves ahead of time, and I supplied her with maps and information for him – as much as I could gather, at least."

"And who was your contact?" Gregory asked.

"I have many," she defiantly answered.

"But Lord Ramsford is one, isn't he? Isn't he? That's why you followed the thief, to make sure that he didn't get anything." Alexandra didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Garrett already understood why

she told him that 'half the reason' she followed him was for his sake. And he already knew why she had burnt the letters: they were dangerous for both her and the Ramsfords.

"Well, now," Gregory told Garrett. "I need an assassin, and, as you have proven to be so accomplished, I thought I'd give you the job of getting rid of her."

Garrett looked questioningly at Alexandra, waiting for a reply to this. "You said you weren't a murderer," she told him. Garrett didn't say anything. "Do you think he won't kill you after he's used you? You know too much – you've seen too much – for him to let you live."

"I will pay you an hundred gold..." Gregory said, completely ignoring her.

"Two...thousand," Garrett corrected as he pointed an arrow at Alexandra's chest.

"Not in here, please," Gregory asked. "The next room – the smell of blood makes me queasy."

"Understood," Garrett told him. He lowered his bow. And then, quite suddenly, raised it again and shot Gregory right through the heart.

Chapter 6: A Conclusion

The imposter slowly opened his eyes. He was lying on a warm bed, and he could hear some wood cracking on the fireplace. Garrett was above him. He instinctively backed away, which caused him great pain in his chest and head.

“Stop,” Garrett told him. “You need to rest.”

“Who are you?”

“Garrett. I’d advise you don’t ever take my identity again, by the way,” he warned.

The thief looked down at his nicely bandaged wound. He knew from its feel that it was neither deep nor deadly; it was a painful puncture of his flesh. It must have bled badly, though, because he felt very weak. His head was killing him, also, and from his choppy memory of the event, he knew he had been hit on the head with a blackjack. “Why?” he asked.

“Because I needed a body...and vengeance, because you stole my name.”

“I didn’t – I swear,” the thief protested. “My name really IS Garrett. I sometimes don’t correct people when they think that I’m you, but I’ve never claimed to be you.”

Garrett scoffed; it was the same thing. “Make sure your clients know from now on,” he warned. The wounded thief eagerly agreed. Garrett got out of the chair beside his imposter’s bed and headed toward the door. Before he slipped out, Garrett nodded to the wounded Garrett’s nightstand and told him, “For your wounds.” The door shut. The wounded Garrett turned to the nightstand: on it sat a bag with at least a thousand gold in it. His eyes bulged. He yelled, “You can wound me again, you know!”

* * *

Garrett made his way into Lord Ramsford’s bedroom. He knew the place pretty well this time around. The guards were perhaps a little more alert and he didn’t find any more bread to snack on. That actually disappointed him.

As he crept into the master bedroom, he glanced over to make sure that both the lord and lady were asleep. They were. He then meant to put the lord’s ring on his nightstand beside him, but something glittering caught his eye. A stool was awkwardly placed in front of the balcony doors. On the stool was a sword, a dagger, a loaf of bread and a letter. Garrett glanced around suspiciously, and then cautiously lifted the letter. It read:

“Garrett:

It is an honor to be robbed by such a distinguished thief. My lady was thrilled by the night's events; she believes it will add some distinction to our poor estate. More importantly, though, she now has a story to tell and exaggerate to all her friends. And what a story! I could not believe my eyes when I saw you jump onto that tree! Even if my lady told her friends the truth, which she never does, I doubt they would believe her! If I did not see it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe her, either.

Our mutual friend" – Garrett guessed that this must mean Alexandra – "told me that you meant to return my ring. I thank you." Garrett's eyes bulged, and he silently cursed Alexandra's big mouth. "I hope you do not mind. She would have told me the night you were coming, but she was being too closely watched. She had been for some time now, so we've had to give up contact.

Also, our mutual friend told me that you had a weakness for Maria's bread. She is an excellent cook." This time Garrett nearly choked from surprise. "I had Maria make you a loaf, and I had her give our mutual friend her secret recipe.

After you left, my guards found a dagger and sword under the balcony. I was told that you were very distressed to have lost them." Garrett frowned – Alexandra again. "I do not know if that was because they have special memories to you, but I am reluctant to believe that it is only because you are a miserly thief, as our mutual friend told me. Whatever the reason, they are yours, so please take them.

Your friend,

R

By the way, thanks for taking care of our spider problem."

Garrett frowned, a deep, ugly frown. Then the frown lightened into a smile.

When Lord Ramsford awoke the next day, he found that the dagger, sword, bread and letter were taken. In its place was an old picture with his ring on top of it. The picture, he realized after careful examination, was one that they had put in the cellar many years earlier. Stuck in the corner of the frame was a little note. It read:

"R:

I'd show this to Edgar on Shore Street by the docks. If he offers you anything less than 50K, tell him who sent you. The bastard won't mess with you then.

G"

* * *

Lord Ramsford never met the thief Garrett again after that one night. In a few months, he and his wife were invited to a party by the rich and influential Lady Alexandra. There they met a “close friend” of hers, a certain silent and nervous “Sir” Garrett. When Lord Ramsford thanked “Sir” Garrett for returning his ring, the man denied having any knowledge of what he meant. He saw a gleam of amusement and understanding in Garrett’s eyes, though, and he also noticed that the bread they served was made with Maria’s recipe.

After that one party, the Ramsfords didn’t see Garrett again for nearly three months. In that time, Sir Gregory was discovered murdered in his house. His estate was robbed clean. The Hammers were not overly upset that a strong Mechanist supporter was murdered, and their “investigation” determined that Gregory “must have committed suicide”. Although Ramsford pondered how Gregory could have shot himself through the heart with an arrow, he did not raise these questions.

This startling piece of news was soon short lived, because of the increasing number of kidnaps and disappearances in the city. These stories gave his wife much to talk and speculate about with her friends. Even more startling than these disappearances was the robbery of a popular museum, the burning of an old Hammer clock tower, and the rumors of a satanic creature commonly called “the hag”.

Because all this was going on, very few people aside from Lord Ramsford and his wife cared that or even noticed that Lady Alexandra and her friend Sir Garrett were married and adopted a handsome peasant girl. No one else seemed to care, either, about the rumors of the add-ons to their mansion: secret passages, glyph messages, and a complete training area. Oh, well, if you’re rich, you can build any kind of crazy house you like.

The End