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PERCEPTION AND DEGREE

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PERCEPTION AND DEGREE

By

Jason Redmon

THESIS

Submitted to
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

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ABSTRACT

PERCEPTION AND DEGREE

By

Jason Redmon

“Perception and Degree” is the story of two people from diametrically opposed walks of life coming to the understanding that not everything they’ve heard about “the other side” is necessarily true. When a young Thief of the Guild breaks in to the King’s Officer’s Academy on a dare, he runs into Gabrielle Ni’sho, a soon-to-graduate Noble student of the Academy. In the confrontation that follows, blood will be shed, perceptions will shift and desperate bargains will be made. Less a morality tale and more an exploration of the forces that drive and shape the beliefs of individuals, “Perception and Degree” attempts to set all sides of an argument forth, leaving the reader to decide who to trust, and whether the decision to end a life is justifiable or not.

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Dedication

For Mom and Dad, who read every story I've ever written—no matter how trite or juvenile.

And Kim, who stood beside me, put up with my, "I'll never get this finished," fits of self-pity, and who never let me back down from writing something for myself for a change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis follows the guidelines set forth by the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, and the Department of English.

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Chapter 1: Booze and Break-Ins

Finding the Royal Military Academy—otherwise known as Versomme—turned out to be one of the easiest things Ryohvahlen (Ryoh to his friends) had ever had to do in his life. The Academy itself was comprised of an old, yet pristinely preserved castle, all of well-polished and bronzed stone—an architectural throwback to the styles of bygone days. The castle proper rose to a height of roughly four hundred feet—with twelve spires jutting out an additional hundred feet or so into the sky at regular intervals around the school. Catwalks connected the spires to each other, and long, delicate-looking staircases ran from the spires down into the upper levels of the Academy’s main building.

It was a pretty damned impressive—and although he hated to admit it, imposing—sight. Standing well over six feet and possessing a build and confidence that only years of training at the Thieves’ Guild in Orminster could have granted him, Ryoh wasn’t exactly an unimpressive sight himself. He’d been at the game of Thievery in one form or another for most of his life, and because of the length and breadth of his experience with the various dangers and pitfalls that came with his profession, it was a rare thing indeed for him to be impressed by—or scared of—much of anything these days.

Versomme, however, scared him. Just a little.

Between Ryoh and the castle lay a wide moat, probably infested with all sorts of nasty creatures that would’ve found an unwary Thief quite tasty, had he deigned to take a swim with them. Above the moat rose a stonework wall that encircled the castle on all sides, rising about a hundred feet or so into the air, and crowned with cruel spikes that glinted in the light of the moon. The only break in this barrier occurred some fifty yards

in front of Ryoh, on the other side of the moat, where the drawbridge and gate had been set into the wall to allow admission to the school for those waiting outside.

The drawbridge, of course, was up.

“Well,” Ryoh breathed to himself, “I did lose the bet.” He sighed at the injustice of betting with a well-known cheat, cursed his damnably bad luck at the same, and wondered, not for the first time that night, why he’d ever been so insane as to agree to try to break into a place as heavily guarded and famous for killing intruders as Versomme.

Of course, he knew why he was here; he was an idiot. An idiot who’d allowed himself to be goaded by the actions of one Asbuck-plowing officer who thought his status and rank protected him from everything.

Earlier in the day, Ryoh had been sitting at a table in The Sleeping Dog Tavern, in the city of Crofsen, with his longtime friend and fellow Guildmate, Claude Dagalier. As was their custom, they’d been downing a “few” beers, discussing the latest job they’d been hired to pull (as professional Thieves, they worked solely by contract; personal jobs rarely netted anything that could be fenced at a higher rate than their contractual clients were willing to pay), the state of the pending war between their home nation of Alfana and the neighboring kingdom of Kulotz, and whether or not they’d been able to get anywhere with their latest amorous interests. On a normal day, Ryoh and Claude would’ve been content to drink themselves into a near-stupor and stumble home at about the time the “respectable” customers were coming into the Sleeping Dog for dinner, but this particular day was destined to be anything but normal.

“So whatever happened with that job you were pulling for Duke Ercres,” Claude had asked him, shaking his beer glass to dislodge the last stubborn drop into his mouth.

“That old buffoon?” Ryoh shook his head and laughed. “You’ll never believe it. The fool hired me to filch something from the Gorud estate—and get this—it was the same stuff the Goruds had hired me to take from Ercres the week before! If it weren’t for the fact that both families had their empty little heads stuck up their backsides, I might’ve felt bad getting paid to do the same job twice.”

“Nobles,” Claude said with a snort. “They’re so goddamn concerned about who has the most expensive, impressive hoard that they miss the fact that the things we’re stealing are less valuable than the money they’re paying us to acquire them.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Ryoh said. He gestured to a passing waitress to bring another round to the table, and then returned his attention to the conversation at hand. “Most of the Noble families have more money than sense anyway, which is a good thing for us. I don’t see any reason to go about educating them on the error of their ways.”

“It’s kind of funny, though,” said Claude. “They’re so sure that a simple accident of birth makes them superior to the common folk that they never stop to consider the fact that we’re robbing them blind, even when we’re not stealing anything from them.”

“Hey, if snobbery and being a complete fool go hand in hand, I say let ‘em have both. I personally enjoy lining my pockets with their gold—especially when they give it so willingly.”

The conversation stalled for a moment as both men accepted full glasses of beer from their waitress, and each took a long pull before setting the glasses back on the table.

“I can’t believe we drink this piss,” Claude said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Yeah, I know—but commoners aren’t allowed to brew beer anymore, remember? Royal Edict number whatever. I wouldn’t be surprised if the blue-blooded

bastards that brew this rot really did piss in it; being the only game in town, they could probably get away with it.” Ryoh took another pull from his beer, made a face, and set his glass back on the table.

“I would think common trash like yourselves would be used to drinking urine by now,” said a condescending voice from just behind Ryoh. “Or are you getting ideas above your station again?”

Without bothering to turn around and look at the source of the voice, Ryoh raised an eyebrow at Claude and said, “Huh. I didn’t think most Nobles would bother to talk to gutter trash. I guess someone’s getting ideas below his station—but we shouldn’t be that surprised, I imagine he’s used to having things below him.”

“Like his sister,” Claude said with a smirk in the direction of the voice.

“Gotta keep the wealth in the family somehow,” Ryoh agreed, leaning back a bit further in his chair.

“You would do well to mind your tongue,” snapped the voice behind Ryoh. Its owner, a short man with perfectly curled brown hair and a softening midsection, stepped to the center of the table and placed his gloved hands on the wooden surface near Ryoh’s beer. “It would be a pity if such a sharp instrument had to be cut out.”

Ryoh smiled at the man—clearly a Noble, and an officer in the King’s Army, judging by the red tabard he wore over his clothing—and raised his beer in mock salute. “Indeed. I would be deprived of the incredible oral pleasure of drinking your piss! Er, beer, I believe your kind calls it. Sorry for the mistake.”

“You Thieves think you’re so goddamn clever,” the Noble spat. “You think just because you do us a service that you are above our vengeance. That thought is a mistake, you filthy animals, and someday you will see that.”

Ryoh opened his mouth to say something biting, but was stopped short when the Noble grabbed his beer glass from the table and poured the remaining contents into Ryoh's lap, soaking the crotch of his pants.

In nearly the same instant that the beer hit his lap, Ryoh was out of his chair and on his feet, his hand halfway to the hilt of a dagger he kept concealed at his waist—and there he froze.

For a moment, the tavern was silent, all eyes upon the Noble and the two Thieves. Relations between the Thieves and their well-bred clients were strained at even the best of times (most folks had bets on when and where the ties that bound the two groups together would finally break and blood would be shed). Fortunately for the Noble, it wasn't today.

"Oh no," he said softly, chuckling as he moved his hand away from the dagger. "I've let you fools bait me before—I'm not going back to the stocks for you."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked the Noble, in a voice that carried the quality of sour honey. "If you wish to draw your weapon, by all means, draw it. We can settle this like men. No need to get the city guard involved."

"That's very kind of you," Ryoh returned, brushing at his lap before resuming his seat. "But if it's a contest between men you're after, I'd suggest you find yourself a replacement fighter."

The Noble bristled at this comment, but said nothing. Ryoh knew that the Noble had some inkling of how a fight between them would turn out, and the pampered idiot probably wasn't in any hurry to see what his insides looked like.

Ryoh had been at the game of Thievery long enough to know that jumping the Noble wouldn't serve any purpose. In fact, if he attacked the smug bastard and was

reported for it, he'd be brought down on sight by the city guard. Trips to the stockade were never any fun—the last time Ryoh'd been hauled in, it had been from the very tavern in which he now sat, and for much the same reason. The scars on his back weren't even fully healed from his last stay in the stocks—he wasn't going back. At least, he wasn't going back for this empty-headed buffoon.

That didn't mean that he wasn't going to get even with the son of a whore, though. He'd just have to find a way to do it that wouldn't end with a blade in his gut or his arms in shackles.

As if in response to his sudden need for inspiration, an idea came to him, and he winked across the table at Claude.

“Hey Claude,” Ryoh said, gesturing to his crotch, “I think I have Noble blood after all! Look, I piss beer!”

“Yeah, I think you do!” Claude said with a grin, picking up on Ryoh's joke without needing an explanation. “Think we could bottle that and sell it?”

“Well I'll be damned, what a fine idea! We could quit being Thieves and become brewers,” Ryoh said in a voice filled with mock enthusiasm. “We're gonna be rich!”

“Hey,” he continued, turning to the Noble, “tell your mother I said ‘thanks.’ I knew something good would come of bedding that old hag!”

At this, the Noble turned a deep, florid color, and hissed, “You will regret that, filth!” Turning on his heel, the Noble stalked out of the tavern, fists clenched tightly at his sides.

After a moment's stunned silence, applause erupted from the other patrons of the tavern (the Sleeping Dog was a haunt for common folk), and someone placed another beer in front of Ryoh as he resumed his seat at the table.

“I think that went rather well,” said Claude, grinning at his friend from across the table.

“Aside from the wet crotch, I’d have to agree. Nobody got killed, I got a free beer, and we got a laugh out of it.” Ryoh tipped his chair back on its hind legs and took a long, self-satisfied swallow of beer.

“Still,” Claude said, “someone ought to teach that well-bred son of a bitch some manners.”

Ryoh shook his head. “Wouldn’t do us any good to try to jump him; we only get left alone so long as we don’t attack Nobles. Besides, I’ve already got one count of assault on a Noble against me. The law says we get three non-lethal ‘mistakes,’ but you know how jumpy the guard can be. I’m not in any hurry to swing from a tree in some forgotten field.”

“Neither am I. There’s a problem with your view on this, though. We don’t get hung for hurting Nobles—we get hung for getting caught at it.”

“True enough,” Ryoh admitted. “What did you have in mind?”

Claude thought for a moment, resting his chin on the edge of his glass. “Well, the officer’s bar isn’t too far from here; three or four blocks down Duli Road, no more.”

“Wouldn’t that be a little obvious? I mean, the guy did just pour beer in my lap; hitting an officer’s bar would get the finger pointed right back at us.”

“Not necessarily. We could go at night, disconnect the taps or something.”

Claude tapped his glass with a fingertip. “But only hitting the bar might be a little suspicious, you’re right about that.”

“Two hits in one night? We’re gonna be busy,” said Ryoh.

“Not if we do them separately,” said Claude. “Isn’t the Noble officer academy supposed to be within a few miles of Crofsen?”

Ryoh stared at Claude for a moment before he answered. “Versomme. You mean Versomme. I think that piss-water’s getting into your head, Claude. We can’t hit the goddamn academy.”

“Why not? You’re not scared, are you?”

“Of being cut into neat little chunks by the psychos they train over there? Bet your mother’s eyes I am!” Ryoh took another slug of beer and looked away from the table, out a nearby window. “There are still things I want to do before I wind up in an unmarked grave somewhere. It’s hardly worth doing something as risky as breaking into Versomme over a little spilt beer.”

“Who said this had to be a life and death proposition,” Claude asked, grinning at the back of Ryoh’s head. “I figure one of us can get in, take something embarrassing from the main building, and then display it somewhere prominent here in town. Away from our safe houses, of course.”

“Like what,” said Ryoh, turning back to face Claude.

“Eh—just something that obviously belongs to the academy. Say a crest or something.”

“And just one of us would be going,” Ryoh asked. “Any particular reason for one guy to take all that risk on himself?”

“Simple,” answered Claude. “While one of us is hitting Versomme, the other will hit the officer’s bar—we’ll get ‘em twice in one night, and they won’t know which way to look for the culprit. C’mon, Ryoh, you know you want to teach those snobby bastards

a lesson or two; yeah, it's risky, but since when has our line of work not carried the threat of a messy death?"

Ryoh seemed to consider this as he drained the last of his beer. Then he banged the empty glass down on the table—a little harder than he really had to—and said, “Oh, why the hell not. How are we deciding who goes where? The usual?”

“You know it,” said Claude, and he ordered two large beers to be brought to their table.

When the beer arrived (in great tankards that were easily three times the size of the glasses that Ryoh and Claude had been drinking from to this point), Ryoh looked across the table at his oldest friend and smiled. “You’re sure you want to do this tonight? If you drink all of that, you’re gonna need a week to sober up.”

“Right, and you’re the heavyweight,” Claude shot back.

“Just don’t cheat this time,” Ryoh said, hefting the tankard.

Claude laughed at this, and said, “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” said Ryoh.

“Go!”

Ryoh sighed, and shook his head to bring himself back to the present. As he’d expected, Claude had cheated—kicked him in the shin under the table in mid-gulp—and he’d lost the guzzling contest. He’d known full well that son of a bitch wasn’t going to play fair—in the twenty years they’d known each other, Claude had *never* played fair—but he’d gone along with the contest anyway.

Which was, of course, why he’d ended up at Versomme, instead of with the easier job at the officer’s bar. Ah well; now that he was here, he might as well get on with getting in—standing outside the walls all night wasn’t going to solve anything.

The first problem was going to be getting across that moat. Ryoh knew without having to look that he didn't want to try swimming in that thing unless he absolutely had to. The tales of Versomme's moat creatures were many and varied, but probably not terribly exaggerated, judging by the number of would-be infiltrators that had previously tried to enter the school and never returned.

Walking closer to the edge of the moat and casting his gaze over the water toward the outer wall, Ryoh was able to see that it was hewn of a rough, porous rock – the kind that just begged to be climbed – as long as you knew what you were doing. If he could just get onto that wall, he'd be able to get in.

With a sigh, Ryoh looked down at the moat. The inky black waters lapped gently at the edges of the moat trench, mocking him with their relatively calm, peaceful sounds. He had a sneaking suspicion that there was something very large, nasty, and full of teeth staring at him from just beneath the surface of that water – and waiting for him to be lulled into thinking he could swim across.

“Sorry,” Ryoh said to the imaginary beast in the water, “but I'm not quite that stupid.”

Casting about for something that might help him cross the moat to the wall, Ryoh managed to lay eyes on a particularly flimsy looking twig, a rock, and a discarded leather glove lying in the grass nearby. Clearly he was on his own for this particular task, as whatever god was busy running things hadn't seen fit to supply him with something that might've functioned as a bridge – or even a vaulting pole.

“Well, damn,” Ryoh said to the night sky. “I really wanted to get in without having to resort to this kind of stuff, ya know?”

The sky, being its usual self, did not deign to respond to Ryoh's comment. Which was okay by him – it had never spoken back before, and he would have been a little upset if it started now – mostly because it would mean he'd have to start going to church.

Turning his back to the wall, Ryoh walked away from it for a moment, and then turned to face it again. He took a deep breath – then another – and a third for good measure. His hands felt clammy inside their leather gloves, and a bead of perspiration ran slowly down his forehead. A cold, slithering fear caressed his gut, and he fought down the urge to shudder. He did *not* want to do this.

The primary trouble with this little plan of his was that if he miscalculated at all – if he so much as missed a step, he was going to fall right into that moat. That in itself probably wouldn't have been the end of him, but he was fairly certain that whatever was swimming around in there wasn't going to allow him too much time to get back to shore. It wasn't necessarily going to be a do or die sort of attempt – but it would be far too close to be of any comfort at all to Ryoh.

He shook his head vigorously – this was no way for a trained Thief to be acting – certainly not one with his record, anyway. It was just a leap – he could do it. Why he was so afraid of creatures that might or might not have been swimming in that inky water surrounding the castle wall, he couldn't say – maybe it was the whole idea of being chewed up and digested by something he had no way of fighting back against that bothered him. Yeah, that was probably it – but better to ignore it for now, or else he'd never get over that moat.

With one final deep breath, Ryoh set his feet firmly, and then, coiling back a bit on his legs, took off at a sprint for the edge of the moat. His feet came down rhythmically against the grass underfoot, beating out a rapid staccato as he raced toward

the wall. His breath came in long deep pulls, which he held in his upper chest to keep his weight up off his legs as he moved.

When he was still several yards from the edge of the moat, he suddenly killed all his forward momentum by going into a deep crouch – and then, without further hesitation, he launched himself forward in a hands-first dive toward the wall. His fingertips came into contact with the ground a few feet further along, and he dropped his weight sharply downward, flexing his arms so that his head nearly hit the grass. He pulled his knees up to his chest as his momentum carried his lower body forward – and pushed them out again explosively, throwing himself further over the ground. The force he was generating now was tremendous – the slightest miscalculation at this point would be deadly.

He was the barest of inches from the edge of the moat when his boots again found solid purchase in the grass. Instantly he had again gone into a crouch, the energy his movements had generated working in concert with gravity to pull him out of it just as he thrust his legs hard against the ground, launching himself into the air once more. He soared out over the moat, moving much faster and rising much higher than most professional athletes would've been able to muster. The wall was rushing forward to meet him now, but he was also beginning to fall back toward the earth – no, toward the moat below...

Thankfully, Ryoh's gloved fingers found purchase in the stonework of the wall, and the rest of him slammed fully into it, flattening briefly against the unforgiving surface. He took a few deep breaths just to reassure himself that he wasn't sucking water into his lungs, and then risked a look down. The moat glinted darkly back up at him, not more than ten feet below. Several large ripples were moving out from the wall along the

water just below Ryoh's position, and then something very large splashed once and was gone, without Ryoh having ever seen it.

"Sorry," Ryoh said quietly to the thing in the moat below. "No Thief for you today – better luck next time."

Casting a glance up toward the top of the wall, the young Thief exhaled a great sigh of relief. The hard part was over, now it was time to get inside. Reaching up with his left hand, he found a bit of purchase in the wall above, and began hauling himself up the wall towards the top.

Moments later, Ryoh was crouched at the top of the wall, feet on either side of the row of spikes that mounted it, looking down on the hundred-foot drop into the courtyard below.

He could, if he was feeling particularly adventurous, test the new length of wire he'd purchased earlier in the week by rappelling down the side of the wall. Or, he could err on the side of caution and climb down the wall the same way he had come up the opposite side. But caution hadn't gotten him over the moat, had it? His track record for wise decisions definitely hadn't been good so far—why the hell should he start being careful now?

He took a moment to survey the interior yard of Versomme. There would be a night watch patrolling the grounds—he knew that much—but he couldn't see them anywhere in the yard at the moment. They were probably on the other end of the grounds, making a sweep to check the perimeter, meaning now would be the best time to move.

Reaching into one of the pockets of his coat, Ryoh produced a tightly-wound coil of thin, metallic wire, which he immediately began securing to a nearby spike. Tying the

wire into a complex knot, he gave the loose end an experimental tug, and then tossed the coil off the wall into the courtyard below. The man who'd sold the wire to him told him it was supposed to be able to support nearly a ton without snapping, despite being as thin as it was. Ryoh wasn't usually one to test such claims through trial by fire, but the wire was an infinitely more attractive option than climbing down the wall; or worse, jumping off. Looking back over his shoulder at the moat below, he grinned and gave it a mock wave, got a solid grip on the wire with both hands, and leapt off the wall and into the courtyard below.

As he fell, Ryoh swung his weight back in toward the wall until his boots came into contact with it. The instant his feet hit the wall, he pushed off again, letting gravity pull him down the wire toward the ground below as he swung out from the wall. He repeated this process until he ran out of wire, which was, unfortunately, about ten feet above the ground.

"Damn," he grumbled. It wasn't even that the drop was all that far; he was just annoyed that a perfectly impressive-looking entrance was going to be ruined by a wire that was ten feet too short to get him all the way to the ground.

With a sigh, Ryoh let go of the wire and dropped the remaining distance down the wall. The ground rushed up to meet him, and as his feet hit he went into a controlled collapse, allowing his legs to fold up under him as he settled all his weight onto the balls of his feet. His arms dropped to his sides, fingertips brushing the grass – and then he was down, crouching inside of the wall of Versomme.

For a moment he remained utterly still, listening for any sign that his rather dramatic entry had been noticed. As no alarm was forthcoming, and no sounds of alert

reached his ears, Ryoh relaxed. He stood and brushed himself off, and then looked around to take stock of his new situation.

The interior yard of Versomme, as it turned out, was no less impressive than its exterior appearance – but for entirely different reasons. A vast carpet of well-trimmed grass spread out before him, running in all directions until it met with the exterior wall, the walls of the castle itself, or the cobbled-stone walkway a few yards to Ryoh’s right, which lead from the gate to the main doors of the school. Towering trees lined this walkway at regular intervals, their ample branches swaying gently in the breeze. At the base of each tree was planted an encircling shrub, adorned with purple flowers and waxy leaves of the darkest green Ryoh had ever seen. Though spare, the landscaping of Versomme was, in its own way, breathtaking.

He was just about to head further into the grounds when he remembered the wire, dangling ten feet above his head. Looking up at it, he couldn’t see any way of getting it off the wall without climbing back up the entire thing and untying it from the spike he’d moored it to at the top. Which, he knew, would defeat the entire purpose of having rappelled down the wall in the first place.

“Probably could’ve thought that through a little better,” he muttered. The wire itself wasn’t going to draw a lot of attention, being no more than a hair’s breadth in thickness, but it didn’t do to leave evidence of illegal entry if one didn’t have to. He made a mental note not to tell Claude about the wire when he got out of Versomme.

As he began to move toward the castle proper, the sound of rushing water moved faintly over the air to greet Ryoh’s ears. Somewhere nearby there was a river – which likely meant there would be a waterline or two not too far off either – an excellent point of entry, if he could just find it.

Walking in the direction whence the watery sounds had originated, Ryoh soon found himself standing next to the outer wall of the castle, staring down into a torrent of rushing water flowing from the external wall, under the outer wall of the castle itself – presumably on its way to some communal tap or well. The river entered the castle through a low archway in the stonework, which was just tall enough for Ryoh to duck under, if he didn't mind getting a bit damp in the process. Considering his other options included barging in the front door or climbing the outer wall of the castle, he decided a little wetness wasn't going to bother him that much.

After a quick check of his equipment to be sure it was all securely attached, Ryoh stretched once, sighed about the injustice of breaking into places he didn't belong in having to be so damned hard, and then slipped into the river.

The chill of the water slapped him like a wall of ice, stealing the breath from his lungs and causing him to shudder violently for an instant. He quickly suppressed his discomfort and waded toward the archway in the wall. The rushing water rose to just above his waist, soaking him in places he'd much rather not have been wet in, and causing him a severe case of irritation at the same time. However, whining about his situation wasn't going to get him out of the water any faster, and so he pressed on.

When he reached the archway, he found that it opened into a long, pitch-black tunnel that ran under the castle much further than his unaided eyes could follow. The idea of walking in there blind and unprepared was just ludicrous – but really, what else was he going to do?

“What the hell is it with this place and goddamn water,” he whispered, his breath pluming on the air before him through his scarf.

There were all sorts of good reasons to turn back right now. Not least was the fact that he hadn't the slightest clue what to expect in that tunnel. The floor could suddenly sink beneath his feet, dropping him into the violent current that was even now tugging at his legs with great force. Or, the tunnel roof could lower, leaving him with little or no breathing room. Worse, a combination of the two could just drown him outright. At least he'd be saving the Versomme guards some trouble.

However, he couldn't turn back now – he was already inside, and had only a little further to go, he hoped, before he'd be inside the main school anyway. That, and all that grousing about teaching the Nobility a lesson wouldn't have done much for him if he'd returned empty handed.

Funny how bravado and professional pride could so often override common sense, he thought to himself. But what the hell? Common sense wouldn't have landed him as a Thief anyway—so what did he care for such things as basic survival instinct?

Other than the not dying part, anyway.

Heaving yet another sigh and shaking himself for courage, Ryoh resolutely moved forward into the tunnel, blinking repeatedly as the light from the stars outside faded into the obscurity of the tunnel before him. The floor beneath his feet was slick and treacherous, covered with all sorts of lichens and other slimy growth. Just once, his foot slipped, causing his heart to hammer violently against his chest—but he caught himself again quickly, and after a moment of feeling as if his stomach was going to try to climb out of his throat, he continued through the tunnel.

After what seemed the better part of an hour – but was probably more along the lines of five minutes (Ryoh had a distinct dislike for being wet and cold at the same time, which caused him to engage in a great deal of exaggeration regarding such happenings), a

light appeared at the end of the tunnel, guttering and dancing fitfully over the surface of the water.

The light, as Ryoh soon discovered, emanated from a single torch thrust into a support on a wall just above a ledge that jutted out over the river in which he was now wading. A few thick metal pipes ran over the side of this ledge and plunged their ends into the water below, leading Ryoh to believe that this was probably the main draw point for the school's water. This, in turn, meant he had just found a direct line into the school itself, likely through a processing room, which, if Versomme was built anything like other buildings he'd been in, would lead him into a kitchen area, or a furnace room, either of which would've been fine by him, so long as it got him away from this damnable water.

With the ledge in his sights and a bit of drying off on his mind, Ryoh slogged forward through the remaining distance, and reached up to grip the overhanging ledge with both hands. He hauled himself up out of the icy waters and stood, straddling one of the pipes with his feet. Then, taking a quick look around to be sure that no one else had decided to visit that part of the castle just then, he shook himself vigorously, sending water flying everywhere. The torch on the wall hissed and sputtered in protest as several flying droplets of water hit it and fizzed out of existence—but Ryoh paid it no heed.

After a moment, Ryoh ceased his shaking, and assessed his current condition.

Damp, he decided, with a faint smell of fish, likely from the river—but it was nothing he couldn't live with—although he wouldn't have balked at a fresh change of clothes.

He took a step forward, and his right boot squished loudly as a sudden gout of water issued forth from the breathable bits of the leather.

“Damn,” Ryoh muttered. “Can’t very well go sneaking around like this—I’ll squeak like a goddamn gutter rat the whole time.”

Reaching up to the torch on the wall, Ryoh seated himself and removed his boots—along with what felt like half the damn river—from his feet. Then, holding the torch at a respectful distance from his boots, he proceeded to dry them with the heat of the flame, doing the same for his soaked feet, legs, and waist in turn.

When he felt decently dry again, Ryoh stood and returned the torch to its place on the wall. Then he set out to follow the pipes to their origin.

The piping ran along the floor through a very narrow hallway, to a distance of about ten yards before turning a rather sharp corner. As Ryoh came around this corner, he nearly ran smack into a rather solid bit of wall.

The pipes, apparently, ran through the wall and into the castle by means of a submerged system. All except one of them, anyway, which ran up the wall at a flat angle, to a small aperture some twenty feet above Ryoh’s head.

“God damn it,” he growled. “This is starting to get irritating.”

It wasn’t even that it was a tough climb, really, but he just couldn’t seem to catch a break with this place. Of course, that was probably why Claude had suggested this place, now that he thought of it. That jackass always knew more about jobs than he let on—and he’d probably known Ryoh was going to run into all this Asbuck dung long before he’d ever decided to send him here.

With a grunt that was half irritation, half resignation, Ryoh gripped the pipe before him with both hands and braced his feet against the wall. Applying pressure with his legs and using it to counterbalance the gripping of his hands, Ryoh slowly shimmied up the pipe, hand over hand and foot after foot.

When he reached the aperture in the wall, Ryoh found that it was just large enough for him to squeeze into next to the pipe. The shaft that the pipe lodged itself in extended down to a corner before disappearing from Ryoh's line of sight – but there was at least a small amount of light to be had in there, so he wasn't going to be entirely blind. It was, he decided, a very good thing he wasn't claustrophobic, otherwise this would've been the end of the line.

Ryoh hauled himself into the opening with what he hoped was at least a trace of dignity, and began to crawl forward through the tunnel. The space inside was so restricted that he couldn't make any kind of real use of his legs, so he resorted to pushing his arms out before him, gripping the pipe, and then pulling himself forward. He had soon gained the corner that had prevented him from seeing the other end of the pipe, and for the first time since realizing he was going to have to jump that godforsaken moat outside, he began to feel pretty good about his chances.

There in front of him, just beyond where the turn had obscured his vision, Ryoh could see a kitchen. Pots and pans of all descriptions hung from hooks on the walls, and torches illuminated three large, marble-topped counters, upon which were arranged various utensils and bits of cutlery. In one corner of the room, a stove glowed with a dull rosy color – probably being kept warm for the morning meal. Apart from that, however, the kitchen was quite empty – which suited Ryoh perfectly.

Wriggling forward along the pipe, Ryoh was just starting to extricate himself from the tunnel when the torches in the kitchen suddenly flared up a bit brighter. With a yelp of surprise, he fell the rest of the way out of the tunnel and onto a loosely-stacked pile of boxes, sending them tumbling to the floor.

“Damn,” he muttered, preparing to right himself. But as he placed his elbows beneath himself to lift off the boxes, another voice, obviously startled – and, he noted, female – called out.

“Wh-who’s there?”

Chapter Two: Confrontation

Almost half past two in the morning, and still no sign of sleep. Sometimes insomnia's not such a terrible thing – and sometimes it just makes you want to cry.

Not that sleeplessness was something terribly new to Gabrielle Ni'Sho, but even still, she would've liked to have gotten more than four hours tonight. But it would seem that neither her own exhaustion, nor her rather stern commands to her brain to stop thinking for a change would allow her the rest she wanted so very much.

It had been like this for the past month or so now. She'd go for a few days with only a couple of hours of sleep, if that, per night, and then toward the end of the week she'd collapse and sleep for an entire day. It wasn't exactly a healthy cycle, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it, either.

She knew what the cause was, of course. War was brewing in the east, and with her graduation from Versomme only weeks away, she knew she'd be deploying to the front lines along with her classmates before long. Something about the thought of an impending and potentially messy death tended to keep people awake at night, and Gabrielle was no different.

It wasn't really that she was afraid to go to war. She was one of the top students of the clerical arts at the Royal Officer's Academy, Versomme—she'd known this day would come from the moment she stepped through the Academy's doors. The problems between her home country of Alfana and the neighboring nation of Kulots had been at a simmering point for the last ten years—no one was surprised that they were starting to boil over now. No, it really wasn't the prospect of going to war that bothered her—it was

what she knew she would see there that was eating at her. That, and a deep-seated fear that she was not prepared to be as effective on the battlefield as she had been told her training would make her.

As a medical officer, Gabrielle's chief profession lay in saving lives, rather than ending them. Like all officers in the King's Army, she'd been taught to use a blade, to fight with her bare hands, and how to kill quickly and efficiently—but really, her primary purpose on the field of war was to ensure that as many soldiers from her side lived through the fighting as possible. Through a combination of magic learned from expert Clerics and more conventional methods of binding wounds, she would be charged with keeping as many warriors on their feet as possible—and to ensure those who could fight no further received the care they deserved. She loved her work, mostly because it meant that someday soon, she'd be making a difference in the world around her—even if that difference amounted to ensuring that her fellow soldiers didn't have to suffer unduly.

However, after being at the academy for near on to five years, she was beginning to wonder if she really was ready for the battles to come. Blood didn't turn her stomach anymore, and she shrugged off splintered bones and gory puncture wounds easily—but up until now, all of her experience with wounded men and women had come under controlled conditions, in a closed environment. Once she was in the field, she would have to work when and where conditions dictated—under attack, out in the open, or otherwise. The thought that she might bungle a healing spell, or otherwise mismanage a wound under the pressure of a full-on attack unnerved her—and it had been doing so for a number of weeks now.

Sitting up in bed, Gabrielle ran her fingers through her long white hair and sighed. She'd often been asked what it was like to come from a Noble family – and it was never

easy to explain to people that it wasn't the fantasy they believed it to be. Not having direct control over your own destiny can be more than just a little annoying, after all—and that lack of control was the whole reason she was here, in this bed, worrying about whether or not she'd be able to save some soldier bleeding out on a field she had yet to see.

She rose from her bed and walked over to where her uniform hung on its peg on the wall. Pulling it off the peg, she sighed, resigned to another sleepless night, and slowly got dressed. She'd have to think about a shower later, but she had the late watch tonight, and it was time for rounds.

Before leaving the room, she stopped and picked her brush up from its place on the dresser, and stood before the mirror, smoothing her hair down. Middle of the night or not, there was no point in looking like a frazzled rat if she could help it. The thought almost made her laugh as she gazed into the mirror.

Gabrielle was a Shothian, one of the mouse-people of Sholensgrad, and, like most of the rest of her kind, she belonged to a Noble House – specifically the House of Ni'Sho, in the Hildebrandt Valley. Her body was covered, from the tips of her long, delicate ears to her toes in soft white fur. Two deep, liquid green eyes sat on either side of a slender muzzle that tapered to the gentlest of points at her nose. Her hands, furred as the rest of her, bore slim, and so she had been told many times by various suitors at her parents' home, elegant fingers that were tipped with long, sharp nails.

“More like claws,” she said aloud. “Horrible, ugly, awful claws.”

As she spoke the words, she could feel the hot tears rising to her eyes again – but she wasn't going to cry. She'd been doing enough of that lately – she wasn't going to give in to it now.

Though the war had been at the forefront of her mind for the last several weeks, she had other, less pressing matters weighing on her as well. Chief among them was the fact that she had no one to talk to about her worries over going into combat—in the five years that she'd been at Versomme, she had yet to develop a connection with any of her peers that amounted to more than a working relationship. She was beginning to wonder if it was her appearance that was keeping her fellow students at bay.

She knew she wasn't ugly – not to her own kind, at least. In fact, if modesty hadn't prevented her from recognizing it, she might've seen that, among Shothian women, she was actually considered very beautiful. Indeed, back home she'd always felt that she'd be okay in terms of boys—not least because they never seemed to stop coming to call on her during her breaks from the abbey.

However, when her parents had decided to arrange a marriage for her with a young Captain in the King's Army, she ran away. She wanted someone, yes, but she hadn't been ready for marriage then – especially not to someone she didn't even know. Certainly the young man had come to call a few times – but it had always been so formal, so dry – she never felt like she was actually getting to know him, just the act he was putting on to keep up appearances.

She shook herself. Her worry wasn't about finding a man to keep her company—all she really wanted was a friend. She'd proven to herself over and over again that she was quite capable of making it on her own, but there was a difference between, “doing things on her own,” and being completely isolated from a social standpoint.

The problem was that introductions had always been handled for her at home. Being a Noble lady of marriageable age, she'd been kept carefully away from casual contact with boys her parents hadn't approved of—and away from most of her fellow

ladies to avoid having them fill her head with “strange ideas.” All of her visitors had been selected and screened by her parents and her personal retainer, meaning that her social contacts were never of her own making. The experience had left her feeling very isolated, and almost entirely bereft of social skills.

The irony of the thing was that she was really very friendly—she just didn’t know what to say to get a conversation started with someone she didn’t know. She’d tried a few times, and after each attempt at opening dialog with another person had failed in its own spectacularly embarrassing way, she’d retreated into her studies entirely.

“Top of the class,” she said to the mirror as she set her brush down on the counter and turned for the door to her room. “Not a hard thing to do when there’s nothing to distract you from books and practice.”

As she shut the door to her room and started down the hallway to the stairs, she was struck by sudden a thought. What if it wasn’t her race or social awkwardness that was keeping her fellow students away? Could it be that her continued success in her classes and field training was making her something of a social pariah?

Possibly, she thought, as she made her way down the stairs to the ground floor. Her parents had always told her that jealousy followed in the footsteps of success—but she couldn’t imagine anyone being jealous of the girl who sat by herself at every meal and was always off in the corner with a textbook while everyone else was chatting or playing games.

Maybe she’d isolated herself by being so bookish. But she’d tried to make friends, she really had. Besides, she could keep up with the young men in combat practice, and was top of the female cadets when it came to swordplay too—it wasn’t as if

all she knew how to do was study. Then again, it was possible that since she never really failed at anything, she seemed somehow unreachable to her fellow students.

Odd that she should worry about such things, she thought. Silly, even. There was a war coming, and here she was worrying over not having someone to sit with at lunch. She had more important things to be concerned with right now—she should focus on being the best medical officer she could possibly be, both for the sake of the soldiers that would soon be in her care, and for her own survival on the fields of war. The rest would have to come later.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her arrival at the kitchen door. Shaking herself out of her musings, she reached for the key in her pocket and unlocked the door, before pulling it open just enough to permit her entry.

The light was dim in the room as she entered – the torches had been banked down for the night. Not that she would really need all that much light; she was just going to check the room, and move on down the hall to continue her rounds.

Somewhere, Gabrielle heard the faintest of scrabbling noises – as if some small animal were scurrying about the cupboards on the opposite side of the kitchen. Not that uncommon, really – there were all sorts of creatures in Versomme – pets of the faculty that were given free reign of the castle grounds. Some of them had become rather bold in claiming territory for themselves, resulting in several funny stories involving nipped feet, burnt bottoms (she was pretty sure Magmasons had been banned from campus after that little incident) and scratched noses – always to the embarrassment of the owner.

Gabrielle smiled to herself as she thought of this – and found that the expression felt unfamiliar to her face. Maybe she should get out more – try to meet some people from outside the school, since her overtures within the walls of Versomme had failed.

“Vitus Lumins,” she whispered into the air, and the torches around the kitchen brightened considerably, allowing her a greater range of vision around the room. It was, she thought, one of the great advantages of being a medical officer that one was allowed to learn a few spells—not having to carry a torch to brighten up a room was always nice.

In the same instant that the light from the torches increased, a surprised yelp sounded from the other end of the room, followed by a crash, as a rather large *something* fell onto a pile of boxes, toppling a few of them to the floor.

Gabrielle’s stomach contracted suddenly in shock and fear. No one was supposed to be in the kitchen this late at night – at least, no one who’d need to be clambering around behind those boxes. Either she’d caught a fellow student sneaking a late night snack, in which case she’d laugh about being spooked – or she’d just stumbled upon an intruder, which could be very, very bad for her.

From the area near the boxes, someone groaned, and then said, in what was plainly a man’s voice, “Damn.”

Alright, so maybe she’d just wandered in on someone stealing a quick kiss in the back of the kitchen. Again, if that was the case, she’d have a good laugh at having caught a pair of surprised would-be lovers hiding in a bunch of boxes. Something wasn’t right, though; despite her social isolation, Gabrielle knew quite well that the students at Versomme had established a number of out-of-the-way locations for their amorous encounters, and the kitchen wasn’t one of them. In fact, no student would’ve had the key to the kitchen in the first place; the key in her pocket was only given to senior students trusted with patrolling the halls at night.

The sound had to have come from an intruder then.

For an instant, she thought of calling for help – but then she realized that doing so would either frighten the interloper into attacking, or fleeing – neither of which would help her in apprehending him, which meant, of course, she was going to have to challenge him on her own – and being a Cleric, she was ill-equipped to engage in combat. Still, she knew some offensive spells, and she had thought to strap her short sword to her belt before she'd left her room. Those things together should've been enough to deal with most threats – and that thought gave her confidence as she pulled the kitchen door shut behind her, removing at least one of the intruder's potential exits from the room.

Unfortunately, this resolve didn't show through in her voice. So when she called out her challenge, it was shaky—not at all the sort of thing to intimidate people with.

“Wh...who's there?”

For a moment there was silence. Then, something rustled near the boxes, and Gabrielle reacted before she had time to think.

“Ar'es locare,” she cried – and a bolt of golden light leapt forth from her hand, lancing toward the boxes on the far side of the kitchen. Just before it hit, a shadowy form flitted across the open space between the boxes and one of the far counters – and the bolt struck home, shattering the wooden crates.

“Right,” came the stranger's voice, from behind the counter. “Do you think we could try to come up with a better way of introducing ourselves? I mean, trying to blow me up is great and all – but I don't think it's the surest route to being friends, y'know?”

Gabrielle said nothing – more from confusion than anything else. Was this interloper actually trying to be funny, or was he merely trying to distract her? Shaking her head vigorously, she decided that it had to be the latter – no one who would break

into Versomme could possibly be the kind of person to tell jokes for any reason other than to break her concentration.

“Okay,” the man behind the counter began again, “apparently you’re not talking. Not that I blame you – I must’ve given you quite a shock.”

Keeping her eyes trained on the far counter at all times, Gabrielle began to edge her way around to where she could get an unobstructed view of the intruder.

“Maybe it would be better if I introduced myself first,” the man suggested. “My name’s Ryohvahren. I realize that’s kind of a mouthful, so you can call me Ryoh if you want – all my friends do.”

“I’d hardly equate myself with one of your friends,” Gabrielle said slowly. Why was this person acting friendly toward her? Weren’t the people that broke into places supposed to be evil?

“Really,” said the man called Ryohvahren. “Well that’s too bad – it’s always better to be friends than enemies.”

“You come breaking in here, and you expect me to be your friend,” Gabrielle retorted. “Excuse me if I don’t exactly jump at your offer, but around here, breaking and entering is usually regarded as an unfriendly action.”

Just a few inches further now, and she’d be on the other side of the counter – with what she hoped would be an unobstructed view – and line of fire – of this invader.

“I can see how this would look awfully suspicious,” Ryoh said from behind his counter. “But it’s not quite what you think.”

“Oh,” Gabrielle returned – with a genuine note of curiosity in her voice. “Care to explain to me what it is?”

“Promise not to blow my head off,” Ryoh asked.

Gabrielle was just about to answer when she noticed the end of a long green coat of some sort trailing out from behind the edge of the far counter. Setting her jaw, she took a quick step forward and again bit out, “Ar’es locare!”

This time there was no flitting of shadow to escape the blaze from her hand. The intruder – Ryohvahlen – vaulted right up onto the countertop and crouched there as the flame splashed against the floor where he had just been.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he said evenly.

Gabrielle had no answer for him this time. He was less than a foot from her – and she had this sneaking suspicion that he could cover that space a lot faster than she could throw up another spell. It wasn’t just the distance that was imposing, however...

The man called Ryohvahlen wasn’t exactly what she’d been expecting. Clearly a tall man, despite his crouched position on the counter, the light from the torches played across his features to reveal a young, gentle-eyed and apparently well built man. Something about his appearance struck her as incongruous – perhaps it was the way his sharp dress—a dark green duster, knee-high leather boots, green pants and a light brown tunic, topped off with a well-wrapped scarf covering from the bridge of his nose to the base of his neck—clashed with the tousled fall of fiery red hair that hung down into his eyes. Or maybe it was the way those same eyes looked at her with composure and something like good-natured amusement, while at the same time holding a measure of fear and uncertainty.

Her heart pounding in her throat, Gabrielle slowly lifted her hand, her teeth pressing together slightly as she prepared to try one last time to vanquish this intruder before he could do the same to her.

“Ar’es...,” she began – but the words never evolved from her lips any further than that. In a single smooth movement, Ryohvahlen slid off the counter and planted one of his feet behind hers whilst the other braced itself against the ground directly in front of her. His left hand caught her raised right, directing it away from his body with a force that was at once irresistible and yet somehow gentle – in the same moment, his right arm shot around her neck, encircling it in a firm hold.

“Oh my God,” she thought desperately to herself, “he’s going to kill me... I’m going to die...”

But no sickening crack announced the breaking of her neck, and no burning slash opened her throat. Instead, Ryohvahlen pulled her right arm in toward him, trapping it against his body by folding his left arm at the elbow and clamping her arm down against his side. With his right arm, he pushed forward against her body, at the same time sweeping the foot he had placed behind hers back toward him, so that she was quite literally swept off her feet and lifted bodily into the air.

As her feet left the floor, Gabrielle knew that she was about to be killed for sure— she’d been taught this sort of throw in her combat classes, and it always ended with the opponent’s skull being smashed into the ground.

However, the man calling himself Ryohvahlen seemed hell-bent on proving her wrong. Instead of driving her skull into the stones of the kitchen floor, he lowered her slowly but firmly to the ground, pinning her there by keeping the pressure of his right forearm against her throat.

She looked up at him, at once terrified but at the same time curious as to why he’d been so gentle with her.

“Let’s try this again,” he said quietly, cutting off her thoughts in mid-stride. He kept his eyes locked directly on hers as he continued, “I’m Ryoh – and aside from clearly wanting to blow my head clean off my shoulders, you are?”

For a moment, she could do nothing but stare back at him, trying to make sense of what was going on. Here before her was a person who had broken into Versomme, dodged two of her spells, and somehow taken her to the floor without hurting her. Clearly he was capable of killing her at any time he wanted to, and yet, he hadn’t harmed her in the slightest – aside from scaring her witless, of course.

Intruders to Versomme were supposed to be threats – the kind you had to kill or be killed by – not the kind who, well, did what this person was doing.

“Are you planning on answering me, or are you just going to lay there and stare at me for the rest of the night?”

Ryohvahlen’s amused-sounding question snapped Gabrielle out of her musings, and brought her back to the present.

“Ga-gabrielle,” she stammered, not knowing what else to do.

“Well, Ga-gabrielle,” he said with a chuckle, “mind giving me the opportunity to explain myself? Or is there some kind of rule here against hearing people out before you burn them to ashes?”

“N-no,” she said slowly. What the hell was going on here? Why was this intruder being nice to her? Why hadn’t he killed her? Or at least knocked her out? Wasn’t that what these people were supposed to do?

“Good,” he said cheerily, and slowly released his hold on her neck, helping her to a sitting position on the floor. For his part, Ryohvahlen folded his legs under himself, resting his hands on his knees – where they’d be ready, Gabrielle found herself thinking.

“Now,” he began, “I’m sure your first question is, ‘What the heck am I doing here?’ Well, it’s a little embarrassing, actually, but if you’ll bear with me, I’m sure I can explain it.”

Gabrielle said nothing, listening to him whilst still trying to figure out why she was sitting here with an intruder and not trying to subdue him – or at least call for help. This was crazy.

Ryohvahlen must’ve noticed her discomfort, because he paused a moment and regarded her with something between amusement and concern.

“Here,” he said, reaching up to his nose and pulling the scarf off. “Maybe this will help – I know it’s probably a little unnerving not to be able to see my face.”

As the scarf fell away, Gabrielle had to suppress the urge to gasp. Before now, she’d always thought possible invaders of Versomme would be vile beasts – monsters from the lowest and foulest of pits. Or, at the very least, large, hairy, nasty men – like highway bandits or something.

But this guy was – well, there was no denying that he was handsome, in a roguish sort of way. The lines of his face were sharp, and yet they somehow contributed to giving him a rather warm, good-humoured look. His skin was slightly tanned, though more on the pale side of the spectrum than the dark, and several earrings glinted softly in the light of the torches hanging on the wall. He smiled at her in a friendly, if somewhat shy manner – and she found herself feeling a blush coming on. Dear Lord, she was blushing over someone that had just broken into Versomme! What was wrong with her?!

“Anyhow,” Ryohvahlen continued, “as to why I’m here. Now don’t go blasting me apart when I say this, okay? Because there’s a perfectly good explanation.”

After an instant's pause, Gabrielle realized that Ryohvahlen was waiting for some kind of reaction from her – not knowing what else to do, she gave a slight nod – the least she could do was listen to his explanation, after all. He hadn't made any move to harm her as yet, other than taking her to the floor, which hadn't really hurt her, and she was curious as to why he was even here in the first place.

“Well, better get this out of the way first,” Ryoh said, with what sounded like embarrassment creeping into his voice. “I'm a Thief – from the Thieves' Guild in Orminster.”

He waited another moment, and Gabrielle could tell he was expecting a bad reaction – and indeed, she was too, but somehow it just wouldn't come – so for the time being, she held her peace.

“I work with a buddy of mine in a nearby town,” he went on after she made no move to attack. “We run jobs for Nobles with more money than brains—usually pilfering from their social rivals. It brings in a decent living, and for the most part we get left alone, so it suits us fine.”

Gabrielle had to suppress an urge to snort at this remark. Of course profiting through theft suited him just fine—he was a Thief—little better than a parasite feeding off of the Nobility.

“Lately, though,” Ryoh continued, “we've been running into an increasing number of young Nobles who aren't quite happy with the arrangement that exists between Thieves and the Nobility. I imagine it's got something to do with the fact that they don't like the idea of their fellows hiring us to break into their homes and steal their things.”

“I see they only let the smart ones become Thieves,” Gabrielle said with something like derision. The effect of Ryohvahlen’s friendly personality was beginning to wear off, and she was again feeling the call of duty pushing her to expel this invader. “Of course no one likes having their home violated or their possessions stolen!”

“That’s certainly true,” Ryohvahlen said earnestly. “But it’s not as if we go around hunting jobs. Generally speaking, our clients find us, and then we do what needs doing from there. Really, if you want to blame the arrangement on anyone, blame it on the Nobles that pay us to steal from their social rivals. If there were no demand for Thieves, then we wouldn’t be here.”

“And I suppose it’s the Nobility’s fault that you’re here, is it?” Gabrielle sat up just a little straighter as she spoke, putting a hand on the ground to help support herself as she shifted her weight—and to be near the hilt of her sword. If she could just keep him talking long enough...

“In a way, it is,” said Ryoh, who was apparently oblivious to Gabrielle’s maneuverings. “Some ass of an officer overheard my friend and I talking about a job, decided to take offense to it, and poured a beer I’d been drinking into my lap. We laughed it off at the time, but apparently it bothered my friend a lot more than it bothered me, because he wanted to get back at the guy somehow.”

“If he’s already an officer,” Gabrielle said, “then he wouldn’t still be here at Versomme. Great plan your friend had, there.”

“Tell me about it,” Ryoh said, shaking his head. “I really don’t want to be here, but my friend thought we could get a little harmless revenge if one of us took something from the academy, and I lost the drinking contest we had to determine who went where.”

“Oh, lovely,” Gabrielle snorted. “So you’re drunk, too? I’d always been taught that Thieves were dangerous, clever people; clearly my instructors have overestimated your kind.”

Ryoh chuckled, and said, “I did take some time to sober up before I came out here. I may be a fool for allowing myself to be conned into breaking into Versomme, but I’m not a complete idiot.”

“Which would explain why you’re telling me the entirety of what you’re doing here.” She had almost reached the hilt of her sword; a moment more, and she’d have this chatty buffoon spitted on her blade.

“Well, I’m hoping that once you understand I’m not here to hurt anyone, you’ll stop trying to kill me.”

“That would go against my sworn duty as an officer,” Gabrielle returned. “Well, I’m almost an officer, anyway.”

“So why are you still sitting there,” Ryoh asked, smiling gently. It was pretty clear to Gabrielle that the fool thought he’d won her over—she was about to show him just how wrong he was.

Chapter 3: Hide and Seek

“She’s buying it,” Ryoh thought to himself as he sat on the kitchen floor with Gabrielle. Good thing, too—Ryoh hadn’t been lying, in the strictest sense, when he had told her he hadn’t broken into Versomme to do any serious harm. The fact remained, however, that he had entered the academy illegally and was not currently under contract to any member of the Nobility—so he had no protection here. If she decided to press that point, he’d be well and truly screwed.

A part of Ryoh was busy condemning himself for not having killed Gabrielle and then getting the hell out of Versomme before anyone was the wiser. It certainly would’ve been safer to take her out and then extricate himself as quickly and quietly as possible. The problem was that Ryoh didn’t like hurting people when he didn’t have to—especially not when they had sparked his interest like the woman he was sitting with now had.

In a way, it was funny. Ryoh’d never thought of a Shothian as attractive before. Not, of course, that he’d really had much to do with them outside of occasionally running a contract for some aging Noble rat with an axe to grind against a social rival. Still, he’d never given any thought to the attractiveness (or lack thereof) of Shothians as a people before he’d run into Gabrielle. Perhaps it was because he’d never spent any serious time with one of their females before, or maybe it was because he’d been avoiding women ever since he and Serah had parted ways, but in either case...

Damn, she was beautiful. He knew he should be thinking about other, more important things just then; how the hell he was going to get out of here alive being chief among those things. However, since his conversation with her seemed to be going so well, he figured he had a few minutes to enjoy the scenery before looking for a graceful exit from what was, at its heart, an exceptionally awkward situation.

It didn't hurt that she was an intelligent—if somewhat biting—conversationalist to boot.

“So as I was saying,” Ryoh said, “the fact that you’re still sitting here, instead of trying to run me through, seems like a pretty good sign to me that you believe I’m not here to do you any harm. Really, the truth is that I just need something from the academy to prove that I’ve been here. Then I’ll go, and you’ll never see or hear from me again.”

Gabrielle seemed to hesitate a moment, as if collecting her thoughts, and shifted her weight slightly. She’d been doing a lot of that over the past few minutes; Ryoh figured it probably had to do with the fact that sitting on a hard stone floor was rather uncomfortable.

“So you’d just disappear with your trophy, and that would satisfy your bet with your friend,” she said at length.

“Sure,” Ryoh said, nodding. “I mean, we’re probably going to display it at the bar we drink at. Aside from that, that would be about it.”

“And you think I should just let you make the King’s Army look like a bunch of fools? As if we can’t even protect our own academy?”

“That’s not what I meant!” Ryoh shook his head and held his hands up to emphasize his point. “I understand it might make the Army look a little silly. Still, it’s better than beating an officer and then getting hanged for it, right? This way, we get our revenge, and nobody gets hurt.”

“Except for the Nobility’s image,” Gabrielle said. Ryoh thought he could hear a bit of a growl creeping into her voice—a sudden jolt of fear hit him at the thought that he might be losing her trust—if he’d ever had it in the first place.

“How fitting,” Gabrielle continued, nearly spitting her words now. Her sudden shift in tone told Ryoh he wasn’t going to be talking her into letting him go any time soon, if at all. In fact, he’d probably just screwed up very badly. “The clever Thieves outwit the bumbling Nobility, everybody’s happy, the end. Isn’t it enough that your kind fleeces my people left and right with your dirty little contracts?”

“Hey now,” Ryoh returned, trying to salvage what little was left of the semi-amicable conversation they’d been having before. Unfortunately, that stumbling beginning was as far as he got. In a movement that probably could’ve been smoother, Gabrielle drew her sword (Ryoh suddenly understood why she’d been shifting her weight so often) and lunged at him from across the floor. If she hadn’t let herself sound so angry in the seconds before she attacked, she probably would’ve caught Ryoh entirely flat-footed; that would’ve been the end of things right there. Even with the advanced warning of her tone, though, it was all Ryoh could do to roll away from her oncoming blade and get to his feet before she came at him again.

“I can’t believe I even thought of listening to you,” she hissed, and swung her blade in a wide arc for his throat as she too came to her feet. The strike itself was wild and more than a little sloppy—the mark of an overenthusiastic (or frightened) amateur—which sobered Ryoh quickly. Instinctively, he bent backwards to avoid the blow, his shoulders hitting a counter-top behind him as Gabrielle’s sword passed over his body. Reaching behind himself, Ryoh grasped the counter with both hands and performed something between a somersault and a backflip, hauling himself into the air, over and onto the counter. He landed in a crouch just out of range of Gabrielle and her blade.

“Would you slow down a minute,” he bit out as she moved around the counter, readying herself for another strike. “We can talk this out—it doesn’t have to be like this!”

“It wouldn’t be if you hadn’t come here,” Gabrielle snarled back at him. “I can’t just let Thieves wander in here and take whatever they want—I will not allow you to besmirch the name of the Nobility and the King’s Army just to salve your own egotism.” With that, she struck with a heavy, over-hand swing that Ryoh barely had time to leap back from before the blade buried itself in the countertop.

“I just want you to know I didn’t want to do this,” Ryoh said. He thought he saw something like fear flash through Gabrielle’s eyes as he spoke; given how she’d disarmed him with easy conversation before now, though, he couldn’t afford to read anything into her actions again. Reaching into a pouch at his belt, Ryoh grabbed a handful of a white, powdery substance he kept there, and threw it into Gabrielle’s eyes. In nearly the same instant, she released her hold on her sword and covered her eyes with her hands, gasping in pain.

Ryoh’s hand was already on the hilt of his own blade, the motion a habit so refined it had become reflex—then he paused. He knew he really should silence her—if she raised the alarm, or even woke someone up with the noise of their combat, he’d be in deep trouble—somehow, he just couldn’t bring himself to strike. Relaxing his grip on his blade, Ryoh said, “You’re really lucky, you know that,” and then bolted for the kitchen door, slipping out into the hallway while Gabrielle was still trying to rub the powder from her eyes.

He knew he had only a few seconds to make good his escape—the blinding powder he’d used on Gabrielle tended to wash out as soon as tears began to flow, so he

needed to find someplace to hide while he figured out how to get himself out of the mess he was in.

Looking up and down the hallway, Ryoh noticed two important things: first, no one else seemed to be in the hall at that moment. Second, the walls of the hallway were marked every few feet by alcoves that held statues of various military figures—perfect for him to hide in, if he could just reach one before Gabrielle recovered.

Deciding to head to the left, Ryoh dashed down the hall until he came to an alcove some thirty feet from the kitchen door. Within the alcove stood a stone statue of a very imposing man in full battle armor; probably a General of one stripe or another, but Ryoh didn't have time to bother looking at the plaque at the statue's base to find out. Instead, he stepped up onto the base of the statue, climbing the side of the stone figure until he was on its shoulders. From there, he slid into the space between the statue's head and the back wall of the alcove, dropped down behind the statue's back, and braced his feet against the stone and his shoulders against the wall of the alcove, thus holding himself in place directly behind the statue's torso. The space between the statue and the wall was a little wider than he was comfortable with (mostly because it required more muscular effort from his legs to maintain his position than a smaller, more compact space would have), but it was the best hiding place he had at the moment.

Though it wasn't the most comfortable position, it was a damn sight better than getting run down and stabbed to death by some over-eager military cadet—cute or not.

“God damn it,” Ryoh said, breathing the words more than saying them. He was in deep trouble; carelessness and overconfidence had killed better Thieves than he, and he'd just walked right into a very, very bad situation. How stupid had it been to try to talk to

Gabrielle? To think he could convince her that they could just pass quietly in the night like nothing had ever happened and forget they had ever encountered one another?

Too much to hope for, he knew. It was often said that Nobles and Commoners were only able to coexist because of their nearly parasitic need for each other; Nobles providing land for the Commoners to work, the Commoners, in turn, producing food both for themselves and their high-born masters. That fragile (if integral) arrangement only held because it made sense from a survival standpoint—between Thieves and Nobles, however, things were different. The protection the Thieves enjoyed lasted only so long as the Nobles needed them (or needed to avoid being outed for using a Thief to take something from a rival). Outside of a contract, a Thief's only defenses against being gutted and left to die in the street by a passing Noble were swift feet and a swifter blade.

The slow ones tended to turn up face down in a river—or they disappeared into unmarked graves.

“I should've killed her when I had the chance,” Ryoh thought to himself. “She'll cut me up before I have a chance to fight back if things keep going like this.”

Worse still, she could raise the alarm. Then, instead of being spitted on one blade, Ryoh would have the privilege of finding out firsthand what it felt like to be a pincushion. Alternatively, they might save him for the rack, or the furnace, or any number of unpleasant ways of meeting a drawn out and agonizing end.

Ryoh shook his head—allowing himself to dwell on the multitude of ways he might be about to die wasn't going to get him out of here in one piece. In fact, it would probably make him an easier target. What he needed was a plan.

The simplest solution would be to wait for Gabrielle to pass by the statue he was hiding behind, move out of hiding behind her, slit her throat, and then stuff the body

somewhere before getting the hell out of Versomme. Despite all the opportunities and perfectly good reasons he'd had to kill her to this point, Ryoh hadn't been able to strike. If it hadn't happened at this point, it wasn't going to—hesitating again would probably get him killed.

Knocking her out was always a possibility—it was a little riskier because, if he hit her wrong, he'd just piss her off instead of turning her lights out. The problem with that idea was that he wasn't sure he could even strike her to begin with; something about launching a blow at that woman just seemed wrong to him, in a deep and visceral way. It wasn't chivalry—he'd let that die with his last relationship—there was just something about her...

Gabrielle chose exactly that moment to come stalking down the hall, presumably in pursuit of Ryoh. He needed to figure out what he was going to do quickly, before she noticed his hiding place.

Looking at both sides of the alcove in which he'd taken refuge, Ryoh noticed a ledge sticking out from the wall beyond the curve of the alcove. He couldn't be sure from this angle, but he hoped that the ledge ran the length of the wall in either direction, moving away from the alcove. If he could get his feet hooked onto that ledge, he could lower himself to a position where he could grab Gabrielle, put her into a hold that would cut off the supply of blood to her brain, and knock her out that way. No need to strike her, no need to worry if he was hitting her hard enough. It was still risky as hell, but it was the best plan he had at the moment. He needed to get out from behind that statue one way or another—not having someone chasing him after he extricated himself was vastly preferable to the alternative.

Bracing his feet a little harder against the statue's back, Ryoh watched Gabrielle move down the hallway, her head turning from side to side as she searched for him. He knew she was looking into the alcoves, which meant that she might well see him before she reached a position from which he could grab her. Moving too early would be just as bad as moving too late, though, so he stayed put.

Foot after foot, Gabrielle stalked the hallway. Her eyes were narrowed in a stare of intense concentration; to her credit, her sword wavered only slightly in her hand. She might be an amateur, but she apparently had the backbone and determination to be a truly effective warrior someday; Ryoh just didn't want to be around when that happened.

She was within inches of the statue when Ryoh struck. Pushing hard against the back of the statue with both feet, Ryoh thrust himself out from the alcove and up onto the statue's shoulders. From there, it was a relatively simple matter to pull himself up onto the ledge he'd been looking at earlier. It was a little wider than he'd been able to see from his position in the alcove, so he had more room to hook his feet.

As soon as his boots hit the ledge, he spun around so that his toes pointed back towards the wall and dropped his body downward, keeping his feet over the ledge so that they held his body up on the wall. He felt a pull in his calves as his muscles strained to hold his weight against his fall, but he ignored it—he was focused on his target now.

Gabrielle barely had time to look up before Ryoh shot his arms around her neck. Gripping the back of her head with his left hand, he hooked his right arm around her neck, catching her throat in the crook of his elbow. He pulled her up off the ground a few inches to keep her from gaining leverage to fight off the hold, flexing his right arm tight around her throat while pushing her head forward with his left hand. The total effect of the maneuver was not unlike being put into a noose, both in application and appearance.

Blood chokes took a few seconds to knock a person out, but they didn't cause any lasting damage, which was really the only way Ryoh could see himself dealing with Gabrielle at that point.

Naturally, Gabrielle attempted to resist the hold. She made several flailing attempts to strike Ryoh with her sword; her swings were wild and unfocused, the frightened lashing out of a cornered animal. He tightened his grip a bit as she struggled, taking care not to squeeze too hard, for fear of breaking her windpipe, and tried to ignore the choking sounds she was making.

Her movements were becoming sluggish now, and Ryoh knew it would only be a second or two more before she'd pass out, then he could get about the business of getting the hell out of Versomme; but then she made a noise that froze the blood in his veins.

It wasn't quite a yelp, it wasn't quite a whimper—the noise occupied a middle ground between the two that Ryoh hadn't previously known existed, and it touched something inside him to hear it. It was soft, frightened, and sad all at once, making Ryoh distinctly aware that Gabrielle probably thought she was about to die. He'd killed Nobles before—always in self-defense, not that it mitigated the ending of a life—but even when they'd cried out in pain or fear, it hadn't stopped him cold the way this sound did. Far from the pitiful cry of self-preservation that issued from lesser beings, Gabrielle's faint noises told Ryoh he was hurting a person not unlike himself—who feared death as much as the next living creature, but who had a better reason for not wanting to die than simply fearing the grave. It spoke of a profound sense of loss—of things unfulfilled.

The thought gave him pause, and for an instant, he relaxed his hold on Gabrielle's neck. In that same moment, her head slipped through his arms; she fell to the floor,

collapsing to her knees and holding her throat with one hand while supporting her weight with the other.

For his part, Ryoh hung on the ledge without moving, staring straight ahead at the wall on the opposite side of the hallway. What was wrong with him? This girl wanted to kill him—to split him open and leave the parts where they fell—and he was tearing up because of a noise she'd made? He really had to be losing it—this reluctance to finish what he started was going to get him killed if he didn't get over it quickly.

As if to punctuate his thoughts, Ryoh felt a sudden burning sensation in his right shoulder—and then he had to clamp his teeth together as hard as he could to keep from screaming. He didn't have to look to know that Gabrielle had just buried her blade in his flesh—nor to understand that the wound was deep, and would probably bleed like hell as soon as the blade was withdrawn.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the pain, Ryoh tried to pull himself up onto the ledge, away from the cold steel that was doing its level best to break through the bone below the muscle and sinew of his shoulder. He flexed the muscles in his stomach, trying to curl up toward his feet, but Gabrielle chose that exact moment to twist her blade.

The pain was excruciating. No, excruciating wasn't the word for this; lying on a bed of glowing coals would've been preferable to feeling muscles separating from tendons and bones being ground down as Gabrielle turned the sword in Ryoh's flesh. He wanted to scream, but even in his anguish he knew that giving voice to the pain would only bring reinforcements for Gabrielle, which would almost certainly lead to his death.

That might have been better than what he was going through at the moment.

“What's the matter,” Gabrielle hissed up at him, “No more witty comments? No more trying to tell me how things do and do not have to be?”

“Gah,” Ryoh grunted, shuddering violently as a wave of pain-induced nausea swelled in his gut.

“Come on,” Gabrielle growled, though with noticeably less anger in her voice. “Say something, you bastard! You had me a moment ago! You could’ve killed me, but you let me go! Only an idiot would do that! Why? Why did you let me go?”

Ryoh wanted to answer—at that moment, he would’ve said or done anything just to get the blade out of his shoulder. All he could manage was a gasp and another violent muscle spasm.

“Why don’t you resist,” Gabrielle asked. Past the pain, Ryoh could hear uncertainty creeping into her tone. He’d banked on that uncertainty before, and it had gotten him spitted.

“Do you have any idea how much this hurts,” he stammered, fighting to keep his voice at a whisper. He opened his eyes then to see that Gabrielle was staring up at him with a look that hovered between determination and fright.

“Why did you let me go,” she returned. “You could’ve killed me... You knew I was going to kill you when I caught you!” She sounded scared—if Ryoh’d been thinking clearly, he would’ve chalked it up to the fact that she’d probably never had to use her blade on a real person before now. Such as it was, he shook again, trying to marshal his voice for a reply.

“The sword. Take it out, please.” He could hear the weakness in his own words, but he didn’t care anymore. His world centered around his shoulder and the steel that was still lodged in it at that moment; there was no room in his mind for anything else.

Gabrielle hesitated before replying. “I can’t... My duty is to repel or destroy all threats to the King and the lands under his rule. That includes intruders to Versomme.”

“Of course,” Ryoh ground out. If it hadn’t been clear to him before that he wasn’t going to be able to talk his way out of his current predicament, it was now. He could hear the uncertainty in Gabrielle’s voice, and he knew, deep down, that she didn’t want to kill him. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t—duty had a funny way of making people do things that weren’t always in line with their own desires and beliefs.

Summoning what self-control he had left, Ryoh reached down with his left arm and grasped the blade where it met his shoulder. In one swift movement, he pulled at the blade with his hand while flexing his legs and abdominal muscles to draw himself up onto the ledge from which he was hanging.

The sensation of the blade leaving his body was almost enough to make Ryoh lose his nerve. Cold metal rasped against damaged bone, tearing at muscle as it was pulled from his flesh. Then, at last, the sword was free, Ryoh was crouching on the ledge, and the blood began to flow.

Or, rather, to spray.

“I think,” Ryoh said softly, covering his shoulder with his left hand, “that you might’ve hit something important.”

Chapter 4: Decisions

“I think,” said Ryohvahlen, crouching on the ledge just out of Gabrielle’s reach, “that you might’ve hit something important.”

Gabrielle looked up at the Thief, and then down at her sword; it was slick with blood, and little bits of gristle clung to the blade. She’d never had to use her weapon in anger before, and something about the act of stabbing another person was turning out to be distinctly unsettling. Sure, she’d been training for real combat ever since she’d come to Versomme, and yes, she was prepared to use her blade against the enemies of the King and her country, but she wasn’t quite sure if Ryohvahlen counted as an enemy of the King.

Or was he? Even if he was, would that distinction have really made doing such violence to him any easier?

Mentally slapping herself, Gabrielle tried to focus on the fact that Ryohvahlen had broken into Versomme; whether he’d intended to hurt anyone or not, the fact remained that he was a criminal who had broken into the academy—his purpose in doing so was inconsequential to the act itself. Despite her attacks, and the fact that she’d nearly run him through, he still hadn’t hurt her. Being honest with herself, Gabrielle had to admit that he’d had her a few minutes ago—he could’ve broken her neck, left her body and gotten away without anyone being the wiser until morning, but he hadn’t.

He could have ended her life and saved himself—but he hadn’t.

Gabrielle looked up at the man on the ledge and felt something tugging at her—but she wasn’t sure what it was. It wasn’t really guilt, and it wasn’t remorse—it was a nagging feeling that she should’ve let Ryohvahlen go when she’d had the opportunity. He’d tried to avoid violence, and she’d insisted on pressing the attack. She knew it was

her duty to kill or at least drive him away from Versomme, but she wasn't sure she liked cornering someone who'd done his best to resolve their battle with words rather than blades—even if he'd only been trying to talk his way out of trouble.

She was about to say something to Ryohvahlen when a sudden spray of blood shot out from the space between his fingers and struck her square in the face. Reacting more out of surprise than anything else, she squeezed her eyes shut and wiped frantically at the warm red liquid that was even now soaking into her fur, dropping her sword in the process.

The ringing of metal bouncing off the stone floor seemed to echo for an eternity, and in the back of her mind, Gabrielle knew she'd just committed a fatal mistake—that is, it would have been, if this wounded Thief had really been dangerous.

She heard his feet hit the ground directly in front of her before she had time to open her eyes, and heard his hoarse whisper, "I'm leaving now—please, don't follow me any more. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you come after me again."

By the time she managed to get the blood out of her eyes and focus, Ryohvahlen and her sword were gone. A trail of dark red droplets led down the hallway and around the corner. Gabrielle stood in the hall and thought furiously, searching for the right way to proceed. She didn't have a weapon, and, besides, the Thief had once again refused to take advantage of her moment of weakness, and was simply trying to make good his escape.

She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. Duty told her to go after him. Unarmed or not, she couldn't let an intruder run loose though the academy. Another part of her, though, questioned whether duty was worth running down a man who clearly didn't want to cause her harm. He'd told her as much, and proven it by not breaking her

neck or cutting her open when he had the chance, which was more than she could say for herself.

In the end, duty won.

Finding Ryohvahlen wasn't going to be hard—the man was literally leaving a trail of blood in his wake. At first, Gabrielle thought it odd that he wasn't trying harder to cover his tracks. As she moved on down the hallway, she noticed a sudden spray and smear of blood against one wall. It looked as if Ryohvahlen had stumbled against the wall and then slid forward along it before resuming his trek down the hallway.

She must've wounded him more severely than she'd thought.

On the one hand, this was a good thing; if her quarry was weakening from blood loss, he'd be less inclined to fight and much less able to evade her when she caught up to him. On the other hand, she didn't want to think of him lying hidden in some corner, bleeding to death.

She shook herself. This was stupid. It was her duty as a soon-to-be officer of the King's Army to destroy threats to the King's lands and people—she should be proud of the fact that she'd mortally wounded an intruder to Versomme. Only she wasn't.

Just ahead of her the trail of blood led up the stairs to the officer candidate's apartments, where she lived. She wondered what Ryohvahlen was thinking, going into the upper levels of the academy; the easiest exits were on the ground level. Then she remembered that the ground-level exits—the main gate and the secondary entryways—were under guard at all times. Ryohvahlen must've figured that out and decided that his best bet was to head upstairs and look for an exit there.

Mounting the steps two at a time, but trying to remain quiet as she tracked her adversary, she thought about rousing a few other cadets for help—or better yet, to call the

guards—but she wanted to do this on her own. She wasn't going to let him go. She'd been the one to challenge him; thus, she was going to be the one to finish the job.

The bloody trail led her down a side hallway to a door that she knew well—it was hers. Ryohvahlen had finally exhausted his options and, of all the places he could've gone to ground, he had done so in her bedroom.

“Lovely,” she whispered to herself.

The door was, of course, closed. The Thief she was chasing would have to be an idiot not to shut it behind him—but now Gabrielle was faced with a new problem. She was unarmed, and for all she knew, Ryohvahlen still had her sword. That put her at a distinct disadvantage, and not being able to see what her opponent was doing on the other side of the door only exacerbated the problem.

She stared at the door, weighing her options carefully. If she wanted to ensure her own safety, she'd alert the guards, and let them handle it—after all, that's what they were there for. On the other hand, they'd kill Ryohvahlen as soon as they found him, and she had to admit she didn't want that. The Thief had warned her, though, that if she came after him again he was going to hurt her—confronting him alone definitely wasn't the smartest thing she could do at this point.

From the other side of the door, Gabrielle heard a muffled thud, and decided that if she was going to act, it had to be immediately. Steeling herself, she took hold of the doorknob and thrust the door open, free hand up to ward off any incoming attack.

But no attack came.

Far from lying in ambush for her on the other side of the door, Ryohvahlen was slumped against the side of her bed, sitting in a slowly-expanding pool of his own blood. When she opened the door, he looked up at her with eyes that were already half dead,

offered her a weak smile, and then let his chin drop to his chest. His breathing came in short, ragged pulls, and he gurgled slightly each time he exhaled.

Ryoh was dying.

Without stopping to consider that she'd just called him by the name he'd given as a friend rather than holding him at a distance with his full name, Gabrielle stepped into the room and locked the door behind her. She hesitated only for an instant, until she spied her sword lying some distance from Ryoh's slack hand. She moved to his side and began removing his coat.

"Trying to take advantage of me," he said, in the barest of whispers.

"Hardly," Gabrielle returned evenly, all business now. "You're going to bleed to death if we don't do something about that wound. Now sit up so I can get these clothes off of you and get a good look at it."

Ryoh chuckled—or rather, he tried to chuckle, and wound up coughing—but he did straighten himself slightly.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked. "You're going to die if I can't get that wound closed up—don't you know that?"

"Always knew..." Ryoh began, and then went silent as his eyes closed.

Gabrielle stared at Ryoh's slack form, and knew that he would be gone in a few minutes if she didn't stop the bleeding. She knew she should let him die, in fact, and report the whole thing to her superiors. Her training had taught her that Thieves were just assassins—cold, heartless killers who'd strike you down as soon as look at you—but Ryoh wasn't fitting into that mold very easily. She was intrigued by him.

Stripping off his coat and shirt, Gabrielle got her first good look at the wound she'd inflicted on Ryoh. She was going to be a commissioned medical officer in a few

weeks, so it wasn't the blood, gore and exposed bone that bothered her—it was the fact that she'd been the one to cause the damage. Before, when she'd practiced dressing wounds and employing low-level healing magic to aid her patients' recovery, she'd always been looking at the result of an accident or a fight—never her own handiwork. This was different—she had caused it.

The wound was deep and ragged—muscles hung limply from severed tendons, and bits of bone and sinew peppered the red meat of Ryoh's shoulder. She hadn't meant to twist her blade when she'd spitted him earlier, her training had taken over. It had always bothered her, that cadets were taught to work their weapons around in the wounds they created—but now she knew why the act bothered her so much. Without immediate and expert medical attention, wounds like the one she'd inflicted on Ryoh would almost certainly lead to fatal blood loss—and after all, she was a healer, both by training and inclination, rather than a killer.

“Fool,” she breathed. “Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance? You had to know it was going to end like this.”

She knew she'd be thrown out of the academy at the very least for what she was about to do—more likely arrested, tried, and executed—yet, something deep inside her made her act.

Setting her teeth, she laid a hand over the gash in Ryoh's flesh and whispered words that mended shattered bone and staunched the flow of blood. Torn muscle tissue knitted itself back together under her fingertips, and skin started to close over itself. The damage, unfortunately, was too extensive for her spell to work entirely—there wasn't enough skin left on Ryoh's shoulder to close itself up.

Rising to her feet, Gabrielle crossed the room to her closet, and pulled out her formal robes. She hadn't used them in a couple of years now. Returning to Ryoh's side, she knelt down and began tearing strips of cloth from the robes and wound the torn cloth carefully but firmly around Ryoh's shoulder in several layers before tying it off.

As she finished her work, Ryoh stirred and looked at his shoulder in bewilderment.

"Nice wrap job," he said weakly. "If it's going to be a burial shroud, though, you've got a ways to go."

"You're not going to die today," Gabrielle said. "At least not before you answer some questions."

Ryoh coughed, and then looked toward the door. "I made a mess of your hallway. I'm pretty sure your guards won't give us a lot of time to chat once they notice the blood."

"I know," she said. "We've got a few minutes. I was the only one on duty for this hour, so no one else should be in the halls right now. But, you'd better talk quickly if you want that bandage to be anything more than a temporary reprieve from death."

The Thief smiled. "Fine. What do you need to know?"

Gabrielle sat back a little, reaching over and pulling her fallen sword to her side as she did. "Well," she began, and then hesitated. She really shouldn't be having this conversation—he had left a great deal of blood in the hall, and if anyone was out, the alarm would be sounded. That would be bad for both of them.

Still, she'd come this far—it would be silly to back down now.

“I guess the main thing bothering me,” she began again, “is why you didn’t kill me when you had the chance? You had to know that I would kill you, given the opportunity.”

Ryoh laughed and patted his shoulder.

“Right,” Gabrielle said softly. “But even when I nearly ran you through, you still didn’t hurt me. I thought Thieves were trained to get away from pursuit at any cost. So why did you hold back?”

The Thief closed his eyes, and for a moment, Gabrielle thought he was going to pass out. But then, just as she was about to reach over to rouse him, he spoke.

“I really don’t know,” he said, opening his eyes and staring at the wall in front of him. “I told myself a couple of times that I should put an end to you and get the hell out of here. You did leave yourself open more often than I expected. Somehow, though, I just couldn’t do it. Maybe I just don’t have it in me to destroy something beautiful.”

“Excuse me,” Gabrielle said, not quite believing her ears.

“You heard me,” Ryoh said, looking over at her with a wink. “It’s not often I get to interact with Nobles that aren’t old, fat, and lazy. I was beginning to think that all of you were a bunch of slugs. But you—well, you’re not exactly hard on the eyes, are you?”

“Rake!” She spat the word, but the anger she meant it to convey just wasn’t there. “What, you thought you could talk your way out of trouble and into my bed? Maybe I should’ve finished you off when I had the chance. I can’t believe...”

“Would you slow down,” Ryoh said. “We’re where we are because you jumped to conclusions. Just calm down and listen for a second.”

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the Thief, not quite willing to let the matter drop, but she held her tongue for the moment.

“Like I said, you’re not hard to look at, and that in itself threw me off. Once I started talking to you, that attraction only got stronger. By the time things came to blows, I just couldn’t bring myself to hurt you.”

“Of course,” Gabrielle said with a snort, trying to ignore the fact that Ryoh had just called her “beautiful” and not been talking about parts of her she’d rather he hadn’t noticed. “Thought you might get yourself a little action and out of trouble at the same time if you did enough sweet talking? That makes sense, coming from a Thief.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Ryoh said. “I said you’re beautiful—that doesn’t mean I’m ready to go jumping into bed with you. It might surprise you to know that not all Thieves are out for easy women and fast cash.”

“Then why do you do it?” Gabrielle was genuinely curious. She wasn’t ready to believe that this Thief was anything other than what she had been taught he was just yet, but the longer she listened, the less inclined she was to believe her lessons.

“The thrill, mostly. And to keep my father from worrying about me.” Ryoh shifted his weight against the bed, grunting in discomfort before speaking again. “I’m the son of a merchant—educated by a private tutor before I joined the Thieves’ Guild. Problem is that the merchant class is still eligible for the same that Commoners are—and with war brewing in the East, my father was afraid that I’d be picked up for front-line duty by the King’s Army.”

“So you became a Thief to duck service to your country,” Gabrielle said, a note of disdain creeping into her voice. This made sense—Ryoh might not have been the murdering monster she’d been taught to believe all Thieves were, but if he’d become a

Thief simply to escape military service, he was every inch the coward he was supposed to be.

“In the way it was set up? Damn right,” Ryoh said. “Fighting for King and country’s all well and good, but when you don’t believe in your King or his war, it’s kind of hard to get any patriotic fervor going. Guild membership got me off the draft roster and gave me a trade to ply that didn’t involve being gutted and left to die on some godforsaken piece of foreign soil.

“Think about it this way: You’re ready to go to war because it’s what all Noble families do—they send their children to become officers or politicians or some other thing, and they play that role to the hilt. You serve your country, but you do it from the back line, away from the worst of the fighting. As a conscript, I’d be given a sword and a helmet, stuck in a trench, and told to take as many of the enemy with me as I could before I died. I don’t mind putting my life on the line—I do it every day as it is—but I’ll be damned if I’m going to do it for a cause I don’t believe in without getting paid well first.”

Here the Thief paused and looked away from Gabrielle.

“Besides,” he continued, “if I’m going to die on the job, I’d rather it be doing something that won’t get a form letter sent to my father. Fortune and thrills are a fine thing, and if I go out chasing them, no one will ever know. Who cares if one more Thief shows up face down in a river? Soldiers get a letter with a wax stamp and a signature—somehow, I think the cold uniformity of that letter would be harder on him than me just disappearing one day.”

“You really did this for your father?” Gabrielle asked. She turned her head slightly to look at the framed picture of herself with her parents.

“Not entirely,” Ryoh said, shaking his head. “The old man and I always got along pretty well—once my mother was gone, that bond only got stronger. He wanted me to go to the Biblios Academy, get myself a professional degree, make something more of myself than he did. I didn’t like disappointing him by joining the Thieves, but even advanced schooling is no protection from the draft these days. And really, what was I going to do? Be a librarian for the King? Go count some Noble’s money all day, and never see any of it myself? The hell with that. I wanted some adventure in my life, and the Thieves’ Guild gave me exactly that.”

“For someone who never finished his education, you certainly speak well enough.” Gabrielle was still staring at the picture of her family, and as she did, she felt a pang in her chest. Ryoh was close to his father, but she never had been on very good terms with hers. He’d always been so cold and distant...

“Just because I didn’t go to Biblios doesn’t mean I don’t know how to use my own language,” Ryoh said. “Like I said, I was educated by a private tutor—dad did pretty well for himself with the whole merchant thing, so he could afford a good education for me. I’ve read most of the ‘classics,’ and even know a little Valic.”

“Magetongue,” Gabrielle gasped, her attention suddenly snapping fully back to Ryoh. “But it is forbidden to anyone who is not of the Nobility or Clergy! How could you have possibly learned it?”

“It’s a pictographic language,” Ryoh said with a shrug that made him wince. “It’s not like it’s that hard to translate a pictograph to words, especially if there’s a pattern to the way those pictographs are set up.”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Surprised I could get hold of information like that?” Ryoh grinned weakly. “I didn’t start learning Valic until I’d already graduated from the Thieves’ Guild. Got bored one day and raided a Noble library for something to read—turned out that I picked up one of those Old Valhurian history books. It had a little of the language and a translation in one of the chapters, and I got interested in working out how the pictographs were converted into spoken language. I’ve been looking into Valhurian history and texts ever since.”

“But what use would someone like you have for Magetongue,” Gabrielle asked. “It’s not like you could use any of the spells without years of training.”

“I don’t want to access the Veil,” Ryoh said, waving a hand in a dismissive gesture. Gabrielle almost bit her tongue off when he mentioned the Veil—no one outside of the magic-wielding classes of the King’s Army and the Clergy was supposed to know about the Veil. “I’m learning Valic out of personal curiosity—and a sense of self-preservation. Some Noble households have started using retired Warmagi to guard their homes—if one turns up while I’m on a job, it might give me a chance to get away if I can anticipate the spell he’s going to throw at me.”

Gabrielle shook her head, amazed at what she was hearing. What Ryoh had admitted to—studying Valic without the blessing of the King—was a crime punishable by death. Of course, so was breaking into Versomme, so it wasn’t as if breaking laws that might result in death seemed to bother the Thief that much. It had taken her years to master the Magetongue—she still stumbled over some of the more complex pictographs even now. Clearly her instructors had grievously underestimated the Thieves—at least this one.

“You realize that you would be killed if anyone ever found out,” Gabrielle said slowly. “I mean, how do I know you won’t pass your understanding of Valic on to your fellows, and use that knowledge to rise up against the King’s Army?”

“There would be no profit in that,” Ryoh said, grimacing as he shifted his weight again. “I told you before, Thieves only exist because there are Nobles that pay us good money to filch things from their rivals. If we killed off our customer base, we’d be out of work pretty quickly.”

“I see,” Gabrielle said. “So you’d never share what you know with anyone else?”

“I have a friend I work with in Crofsen—I’ve been teaching him what I know, but only because we’ve been friends ever since our first days at the Guild. I’d rather not see him burned up by some overzealous Warmagus.”

“He’s the only one though, right?” Gabrielle’s fingers twitched on the handle of her sword as she spoke—she was leaning toward letting Ryoh go, but if she thought he was passing the secrets of Magetongue to his entire Guild, duty would override her aversion to finishing what she’d begun earlier.

“Yeah,” Ryoh grunted, trying to sit up a little straighter against her bed. “Thieves don’t work as a huge, interconnected network anyway—if we run into each other on the street, it’s only by chance. I have no direct route to anyone who’d care about the information I have.”

Gabrielle bit her lower lip, thinking furiously. At this point, Ryoh had no good reason to lie to her—she hadn’t said anything about letting him go, and other than saving his life to ask a few questions, she’d given him no indication that he was headed anywhere but the stocks—so she didn’t think he was trying to talk his way out of his predicament again. Besides, if she let him go, he’d owe her a favor—and there was

something she'd been needing to do for a while now that she wasn't sure she could accomplish through normal channels.

Taking a deep breath, Gabrielle began to speak. "All right then, listen. Someone else will be in the hall soon, and when they see the bloody trail you left, they will raise the alarm. I'm still not sure I should be doing this, but I'm going to help you get out of here—on one condition."

"That being," Ryoh said evenly, giving no indication that he was at all excited by the sudden prospect of freedom.

"There's something I need to find out," she said slowly. "But I'm not sure I can get the information I need legitimately."

"I see," Ryoh said with a chuckle. "I'd be in your debt for not killing me, so once I'm out of here, I'd owe you a freebie."

"Well, yes," Gabrielle said hesitantly. "I mean, you could always disappear into whatever underground channels you Thieves use to avoid detection, and I'd never have the information I need, but..."

"But I haven't lied to you yet, so if I give my word now, you're willing to trust it," Ryoh finished for her. He leaned forward and picked up his blood-soaked tunic and coat, pulling each on with a series of stifled groans that reminded Gabrielle of the pain she'd inflicted on him. "All well and good, but whether my word's worth the breath I use to give it will be a moot question if you can't get me out of here—and in case you haven't noticed, I'm not in any shape to go climbing down the side of the Academy or anything."

"There's a tunnel the students here use to get into town when we feel like taking a day off," Gabrielle said. "The guards know about it, but they've never closed it off—I

think skipping class once or twice a year is kind of expected of us. If I can get you down there, you can follow it straight out of Versomme—it opens up about half a mile outside the grounds.”

“And what makes you think I wouldn’t use this tunnel to get back in someday,” Ryoh said softly.

“I thought of that,” Gabrielle returned. “The door only opens from the inside—it was kind of a way for the faculty here to force us to take responsibility for the days we skipped class when we were younger.”

“Bit of a double-edged sword,” Ryoh said with a nod. “Fine, if you can get me down there, I’ll find your information for you. I’d rather not die on the job today if I can help it.”

Rising to her feet, Gabrielle bent down and helped Ryoh stand. He was heavier than she’d expected him to be, and as she slung his good arm over her shoulders to support his weight, she found out why. When she’d removed his shirt and coat to dress his wound, she’d seen that he was muscular—but she hadn’t felt how solid those muscles were until just now.

Not that strength was everything in the world. Gabrielle had bested male cadets twice her size by being faster and more skilled with a blade than they were. Still, Ryoh’s build was a stark reminder that she’d been dealing with a very dangerous adversary before they’d made their tenuous peace.

“Damn it,” Ryoh muttered as they began to move toward Gabrielle’s door. “I forgot, I need something to prove I’ve been here.”

“What, having your shoulder ripped open isn’t proof enough,” Gabrielle asked.

“It doesn’t have to be anything big—just something with the Versomme crest on it. It’d be a real shame to go home empty handed.”

Gabrielle sighed. Nothing was ever easy in this life—not even sparing someone who was supposed to be your enemy from his own demise.

Looking around the room, she spied the embroidered quilt her mother had bought for her during her second year at Versomme. It was a thick, warm affair, with the academy’s crest stitched into the center. Since it was still summer, she wouldn’t be needing it for a while, but if Ryoh really did pull a disappearing act...

“Will a blanket do?” she asked. “I mean, I’m going to need it back—it gets cold up here in the winter months—but I could let you borrow it for a while.”

“That would work,” Ryoh said, quirked an eyebrow at her. “Why so helpful all of a sudden? Isn’t letting me go bad enough?”

“It is,” Gabrielle said. “But this way I can give you a good reason to keep up your end of the bargain.”

“A blanket,” Ryoh asked.

“Well,” she said, “you’d be carrying proof that you’d broken into Versomme—the blanket’s personalized, after all. You wouldn’t be able to get it outside of these walls. Do you really want to be caught carrying damning evidence if you decide to skip out on me and I tell the city guard about your little break-in?”

Ryoh laughed at that, and said, “Now that’s just fighting dirty. But fine, I’ll take the blanket.”

Easing Ryoh off her shoulders and helping him lean against the wall, Gabrielle crossed the room and pulled her blanket off of the chair it rested upon. Folding it as

small as possible, she tucked it under one arm, and then helped Ryoh get his good arm around her shoulders again.

“What about the blood,” Ryoh said. “It leads right here—won’t there be awkward questions once I’m gone?”

Gabrielle shook her head, and whispered, “Exara san’grade,” into the air. She smiled to herself as the blood that had soaked the side of her bed and puddle on the floor began to vanish from sight.

“That’s a handy trick,” Ryoh said appreciatively. “Why would an officer in the King’s Army need to know how to cover up blood, though?”

“I’m a medical officer,” Gabrielle answered. “Or I will be in a couple of months. It’s not so much about covering the blood up as it is sterilizing my working environment. I’m going to be treating combat casualties someday—it wouldn’t do to have my patients lying in each others’ blood.”

“Good point,” Ryoh said.

“There isn’t time to get rid of all of it,” Gabrielle said as she pushed open the door to her room and helped Ryoh walk out into the hallway, “but I should be able to wipe out the bits that would lead to my room. We have to go down the stairs you came up anyway, so I’ll get what I can along the way.”

Ryoh pulled his arm away from Gabrielle’s shoulders. “I can probably manage to walk on my own—and I imagine you’ll need a free hand for all the cleanup you’ll be doing.”

Gabrielle smiled weakly. “If it helps, I feel—conflicted—about hurting you as badly as I did.”

“It does,” Ryoh said quietly. “But we should get moving.”

“Right.”

They moved off down the hallway, retracing the steps Gabrielle had taken in pursuit of Ryoh. Along the way, they stopped periodically so that Gabrielle could wipe out the trail of blood that Ryoh had left. Ryoh even gave an appreciative whistle at a couple of particularly gore-covered spots.

Gabrielle and Ryoh had nearly reached the tunnel out of Versomme when they heard someone coming down the hallway ahead of them.

“Damn,” Gabrielle hissed. “The next patrol shift must’ve started already! Hide!”

Casting about herself, Gabrielle noticed an alcove off to the left that held no statue, but was shrouded in shadow from the lights flickering in the hallway all the same.

“In there!”

Without pausing to consider what she was doing, Gabrielle pushed Ryoh into the alcove, and squeezed in beside him. Pressed against the young Thief in the alcove, Gabrielle felt something of a blush coming on. She’d not been this close to a man before now—but her embarrassment vanished as the person coming down the hallway drew nearer.

For what seemed an eternity, both Noble and Thief held their breath, waiting for the patrolling cadet to pass by the alcove. The cadet in question—the schedule said it would be Vormann, Gabrielle thought—was whistling as he strolled down the hall, oblivious to the pair huddling together. He passed by the alcove without ever looking up, and continued on down the hall.

When the cadet had rounded a corner at the other end of the hall, Gabrielle and Ryoh extricated themselves from the alcove—a somewhat embarrassing affair, given how tightly they’d had to press together to get into the thing in the first place—and

continued on until they came to a red and gold tapestry that hung on one of the academy's walls.

"It's just behind here," Gabrielle whispered. "I'll open it for you—once you're inside, just follow it until you reach a set of wooden steps. The steps lead up to a trap door that opens onto the plains about half a mile outside Versomme's walls. From there, it's not that much of a walk back to Crofsen."

"Right," Ryoh said, tucking Gabrielle's blanket under his arm as she handed it to him. "Where do you want to meet to get this thing back?"

"I hadn't thought about that," Gabrielle admitted.

"The King's Park should work—there's always a crowd there, so it's not as if anyone's going to notice two people having a chat over a blanket. Meet me by the bush that looks like Lafad."

"The Queen's dog?" Gabrielle asked with a stifled laugh. "There's really a bush that looks like him?"

"Well, it was cut to look that way by the park's caretakers—but yeah," Ryoh said. "My friend and I taught a local stray to pee on that bush, just because we thought it was funny."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with a hand to silence another laugh. "I guess it is, at that. Listen—thanks, for... Well, for not being what I expected you to be."

"Same goes for you, though I'd hardly say we're on friendly terms just yet."

"I know," Gabrielle said. "And if you go committing any more crimes on my watch, our deal's off. But, still—it's nice, in a way, to know that the world isn't as dark a place as my instructors have taught me it is."

"Nothing's ever as bleak as it first appears," Ryoh agreed with a nod.

“Right. You’d better be off. I’ll meet you at the park in a week’s time. That will give me an opportunity to make sure the furor over the blood I didn’t get cleaned up has died down, and give you a chance to rest that shoulder.”

“It’s a deal,” Ryoh said, extending his hand. After a moment’s hesitation, Gabrielle took it, and found Ryoh’s handshake to be firm and somehow gentle.

“Let’s get you out of here,” she said.

Pulling a portion of the tapestry away from the wall, Gabrielle pushed on a block of stone that looked entirely indistinct from the others around it. At first, nothing happened; then a soft click announced the releasing of a lock, and an opening appeared in the wall as a section of stone and masonry swung away. The tunnel beyond the doorway was dimly lit by torches stuck into the walls, and stretched away into the distance before curving out of sight.

“You’re sure there’s no guards in there,” Ryoh said.

Gabrielle just looked at him with disappointment. How could he ask such a ridiculous question?

Catching on to the meaning of Gabrielle’s look, Ryoh nodded his head and said, “One week, King’s Park, Lafad’s bush.”

With that, he turned and strode into the tunnel, moving away at a steady pace despite his wound.

Gabrielle didn’t wait to see if he looked back before closing the door to the tunnel and letting the tapestry cover it once more.

She sighed and stepped away from the wall. She knew she’d just done something really stupid and dangerous. But it wasn’t as if Ryoh would tell anyone that mattered

about his escape—he'd be caught and killed if he admitted to breaking into Versomme, so she was safe in that direction, at least.

A sudden cry from down the hall told her that the patrolling cadet had just found the blood she hadn't been able to clean. She shook herself, stood up a little straighter, and tried her best not to look guilty. Then she turned on her heel, and took off at a brisk trot in the direction of the yelling cadet—that blood would want checking on, and if she wanted to last the week until she next met Ryoh, she'd have to at least help with the investigation.