

Author's Preface

First off, thank YOU for taking a chance on a first timer. This is my very first attempt at a novel, and hopefully there will be many more to follow.

As a voracious reader of sci-fi and fantasy novels for the last thirty years (I'm forty-six years old, by the way) I am downright angry at the garbage that has been getting published (traditionally) in the last fifteen or so years. I'll bet that forty percent of the sci-fi / fantasy novels that I start reading, I can't finish. Of course, I give them a fair chance. But, if after the first twenty-five percent of the book I'd rather receive a root canal than continue on, I abandon it. I figure if the author has not put their best effort forth at that point, the book will be a further waste of my time. The book you now have in your possession is my effort at what I have been saying to myself for the last decade, "I know I can write a better book than that."

My writing style is sure to rile a few people. Firstly, you will not need a dictionary as a companion to this novel. I am firmly against using a \$1.00 word where a .25¢ word will do. *"Hey, look how smart I am, I used PERSPICACITY when I just could have used INSIGHT."*

Next, I try to avoid overly descriptive sentences. More often than not, they hinder the flow of the novel and act as nothing more than padding. I'm not being paid by the word, like many traditional authors. When the words start getting in the way of the story, you are trying too hard. Let the reader use his or her imagination to fill in the blanks. If you want a five-page-long block of text describing a character walking into a room, read Tom Clancy.

Now, fair warning, dear reader: This novel is dark. There is no happy ending. It does not contain any heroes that save the day. There are no damsels in distress, and if there were, they would most certainly be killed off. Dragons? Not this time. Talking dragons at some point? Absolutely, positively, not. It does not follow the typical fantasy formula of the main characters struggling throughout the story to emerge as better, more admirable people. No heroes, no heroic quests, and most importantly of all, no vampires or zombies.

Well, dang it, you say. This sure isn't shaping up to be a fantasy novel. Wait, there's more. This novel explores the 'evil' point of view. In this particular tale, 'good' takes a shellacking while 'evil' prospers. The single quotations around 'good' and 'evil' denote the relativity of the two words. From the point of view of someone who is 'evil', what is 'evil' to others is actually 'good' to them. It all depends upon the point of view. It is this less discussed 'evil' point of view that I am focusing on in this tale. Rest assured, my goal wasn't simply to shock the reader with blood, guts, gore, and negative characters doing negative things. No. I wanted to explore the depths of the 'human' psyche (there are a few non-human

characters) from an alternative point of view.

The format of this novel is also a bit different from the standard fantasy fare. It is divided into three parts. Part one being five separate short stories dealing with each of the five main characters and the pivotal events that changed their lives. Part two unites the five main characters and explores the 'other' point of view that I talked about above. Part three is the climax of the story.

Wow. Have I just totally ruined my chance of you even starting to read this book? If you still feel up to reading it after all that, I am truly grateful. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Please don't hesitate to visit me at www.jasonleefantasyauthor.blogspot.com to tell me your thoughts. Love it or hate it, I'd appreciate your feedback.

Finally, a high-resolution image of the following map can be found at:
www.jasonleefantasyauthor.blogspot.com

Thank you,
Jason Lee

Chapter One

Skeele The Assassin

"You'll soon be in a better place," whispered the assassin into his victim's ear as he drew the blade across his throat. The victim, an elderly man returning from his nightly stroll and only feet from entering his posh home, tensed as the blade raked across his throat. His lifeblood freely gushed from the mortal wound as he was held fast from behind by the assassin. His feeble struggling ended moments later as he descended into death.

The assassin dragged the dead man several yards and deposited his body into the bushes. The victim's heels leaving evident blood tracks into the bush, as if two paintbrushes soaked in red paint were drawn across the cobblestones. He pilfered the keys to the front door from the dead man's pocket and robbed the house of its valuables.

The assassin, a mousy man named Skeele, was one of many assassins in town of Khazeer, but he was also one of the best, perhaps the best. He was a young man thirty years of age who killed for profit. Jobs had been slow coming in lately, and he had two children from two different women to provide for.

This robbery was known only to him—a side job. He had no morals, no conscience, and not a decent fiber in his being. Delicate of stature, he moved like a fox in the night and struck with the precision of an owl capturing its prey. From throwing stars to daggers to swords to crossbows, Skeelee had mastered every weapon of death.

Skeelee called the sprawling city of Khazeer home. Khazeer was located in the far southeastern corner of the kingdom of Altemnum. The extreme southeast quarter of the city harbored the brigands, outlaws, and the corrupt. It was also the area where Skeelee called home. People who wish to deal in the seedier aspects of life, keep clear of the authorities, or simply withdraw from society, came to the southeast quarter of Khazeer.

On the outskirts of the town sat a ramshackle farmhouse, nestled in a copse of trees far from the lonely dirt road that lead to its hidden drive. To most townsfolk, this was the farm of Bern Bonnette. To all but a select few, Bern was the gentle bean farmer who inherited the farm and its considerable acreage from his recently deceased father. A quiet, solitary man who kept to himself, Bern worked the land and supplied Khazeer with his bountiful green beans. Past middle age but still of strong mind and body, the eccentric Bern led a double life. To the select few who knew him, he was the head of a guild of four elite assassins/thieves. He was a vicious killer who knew no bounds.

The Guild, as it was simply referred to, was known to only a handful of powerful people in Khazeer. When the local authority's hands were tied, someone needed to mysteriously disappear, or some deed needed to be done that was too critical or large-scale for the run of the mill mercenary, The Guild was called upon. The Guild charged a hefty fee for its services, but they had never failed to achieve success in their five-year history.

On a stormy Saturday evening, the four guild members—Bern, Skeelee, Stig, and Axyle—gathered in the dirt floor basement of Bern's farmhouse, sitting at a candlelit table and discussing the next contract.

"Good evening gentlemen, I see you're still all alive," Bern declared as everyone settled in for the once a month meeting. "You look a little peaked, Stig. I wasn't sure if you'd make it tonight."

"It's just a flesh wound. Remind me to thank old Marrock, he makes the best leather vests this side of The Barrens," replied Stig. The guild's newest member, Stig was stout man who acted as the guild's point man. Daring and resourceful, Stig was always the first in and last out of any mission.

"Stig, you slipped up," Bern reprimanded, his tone turning more serious. "I thought it was made quite clear that additional casualties were acceptable as long as the mark was eliminated. You hesitated, and now you're paying the price. But more importantly, you jeopardized the mission."

Genuinely ashamed, Stig bowed his head and muttered, "The guild has my apologies. It will not

happen again.”

Bern said, “I should hope not. Innocence is not a factor. Age is not a factor. If our contractor specifies that additional casualties are acceptable as long as the mark is eliminated, as he did, then it is of no consequence if the entire family is slaughtered in the process. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good. Now, gentlemen, we have a new job on the docket. Mayor Orem needs our services.”

Axyle, a tall wiry man and the guild’s best thief, said, “Orem? If he’s involved, it must be big.”

“It is. Our biggest yet—65,000 credits.”

“What’s he want, the King assassinated?” exclaimed Stig, his eyes going wide.

“He may as well want that, for this task will be equally difficult. Orem wants Jakleel Bunkle eliminated.”

Now it was Axyle’s turn to look surprised. “Bunkle, what the hell has he ever done, other than be the most arrogant, stuck-up, crooked. . .”

“It’s not what he *has* done, but what he *hasn’t*,” interrupted Bern. “Bunkle’s resisting Orem’s policy of a 40 percent take on what the in-house entertainment brings in.”

“Whores,” hissed Axyle with a smirk, now understanding.

“Yes. Bunkle is getting too big for his britches and that is making Orem a bit nervous. Bunkle’s got his pudgy hands into everything from gambling to farming to ladies of the evening. Next to Orem, he may be the most powerful man in Khazeer.”

Stig said, “From what I hear, Bunkle is untouchable.”

Skeele uttered, “No such thing as untouchable.” Of the four, Skeele was the most well rounded of the four guild members. His roguish, self-centered behavior was his only shortcoming, often causing guild jobs to evolve into something much more difficult than they would have otherwise been.

“Bunkle’s got at least a dozen bodyguards with him at all times. His mansion is a fortress. This won’t be easy,” Axyle said.

“Nothing ever is,” mumbled Skeele.

Bern grabbed a large candle and slid it closer to him as he began to consult some notes. “Right. Now, here’s what Orem wants. Bunkle’s death is to be made to look like an accident. Orem would be the first to be suspected if Bunkle were to be murdered. They’re not exactly happy with each other as of late, and the whole town knows about it. Also, no appropriating things from the mansion. This is no robbery.” He looked specifically at Skeele.

“I hear Bunkle has the largest collection of Cyclix orbs in the west. He won’t miss a few here and there,” Skeele said with a smirk.

Bern grew irritated. "Nothing is to be removed from the premises! Listen, Orem recommended that it looked like he choked on something or some heavy object fell on him or he fell off the balcony. We are free to do whatever is necessary to make it look accidental. Orem is taking a huge chance by ordering his murder. He doesn't want anything to point to himself."

Axyle said, "When's this supposed to go down?"

"This Friday night. Orem is hosting his annual End of Summer Masquerade Ball. This is when we will strike. I have been planning this one for the last three nights and have what I think is a plan that gives us the best chance. It's been a long time since we had such a well-paying job and we can't botch it. It must go flawlessly."

Skeele said, with perhaps a bit too much sarcasm, "Don't you think we should have a say in the plan?"

Bern's patience was near its end. He threw down his notes and slid back from the table. "Listen Skeele, you're walking a fine line within this organization. Last month you slaughtered an entire household when only the wife was the target."

"They got in the way."

"Don't forget about the Zepha painting you destroyed when all you had to do was plant the papers in the museum director's office. That damn thing was a masterpiece."

"I had to hit Markum over the head with something—that was the closest thing."

Bern sprung up. "It cost us 31,000! Your actions as of late have not been becoming of a guild member. They have caused too many looks my way—too many questions. The authorities are asking for more and more to look the other way with each slip up. Orem and his lackeys won't hesitate to expose this organization to the King to save his fat ass. If I'm going to the gallows, rest assured, I'm taking you three with me."

"Simmer down. I'll be on my best behavior," Skeele said, never once looking up.

"This is not some 3,000 credit hit or some petty smash and grab. This will be our single biggest take—16,250 each!" Bern returned to his chair, appearing to have gotten his anger under control. "Now listen up, here's the plan. Mayor Orem will be providing me with a list of attendees. The first task goes to you, Axyle. Early Friday evening, before anyone shows up to the party, you will incapacitate one of the attendees—who will be decided once I get the list—and appropriate his or her costume. You, Skeele, will don the costume and impersonate the attendee to gain entry into the mansion. Once inside, you should be able to get close to Bunkle and eliminate him. Take him out when he's alone. No witnesses. Accidental fall, choked on a chicken wing, whatever."

The table was silent. Finally, Stig asked, "What are our roles?"

“Support. I will make sure that the invitee that Axyle incapacitates stays out of the picture. You, Stig, will take up a position outside the mansion, out of sight, and assist Skeele if anything goes wrong on the inside. Also, Axyle will be walking Greeve street should additional support be needed.”

All nodded their approval.

Bern looked around the table and said, “So, unless there are any other questions, I will declare this meeting adjourned until Mayor Orem gets me the list of attendees to the ball. From there, we’ll iron out the finer points.”

Once again, silent nodding from the others.

“Meeting adjourned. Watch for the signal,” Bern said, implying the lighting of a bonfire in his field to signal that a guild meeting was to take place at midnight of that night.

Belongings were gathered up and candles blown out. The four climbed the rickety stairs to Bern’s main floor. One by one, they silently slipped out the back door and into the darkness of the night.

Two days later, Monday evening, Bern created a pile of dead tree branches in his south field and set it alight. The final meeting before Friday night’s assassination was called to begin.

In less than one hour, the four were once again gathered at the table in Bern’s basement. Bern withdrew a folded up piece of parchment paper and placed it on the table near a flickering candle.

“Orem came through. Here is a list of confirmed attendees to Friday night’s Masquerade Ball.”

“Aren’t we missing something?” asked Skeele.

“And what would that be?” replied Bern.

“Why, some sort of down payment, of course. I do believe it’s customary to put down something before we take any action,” Skeele explained. “Am I not right?”

Bern was obviously displeased. “Skeele, don’t push it. We’re dealing with Mayor Orem—he’s not going to skip town on us. 65,000 credits will be coming our way soon enough. Patience.”

Skeele just nodded his head, never looking up.

Bern continued, “Now, Lady Winthrope, the spinster at the end of Jasmine way, is our first undertaking. I chose her because she is always alone, and because she best resembles Skeele in stature.”

Stig and Axyle burst out laughing. Skeele flashed a deadly stare their way, which would have made any normal person go pale with fear, but these hardened assassins didn’t flinch and continued their laughter for a few more seconds. They may have reacted a bit differently if they knew that Skeele had a throwing knife in each hand. Expertly plucked from his boots during the hilarity at the table, Axyle and Stig were only two flicks of Skeele’s wrists away from a knife to the jugular. Of course, he would never consider murdering them right there at the table, but zinging the stars into the table, inches from

their hands, was something he was considering.

"Axyle," Bern continued, "your job is to break into Lady Winthrop's residence Friday night before the ball starts and put her out of commission for the evening. Find her costume and her personalized invitation and bring them here. You are free to use whatever means necessary, but she is not to be permanently harmed. The ball starts one hour after sunset, so I'd like to have Skeele in costume by sunset."

Axyle rubbed his gaunt face, thinking. "Well, seems easy enough. I'll just sneak in through the window, apply a little ether to the face, and nighty night. Hopefully, she's already in the costume so I can undress her. She's not that bad looking, you know."

That brought a few chuckles from the table. Stig added, "She'd probably *like* being undressed by a man. Maybe you should keep her awake for it."

Bern said, "Just get the costume here by sundown. Rape the bitch if you want, I don't care. I'll take up a position and watch over the Lady's house to make sure she stays out of the picture once she wakes up."

Axyle hissed, "What, afraid I won't be thorough enough? Rest assured, I will."

Bern dismissed the accusation with a condescending shake of the head. "Precautionary measure only. Now, Skeele, you will put on Winthrop's costume and arrive at the ball one hour after sunset. Present the invitation, gain entrance, and dispose of Bunkle. You know the rules."

As usual, Skeele's mind seemed far away from the present. "I hate rules," he murmured while picking his fingernails.

Bern continued, "Stig will have a position just inside the bunch of trees that are about 300 feet to the south of the mansion. He will be your backup on that side. Axyle will be wandering Greeve Street to the north, should you require assistance in that direction."

Bern produced a small scrap of paper and handed it to Skeele. "This is a diagram of the mansion, graciously provided by Orem. Study it."

With not so much as a glance at it, Skeele wadded it up and stuffed it into one of his many coat pockets. Bern could only shake his head in disgust.

"Ok. We'll gather here, Friday midday, to go over the final mission briefing." Bern slid his chair back from the table and stood up. "Unless there is anything else, this meeting is adjourned."

The four deadly assassins headed upstairs, slipped out the back door, and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

The following three days came and went uneventfully in Khazeer. It was a blustery autumn day;

the day of Jakleel Bunkle's End of Summer Masquerade Ball. Khazeer's richest resident, Bunkle was known for hosting extravagant cotillions several times a year. Rich and influential, Bunkle was making the Mayor nervous with his incremental gains in various enterprises within the town. He would have to be stopped. Tonight, hundreds of guests would occupy his mansion for the ball; but it would be Bunkle's last. Tonight there would be a tragic accident.

The Guild members, Bern, Stig, Axyle, and Skeele were preparing themselves for the night's job downstairs in the assassins' den. Each member outfitted themselves with various deadly weapons of choice, securing them to their bodies. They worked methodically and silently. Each assassin carried no less than four different types of weapons; Skeele sported nearly a dozen. He had no less than seven holsters belted onto his arms, legs, and torso. Each holster contained wicked instruments of death, from barbed knives to razor garrotes, and from throwing stars to poison vials.

Twilight was upon them. It was time. Axyle pulled his black cloak tight and cinched it at the waist. "Be back in under an hour," he said as he slunk out the door and out into the early evening. Phase one of the mission was underway.

There were not many people out and about on the chilly late September evening, but Axyle, clad all in black, tried to appear as inconspicuous as he could. He sauntered down the gas-lit cobblestone roads; nodding to the occasional person he chanced across on his way to Lady Winthrop's small cottage at the end of Jasmine Way.

He ducked down a partially lit alleyway and stuck to the shadows. Dodging rubbish, crates, and the occasional shopkeeper emptying the trash, Axyle was like a shadowy specter, gliding down the alleys without a sound.

Patting his pocket to make sure the vial of ether was still there, Axyle peered around the corner of the alley and down Jasmine Way. It was much darker now and there was not a person in sight. He stepped out of the alley and hustled down the narrow dead-end road that was Jasmine Way, on his way to the small cottage at the end.

Ducking down, he scampered up to a large evergreen tree and crouched low. Black hood over his head, he was invisible. Lady Winthrop's cottage was completely dark except for one lit window at the ground level. He watched the window and soon saw the silhouette of Lady Winthrop walk across its pane.

Axyle dug into his pocket and retrieved the small vial of ether that was rolled up in a brown cloth. He rose up from his crouched position and surveyed his route towards the window.

With one step towards the cottage, Axyle heard the familiar sound of a night watchman coming down the way. Still over one hundred feet away, the clanking sounds of chain mail and short sword were

fast approaching. He hastily dove under the bottommost branches of the tree and made himself as small as he could.

He withdrew a pair of metal knuckles from a fold in his cloak as well as a five-inch spike. He screwed the spike onto the end of the knuckles. If he was discovered and it came to blows, one punch to the head or heart from his wicked weapon would pierce the chain mail and slay the night watchman. He waited under cover of the evergreen tree.

The watchman walked to the end of the cul-de-sac and stopped. Mere feet from the hidden assassin, the watchman opened up his trousers and relieved himself in the direction of the tree. A few drops found their way through the branches and landed near the assassin, but he did not flinch.

The watchman closed up his leather pants, passed some gas, and then continued on his rounds, the sound of his clanking armor fading into the night.

Axyle already had disassembled his knuckle-spike, tucked it away, and now had the ether vial and cloth in his hand. Seeing the coast was clear, he crawled out from his cover.

"Damn," he hissed, for he had just crawled through the puddle of urine. Still crouching, he wiped his hands across his thighs and then scooted up to the side of the house, just under the lit window. Through the partially open window, he could hear Lady Winthrop humming a tune as she was preparing for this evening's masquerade ball.

Uncorking the vial, Axyle drenched the rag with ether and deposited the vial and cork back into his voluminous cloak. Hearing the Lady walk into the next room, he reached up with a black gloved hand, surveyed the area to make sure no more night watchmen or wandering pedestrians were nearby, and inched the window up. He then reached up to the sill with both hands, and with the dexterity of a cat, vaulted himself up through the window and into the room, all without making a single sound.

The small room Axyle now found he was in was the Lady's changing room. It was well lit by two wall sconce lamps. He snuffed out the closest one, creating a favorable shadow in his corner. He then assumed a crouched position behind a footstool. He could hear her humming approaching from down the hall. She was coming back.

"Oh dear, the lamp's gone out," said the middle-aged spinster as she set one foot into the room. She then turned and left, presumably to get a match.

Axyle had spied the Lady already in costume, except for her mask. The costume was an audaciously colored, flowing dress. All the better for Skeelee, for it would conceal his build, for even in all his slighthness, he was still bulkier than the Lady. In addition, it would provide him with much space to conceal his weapons.

He scanned the room from his semi-concealed position and located the mask on a table in the

far corner. Now all he needed to do was immobilize the spinster, strip her, ravish her, locate the invitation, and then hustle back to Bern's farmhouse.

Moments later, her humming grew in volume. Lady Winthrope entered the room, candle in hand, and made her way towards the far corner. A black form sprung from the shadows and enveloped her. She dropped the candle in fright. As a scream formed in her throat, Axyle slapped the ether soaked rag over her mouth. There was no struggle, no sounds.

It appeared as if Lady Winthrope was encased by a giant bat. Seconds later, her eyes fluttered closed and she went limp.

Axyle guided her body downward to the floor and went about stripping her outfit. He tossed the flowing dress under the window, nabbed the gaudy mask and pitched it onto the heap, and then scoured the room for the invitation. No luck.

Darting out of the room and down the hall, Axyle made his way to the front entryway. There, sitting on a ledge, he spied an elegant pink envelope with an ornate "B" scribed in the corner. He had his invitation.

He made his way back to the sitting room and set the invitation onto the masquerade outfit. He stood over his unconscious victim and considered her form. She was not that unattractive, he thought, maybe even pretty in her day. Too bad. He crudely yanked off her undergarments, undid his trousers, and ravished her.

Minutes later, he secured his trousers and dragged the nude body of Lady Winthrope into the corner of the room. He rummaged through his pockets and produced a vial of pills. Extracting two pills from the vial, he forced them down the throat of the woman. *That should keep her down till morning, he thought.*

Axyle fully opened the window and peered out into the night. The coast was clear. He stuffed the mask and invitation into some inner pockets of his cloak, gathered up the masquerade dress, and like a snake, slithered out the window and made for Bern's farmhouse, half way across town.

"What kept you?" Bern asked a panting Axyle as he dumped the costume and invitation onto the table.

"A man has his needs."

"You raped the bitch?"

Axyle nodded, smirking.

"I might have a go at the old prune tonight, too." Bern gathered up the costume and envelope. He and Axyle headed downstairs to the assassins' den.

"Alright boys, now begins phase two," Bern said, plopping the costume onto the table. "I will be watching over Lady Winthrop's house, making sure she doesn't somehow come to her senses and alert the authorities."

"Oh, she'll be out of commission till sun-up. She's got two of Emery's night-berry pills in her," said Axyle, referring to the town's local apothecary who provided the sleeping pills that he had shoved down her throat.

"Here, Skeele, get into this," Bern said, pushing the costume to the diminutive assassin. Skeele grimaced at the sight of the garish costume.

"Go on, Skeele, I'll bet you'll look real pretty," Stig said, bringing laughter to the table.

A not too happy Skeele stripped off his street clothes and grabbed the costume. Skeele, never the one for words or modesty, silently fumbled with the costume as the others began preparing for their roles in the evening's assassination.

"Just keep saying to yourself, 16,250 credits at the end of the night," Bern said, referring to the payday each person would receive with the successful completion of the job.

It was a snug fit, but Skeele managed to get dressed. The flowing dress covered him from head to toe, never suggesting that a deadly assassin, armed to the teeth, was under its voluminous folds and brightly colored patterns.

Bern handed him the feathery mask, which Skeele put on. It covered everything but the back of his head. Bern adjusted some feathers here and there and the transformation was complete. "Ravishing, absolutely ravishing," Bern commented with a sly grin.

Stig and Axyle had since lost interest and were lost in thought as they checked their inventory and pored over the maps one last time.

Skeele stuffed the invitation into the dress and said, "Alright, let's get this over with."

Bern said, "Remember the plan. Accidental death. No pilfering. Keep your wits about you. Stig will be in the copse of trees to the south, Axyle will be on Greeve Street to the North, and I'll be near Lady Winthrop's house should you need assistance once you're out. You're on your own on the inside. Rendezvous here at midnight. Ready?" The others nodded. "Solinomnus E Atriunei."

"Solinomnus E Atriunei," the others repeated, which roughly translated to: *With Death Brings Life*. They then headed upstairs and scattered into the night.

Skeele had sneaked (as much as he could sneak wearing his ridiculous costume) across Bern's field and emerged onto a dimly lit back-street that led to Buckle's mansion. He was eager to walk right into the thick of things and rely on his worldly skills to complete the task. He was not a team player and

preferred operating alone. He thrived on complicated jobs; loved painting himself in a corner and putting himself to the test in order to get out.

Ah, there it is, he thought as he turned down a well-lit street and saw the mansion on the cul-de-sac. *Not very many people in the area. I must be early. I had better wait until it gets into full swing to make my move.*

Skeele was about two hundred yards from the pathway that led to Jakleel Bunkle's mansion when he began to notice a few costumed couples heading in that direction. He removed the invitation from his pocket hustled to catch up.

Once I get past the door guards, I'll check out the rooms and figure out a plan. Something heavy to drop on him should do the trick.

Skeele made his way up the pathway and to the front door of Bunkle's mansion. There were two of his private guards in full plate mail stationed at either side of the door. They both had sheathed long swords at their side. A butler stepped out to greet Skeele. "Good evening madam."

Skeele silently offered the invitation to the butler who opened it and briefly glanced at it. "It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Jakleel Bunkle's ninth annual End of Summer Masquerade Ball. I hope you have an enjoyable evening, madam." He motioned for Skeele to enter.

Skeele simply nodded and walked in. *That was easy.*

Standing in the vestibule, Skeele took stock of his surroundings. He already had the mansion's layout memorized from the map that Mayor Orem provided, so he began taking inventory of things. Large flower-filled vases and life-size marble statues decorated the room beyond. These could be tipped over for diversionary purposes or to block the pursuit of guards, should things go awry.

Leaving the vestibule and heading into the great Room, Skeele decided that the assassination should most likely happen during the middle of the party, when the mansion was packed with guests. Right now, the vast room was sparse with costumed guests, affording little cover should he need to make a quick escape. Better yet, hopefully he could locate Bunkle on one of the upper levels where a window would be his means of escape. He headed over to the snack table in the center of the great room.

The mansion was elegant, befitting one of the richest people in the town. Marble floors, imported tapestries on the walls, high ceilings with flying buttress archways, and space. Lots of space.

There were only a dozen or so guests at this early hour and a small group of harpists and flutists was just setting up. Feeling awkward, Skeele made a decision. *Let's just see what my boundaries are. It's always good to know where the line is.*

He made his way across the expansive room, obviously the place where the majority of the evening's activities would be held, and approached a staircase. Two guards were stationed at its head.

Hmmmmm, getting to him upstairs is not going to be as easy as I hoped. Bunkle's got his lackeys everywhere.

One of the guards grew uncomfortable at the costumed figure lingering around the stairs that led up to, what was no doubt, Bunkle's penthouse level. "Move along, Ma'am."

Skeelee performed his best curtsy and headed off towards a dimly lit alcove off to one side of the assembly area.

That's where he's at. I'd rather take care of him up there than down here. Now, how do I get up there unnoticed? Skeelee muddled over his strategy as he sauntered into the alcove. Two armed guards presented no problem whatsoever for him. Dispatching them would be the easy part. What would not be so easy is to keep the dozens of people from seeing him commit the deed.

Wooo hooo. What have we here? He spotted a jewel-encrusted gold plate hanging on a wall. Glancing around, he yanked the plate off its mount and shoved it under his outfit. *Nice. This'll pay a few bills. Bunkle's gonna have to wait a few minutes; I have more pressing matters to attend to.* Bern's stern warning of no looting never once entered into his thoughts.

The outlandishly garbed assassin continued meandering about the first floor of the huge mansion, pilfering small items that appeared to be of value. Gold silverware. A small painting. A diamond he pried from a large sculpture of a Dragon. He even managed to relieve a guest of her pearl necklace.

Uh oh. Time to act. The crowd seemed to be getting louder in a way that didn't seem to be joyous. Skeelee sensed a commotion. Someone must have noticed something. *Must have been the pearl necklace. Damn! I should have stuck to trinkets.*

Gliding along the wall that was adjacent the guarded staircase, Skeelee made his way through the room as unassuming as possible. Things were starting to heat up. The crowd had grown two-fold in the last twenty minutes and he intermingled back into their midst.

Just then, Skeelee saw an insanely fat man dressed in audacious purple garments, laughing and squeezing two harlots that flanked him, emerge from the growing crowd and proceed up the stairs. *Damn! How could I have missed that fat son of a bitch?* The clinking of gold and the extra poundage of trinkets stuffed under his costume, revealed the answer. Skeelee cursed his impulsiveness.

Hurrying, the costumed assassin dodged guests as he made his way to the guarded stairway, making up a plan as he went. He worked best under pressure. This was what he lived for. He loved relying on his skills and quick wit to solve problems that were thrown his way. He was nearly to the staircase.

"Robbery," Skeelee said to one of the armed guards in his best female voice, capitalizing on the commotion at the far end of the room. He pointed across the floor to an area that seemed alive with

activity.

"On it," replied the guard who promptly deserted his post and rushed through the crowd towards to ruckus.

How easy was that?

A robbery was in fact the cause of the disturbance. Moments earlier, some unfortunate guest realized she had "lost" her coveted pearl necklace that was worth a small fortune. A perfect, yet unplanned, diversion, Skeele chuckled.

Seconds before the assassin made it to the guarded staircase, he had slipped on a set of brass knuckles. The remaining guard was mindful not to desert his post, but he did direct his attention to the far end of the room where his fellow guard was scampering.

Now was Skeele's chance. In one stealthy move, he dealt a powerful yet controlled uppercut to the guard, who collapsed into his waiting arms like a sack of potatoes.

Just then, a costumed guest turned to look at Skeele, who was trying to hold up the knocked-out guard. Skeele then wrapped the unconscious guard in an embrace and feigned a passionate kiss.

The guest smiled and continued on. Perfect.

Skeele glanced around while holding up the guard. Most of the guests had headed over to the commotion and were paying him no mind. He positioned the guard—more like draped him—over the banister and nimbly ran up the stairs.

Near the top, he peered around the corner and scanned down a hall. Red carpet with odd gold designs and red wallpaper emblazoned with gold filigrees assaulted his eyes. Oil lit lamps adorned the walls at regular intervals. There was not a soul to be seen. Reaching up under his costume, he drew a quarter sword. With caution, he proceeded down the hallway.

Along his way, he relieved Bunkle of a few more treasures, stuffing them in his already bulging pockets.

At the end of the hall, he peered around the corner and saw a single armed guard standing near massive double doors with a large golden "B" flourished one each one. *How pretentious.*

There was no time to waste. It wouldn't be long before someone noticed the stairway was unguarded—or worse—there was an unconscious guard slumped over the banister.

All thoughts of the guidelines of this mission eluded him. He was an assassin and a thief. That's what he did, and he did it well. Others would have to die tonight.

Skeele unbuttoned the front of his costume. He had a feeling he would need quick access to his full complement of weapons hidden underneath. He produced his favorite weapon, an eight pronged throwing star with razor sharp barbs that had been soaked overnight in hemlock—near instant death.

With a flick of the wrist, the star sailed through the air and sank deep within the exposed throat of the guard. He collapsed with a muffled grunt as the serenity of paralysis and death took him.

Skeele withdrew another throwing star and dashed to the door. He could hear Bunkle engaged in passionate sex with the two female guests inside.

Just then, an alarm went off. A pulsating whine filled the entire mansion. *Damn!*

Those were the first 15 pages of **Five Times Vengeance: *The Guild of The Five***. I hope you enjoyed them because there are 371 more pages just like those. The e-book can be purchased on Amazon.com for \$2.99 beginning on Friday, October 19, 2012. Thank you for your support.