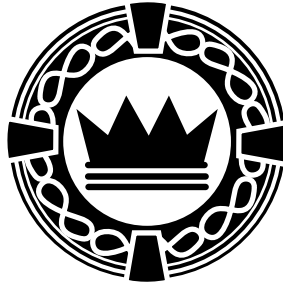
The background of the cover is a misty, golden-hued landscape. In the foreground, there are dark evergreen trees and some tall, thin grasses. In the background, a large, multi-story building with a central tower is visible through the mist. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and atmospheric.

THE  
CROWN  
CONSPIRACY

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE  
CROWN  
CONSPIRACY



BY  
MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN



SPECIAL EDITION

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## PRAISE FOR SULLIVAN'S CROWN CONSPIRACY

*"The Crown Conspiracy reminds me why I fell in love with the fantasy genre in the first place."*

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*"I flew through Sullivan's The Crown Conspiracy in just about a day. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay the book and its author is that immediately upon arriving at work I went and grabbed its sequel, Avempartha off the new book shelf."*

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To my wife Robin (my biggest fan, critic, contributor, and publicist) whose hard work and dedication made it all possible.

And to my daughter Sarah who would not read the story until published.

## BOOKS IN THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

*The Crown Conspiracy*

*Avempartha*

*Nyphron Rising*

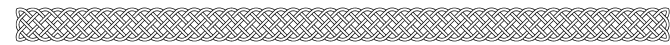
*The Emerald Storm*

*Wintertide*

*Percepliquis*



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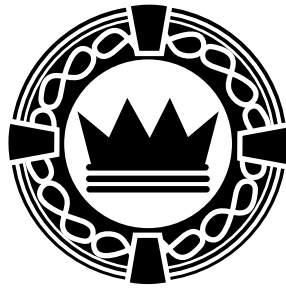


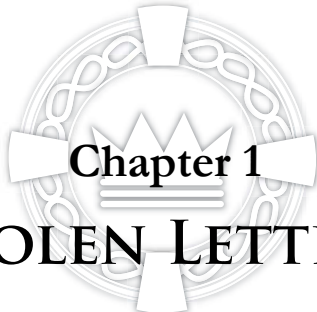


# Detail Map of Avryn



THE  
CROWN  
CONSPIRACY





## Chapter 1

# STOLEN LETTERS

ARCHIBALD BALLENTYNE HELD the world in his hands, conveniently contained within fifteen stolen letters. Each parchment was penned with meticulous care in a fine, elegant script. He could tell the writer believed that the words were profound and that their meaning conveyed a beautiful truth. Archibald felt the writing was drivel, yet he agreed with the author that they held a value beyond measure. He took a sip of brandy, closed his eyes, and smiled.

He sat by the fire, savoring the moment and appraising his future. As Earl of Chadwick, he already possessed ample wealth, a modest position at court, and of course, his exceptional good looks. Most ruling nobles were potbellied, gout-ridden, old bores. He, on the other hand, was in his prime: fit and tall with a full head of auburn hair, chiseled features, and piercing blue eyes. Archibald was proud of his appearance. He could obtain wealth and fame through any number of means, but to be born handsome was a gift for the deserving. He accentuated his natural virtues by wearing the finest imported fashions made with expensively dyed silks, embroidered linens, and feathers from exotic birds. His fellow nobles admired him for his elegant style. Soon his prestige would be elevated to the same enviable level.

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

“M’lord?”

Reluctantly, Archibald opened his eyes and scowled at his master-at-arms. “What is it, Bruce?”

“The marquis has arrived, sir.”

Archibald’s smile returned. He carefully refolded the letters, tied them in a stack with a blue ribbon, and returned them to his safe. He closed its heavy iron door, snapped the lock in place, and tested the seal with two sharp tugs on the unyielding bolt. He then headed downstairs to greet his guest.

When Archibald reached the foyer, he spied Victor Lanaklin waiting in the anteroom. He paused for a moment and watched the old man pacing back and forth, and it brought him a sense of satisfaction. While the marquis enjoyed a superior title, he had never impressed Archibald. Perhaps he was once lofty, intimidating, or even gallant, but all that was lost long ago, shrouded under a mat of gray hair and a hunched back.

“May I offer you something to drink, your lordship?” a mousy steward asked the marquis with a formal bow.

“No, but you can get me your earl,” he commanded, “or shall I hunt for him myself?”

The steward cringed. “I am certain my master will be with you presently, sir.” The servant bowed again and hastily retreated through a door on the far side of the room.

“Marquis!” Archibald called out graciously as he made his entrance. “I am so pleased you have arrived—and so quickly.”

“You sound surprised.” Victor’s voice was sharp. Shaking a wrinkled parchment clasped in his fist, he continued, “You send a message like this and expect me to delay? Archie, I demand to know what is going on.”

Archibald concealed his disdain at the use of his childhood nickname, *Archie*. This was the moniker his dead mother had given him and one of the reasons he would never forgive her. As a youth,

## STOLEN LETTERS

everyone from the knights to the servants had used it, and he always felt demeaned by its familiarity. Once he became Earl, he made it law in Chadwick that anyone referring to him as such would suffer the loss of his tongue. Archibald did not have the power to enforce the edict on the marquis, and he was certain Victor used it intentionally.

“Please do try to calm down, Victor.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” The marquis’ voice echoed off the stone walls. He moved closer, his face mere inches from the younger man’s, and glared into his eyes. “You wrote that my daughter Alenda’s future was at stake and you had evidence of this. Now I must know—is she, or is she not, in danger?”

“She is most certainly,” the earl replied calmly, “but nothing imminent, to be sure. There is no kidnapping plot, nor is anyone planning to murder her, if that is what you fear.”

“If you’ve caused me to run my carriage team to near collapse while I worried myself sick for nothing, you will regret—”

Holding up his hand, Archibald cut the threat short. “I assure you, Victor, it is not for nothing. Nevertheless, before we discuss this further, let us retire to the comfort of my study where I can show you the evidence I mentioned.”

Victor glowered at him but nodded in agreement.

The two men crossed the luxurious foyer, passed through the large reception hall, and veered off through an ornate door that led to the living quarters of the castle. As they traversed various hallways and stairways, the atmosphere of their surroundings changed dramatically. In the main entry, fine tapestries and etched stonework adorned the walls, and the floors were made of finely crafted marble; yet, beyond the entry, no displays of grandeur were found, leaving barren walls of stone the predominate feature.

By architectural standards, or any other measures, Ballentyne Castle was unremarkable and ordinary in every respect. No great king or hero ever called the castle home. Nor was it the site of any

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

legend, ghost story, or battle. Instead, it was the perfect example of mediocrity and the mundane. For twelve generations, the Ballentynes lived there. Each earl, including Archibald's father Albright, had tried to advance his position, but in the end, his failures left the House of Ballentyne anchored to the morass of nobility's middle tier. Only time would determine if Archibald would succeed, where so many others had previously failed.

After some time, Archibald led Victor to a formidable door made of cast iron. Impressive, oversized bolts secured the door at its hinges, but it displayed no visible latch or knob. Flanking either side of the door stood two large, well-armored guards bearing halberds. Upon Archibald's approach, one rapped on the door three times. A tiny viewing window opened, and a moment later, the hall echoed with the sharp sound of a bolt snapping back. As the door opened, the metal hinges screamed with a deafening noise.

Victor's hands moved to defend his ears. "By Mar! Have one of your servants tend to that!"

"Never," Archibald replied. "This is the entrance to the Gray Tower—my private study and treasure room. This is my safe haven, if you will. I want to hear this door opening from anywhere in the castle, which I can."

Stationed behind the door, Bruce greeted the pair with a deep and stately bow. Holding a lantern before him, he escorted the men up a wide spiral staircase.

Halfway up the tower, Victor's pace slowed, and his breathing appeared labored. Archibald paused courteously.

"I know it's a long way. I've climbed these stairs a thousand times. I used to hide up here when my father was Earl. This was the one place I could be alone. No one ever wanted to take the time or effort to climb these stairs to the top. While it may not reach the majestic height of the Crown Tower at Ervanon, it is the tallest tower in my castle."

"I'd think people would make the climb merely to see the view," Victor speculated.

## STOLEN LETTERS

The earl chuckled. “You would think so, but this tower has no windows. After I became Earl, I decided it was the perfect location for my private study, and I added doors to protect the things dear to me.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, they encountered another door. Archibald removed a large key from his pocket and unlocked it. He gestured politely for the marquis to enter. Once they were both inside, Archibald left Bruce outside to stand guard and closed the door behind them.

The room was large and circular with an expansive ceiling. The furnishings were sparse: a large disheveled desk, two cushioned chairs near a small fireplace, and a delicate table between them. A fire burned in the hearth behind a simple brass screen, illuminating most of the study. The candles, which lined the walls, provided light to the remaining areas and filled the chamber with a pleasant, heady aroma of honey and salifan.

Archibald smiled when he noticed Victor eyeing the cluttered desk overflowing with various scrolls and maps. “Don’t worry, sir. I hid all the truly incriminating plans for world domination prior to your visit,” he quipped. “Please do sit down.” Archibald gestured toward the pair of chairs near the hearth. “Rest yourself from your long journey while I pour us a drink.”

The older man scowled and grumbled, “Enough of the tour and formalities. We are here now. Explain what this is all about.”

Archibald ignored the marquis’ tone. He could afford to be gracious now that he was about to claim his prize. He waited while the marquis took his seat.

“You are aware, are you not, that I have shown an interest in your daughter Alenda?” Archibald asked, walking to the desk to pour two glasses of brandy.

“Yes, she’s mentioned it to me.”

“Has she told you why she has refused my advances?”

“She doesn’t like you.”

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

“She hardly knows me,” countered Archibald with a raised finger.

“Archie, is this why you asked me here?”

“I would appreciate your addressing me by my proper name. It is inappropriate to call me *that* since my father is dead and I hold title. In any case, concerning your question, it does have a bearing on the subject. As you know, I am the twelfth Earl of Chadwick. Granted, it’s not a huge estate, and Ballentyne isn’t the most influential of families, but I am not without merit. I control five villages and twelve hamlets, as well as the strategic Senon Uplands. I currently command more than sixty professional men-at-arms, and twenty knights are loyal to me—including Sir Enden and Sir Breckton, both of whom rank in the top fifty on the tournament circuit. Chadwick’s wool and leather exports are the envy of the whole of Warric, and there is talk of the Summersrule Games being held here on the very lawn you crossed to enter my castle.”

“Yes, Archie—I mean *Archibald*—I am well aware of Chadwick’s status in the world. I don’t need a commerce lesson from you.”

“Are you also aware that King Ethelred’s nephew has dined here on more than one occasion? Or that the Duke and Lady of Rochelle have promised to invite me to Wintertide this year?”

“Archibald, this is quite tiresome. What exactly is your point?”

Archibald frowned at the marquis’ lack of awe. He carried over the glasses of brandy, handed one to Victor, and took the remaining seat. He paused a moment to sip his liquor.

“My point is this. Given my position, my stature, and my promising future—why would Alenda reject me? Certainly, it is not because of my appearance. The rest of her suitors are old, fat, or bald—in several cases all three.”

“Perhaps looks and wealth are not her only concern,” replied Victor. “Women don’t always think about politics and power. Alenda is the kind of girl who follows her heart.”

“But she also follows her father’s wishes. Am I correct?”

## STOLEN LETTERS

“I don’t understand your meaning.”

“If you told her to marry me, she would.”

“That is not a certainty. Alenda has been known to disobey me.”

“As her father perhaps, but would she refuse a command from the Marquis of Glouston?” Archibald pressed. “You could *order* her to marry me.”

“So, this is why you coerced me into coming here? I’m sorry, Archibald, but you have wasted your time and mine. I refuse to force her to wed a man she doesn’t want. She would hate me for the rest of her life. I care more about my daughter’s feelings than the political implications of her marriage. I happen to cherish Alenda. Of all my children, she is my greatest joy.”

Archibald took another sip of brandy and considered Victor’s remarks. He decided to approach the subject from a different direction. “What if it were for her own good? To save her from what would be certain disaster.”

“You warned me of danger to get me here. Are you finally ready to explain, or would you prefer to see if this old man can still handle a blade?”

Archibald disregarded what he knew was an idle threat. “When Alenda repeatedly declined my advances, I reasoned something must be amiss. There was no logic to her rebuffs. Look at me. I am a rich and handsome man. I have connections and my star is rising. The reason for your daughter’s refusal is quite simple: she is already involved with someone else. She is having an affair—a secret affair.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Victor declared. “Who is this man? Why would she not tell me?”

“It is little wonder she’s kept it from you. She is ashamed. You see, the man she is entertaining is a mere commoner without a single drop of royal blood in his veins.”

“You’re lying!”

“Perhaps you’ve heard of him. His name is Degan Gaunt. A

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troublemaker I hear, part of the Nationalist movement out of Delgos. They rendezvous at Windermere near the monastery. They meet on nights when you are away or occupied with matters of state.”

“That is ridiculous. My daughter would never—”

“Don’t you have a son there?” Archibald inquired. “At the abbey, I mean. He’s a monk, isn’t he?”

Victor nodded. “Myron. He is my third son.”

“Perhaps he has been helping them. I’ve made inquiries and it seems your Myron is a very intelligent fellow. Perhaps he is masterminding liaisons for his beloved sister and carrying their correspondence.”

“You *are* insane,” Victor shot back, suppressing a bitter laugh. “I sent Myron to the abbey when he was barely four years old. He hasn’t set foot outside its walls in thirty-two years. All he is good for is scribbling books. To my knowledge, Alenda has never even spoken to him. This whole story is obviously a pathetic attempt to have me pressure Alenda into marrying you, and I know why. You don’t care about her. You want her dowry. The Rilán Valley borders ever so nicely against your own lands. Not to mention, marrying into my family would be quite a boost for you, socially and politically.”

“Pathetic, am I?” Archibald set down his glass and produced a key on a silver neck chain from inside his shirt. He rose and crossed the room to a tapestry depicting a Calian prince on horseback abducting a fair-haired noblewoman. He drew it back revealing the hidden safe, and inserting the key, opened the small metal door.

“I have a stack of letters written in your precious daughter’s hand that proves it. They tell of her undying love for her disgusting peasant.”

“How did you get these letters?”

“I stole them from her. I knew she was seeing someone and wanted to know who my rival was, so I had her followed. Once I discovered she was sending letters, I arranged to have them intercepted.” From the safe, Archibald brought forth a stack of parchments and dropped

## STOLEN LETTERS

them in Victor's lap. "There!" he declared triumphantly. "Read what your daughter has been up to, and decide for yourself whether or not she would be better off marrying me."

Archibald lifted his brandy glass victoriously; he had won. In order to avoid political ruin, Victor Lanaklin, the great Marquis of Glouston, would order his daughter to marry him. Finally, he would have the borderland, and perhaps in time, he would control the whole of the marchland. With Chadwick in his right hand and Glouston in his left, his power at court would rival that of the Duke of Rochelle.

Looking down at the old, gray-haired man in his fine traveling clothes, Archibald almost felt sorry for him. Once long ago, the marquis had enjoyed a reputation for cleverness and fortitude. Such distinction came with the title. The marquis was no mere noble, nor was he a simple sheriff of the land like an earl or a count. He was responsible for guarding the king's borders. This was a serious duty, which required a capable leader, an ever-vigilant man tested in battle. However, now that the frontier was no longer under threat of attack, the great guard had become complacent, and his strength had withered from lack of use.

As Victor opened the letters, Archibald contemplated his future with relish. The marquis was right. He was after the land that came with his daughter. Still, Alenda was attractive, and the thought of forcing her to his bed was more than a little appealing.

"Archibald, is this a joke?" Victor questioned.

Startled from his thoughts, Archibald set down his drink. "What do you mean?"

"These parchments are all blank."

"What? Are you blind? They're—" Archibald stopped when he saw the empty pages in the marquis' hand. He grabbed a handful of letters and tore them open, only to find still more blank parchments. "This is impossible!"

"Perhaps they were written in disappearing ink?" Victor smirked.

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“No...I don’t understand...these aren’t even the same parchments!” He rechecked the safe but found it empty. His confusion turned to panic. He tore open the door and called anxiously for Bruce. The master-at-arms rushed in, his sword at the ready. “What happened to the letters I had in this safe?” Archibald shouted at the soldier.

“I...I don’t know, my lord,” Bruce replied. He sheathed his weapon and stood at attention before the earl.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Have you left your post at all this evening?”

“No, sir, of course not.”

“Did anyone, anyone at all, enter my study during my absence?”

“No, my lord that is impossible; you hold the only key.”

“Then where in Maribor’s name are those letters? I put them there myself. I was reading them when the marquis arrived. I was only gone a few minutes. How could they disappear like that?”

“I’m sorry, my lord, I—”

“Shut up. Shut up, you imbecile! I need to think.”

Archibald’s mind raced. He had them in his hands only moments ago. He had locked them in the safe; he was convinced of that fact. *Where had they gone?*

Victor drained his glass and stood up. “If you don’t mind, *Archie*, I’ll be leaving now. This has been a tremendous waste of my time.”

“Victor, wait. Don’t go. The letters are real. I had them!”

“But of course you did, Archie. The next time you plan to blackmail me, I suggest you provide a better bluff.” He crossed the room, passed through the door, and disappeared down the stairs.

“You had better consider what I said, Victor,” Archibald yelled after him. “I’ll find those letters. I will! I’ll bring them to Aquesta! I’ll hold them up at court!”

“What do you want me to do, my lord?” Bruce asked.

“Just wait, you fool. I have to think.” Archibald ran his trembling fingers through his hair as he began to pace around the room. He re-

## STOLEN LETTERS

examined the letters closely. They were indeed a slightly different grade of parchment than the ones he had read so many times before.

Despite his certainty of placing the letters in the safe, Archibald began pulling out the drawers and riffling through the parchments on his desk. He poured himself another drink and crossed the room. Ripping the screen from the fireplace, he probed the ashes with a poker to search for any telltale signs of parchment remains. In frustration, Archibald threw the blank letters into the fire. He drained his drink in one long swallow and collapsed into one of the chairs.

“They were just here,” Archibald said, puzzled. Slowly, a solution began to form in his mind. “Bruce, the letters must have been stolen. The thief could not have gotten far. I want you to search the entire castle. Seal every exit. Close every door, every gate, and every window. Do not let anyone out. Not the staff, not the guards—no one leaves. Search everyone!”

“Right away, my lord,” Bruce responded and then paused. “What about the marquis, my lord. Shall I stop him as well?”

“Of course not, you idiot! He doesn’t have the letters.”

Archibald stared into the fire as he listened to Bruce’s footsteps fading away as he ran down the tower stairs. Alone, he had only the sound of the crackling flames and a hundred unanswered questions. He racked his brain but could not determine exactly how the thief had done it. Still, it was the only answer.

“Your lordship?” the timid voice of the steward roused him from his thoughts. Archibald glared up at the man who poked his head through the open door, causing the steward to take an extra breath before speaking. “My lord, I hate to disturb you, but there seems to be a problem down in the courtyard that requires your attention.”

“What kind of problem?” Archibald snarled.

“Well, my lord, I was not actually informed of the details, but it has something to do with the marquis, sir. I have been sent to request your presence—respectfully request it, that is.”

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

Archibald descended the stairs, pondering if perhaps the old man had dropped dead on his doorstep, which would not be such a terrible thing. When he reached the courtyard, he found the marquis alive but in a furious temper.

“There you are, Ballentyne! What have you done with my carriage?”

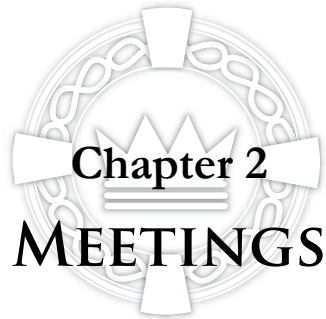
“Your what?”

Bruce approached Archibald and motioned him aside. “Your lordship,” he whispered in the earl’s ear. “It seems the marquis’ carriage and horses are missing, sir.”

Archibald held up a finger in the direction of the marquis. With a raised voice, he replied, “I’ll be with you in a moment, Victor.” Then he turned his attention to Bruce and whispered, “Did you say *missing*? How is that possible?”

“I don’t know exactly, sir, but you see, the gate warden reports that the marquis and his driver, or rather two people he thought were them, have already passed through the front gate.”

Suddenly feeling quite ill, Archibald turned back to address the red-faced marquis.



## Chapter 2

# MEETINGS

SEVERAL HOURS AFTER nightfall, Alenda Lanaklin arrived by carriage at the impoverished Lower Quarter of Medford. The Rose and Thorn Tavern lay hidden among crooked-roofed hovels on an unnamed street, which to Alenda appeared to be little more than an alley. A recent storm had left the cobblestones wet, and puddles littered the street. Passing carriages splashed filthy water on the pub's front entrance, leaving streaks of grime on the dull stone and weathered timbers.

From a nearby doorway, a sweaty, shirtless man with a bald head emerged carrying a large copper pot. He unceremoniously cast the pot's contents, the bony remains of several stewed animals, into the street. Immediately, half a dozen dogs set upon the scraps. Wretched-looking figures, dimly lit by the flickering light from the tavern's windows, shouted angrily at the canines in a language that Alenda did not recognize. Several of them threw rocks at the scrawny animals, which yelped and darted away. They rushed to what the animals had left behind and stuffed the remnants into their mouths and pockets.

"Are you *sure* this is the right place, my lady?" Emily asked, taking in the scene. "Surely Viscount Winslow couldn't have meant for us to come here."

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

Alenda re-examined the curled thorny branch with a single bloom painted on the warped signboard above the door. The red rose had faded to gray, and the weathered stem looked like a coiled snake. “This has to be it. I don’t think there’s more than one tavern called The Rose and Thorn in Medford.”

“I just can’t believe he’d send us to such a...a...place!”

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but this is what was arranged. I don’t see how we have a choice,” Alenda replied, surprised by how brave she sounded.

“I know you’re tired of hearing this, but I still think this is a mistake. We shouldn’t be dealing with *thieves*. You can’t trust them, my lady. Mark my words: these people you hired will steal from you just like they steal from everyone else.”

“Nevertheless, we’re here now, so we might as well get on with it.” Alenda opened the door and stepped out onto the street. As she did, she noticed with concern that several of those loitering nearby were watching her intently.

“That’ll be a silver tenent,” the driver told her. He was a gruff, elderly man who had not shaved in days. His narrow eyes were framed with so many wrinkles that Alenda wondered how he could see to drive the carriage.

“Oh, well, you see, I was expecting to pay you at the end of our journey,” Alenda explained. “We’re only stopping here for a short while.”

“If you want me to wait, it’ll cost ya extra. And I want the money ya owe me now, in case ya decide not ta come back.”

“Don’t be absurd. I can assure you we will be coming back.”

The man’s expression was as pliable as granite. He spit over the side of the carriage at Alenda’s feet.

“Oh! Well, really!” Alenda pulled a coin from her bag and handed it to the driver. “Here, take the silver, but don’t wander off. I’m not exactly sure how long we’ll be, but as I told you, we *will* return.”

## MEETINGS

Emily exited the carriage and took a moment to adjust Alenda's hood and to ensure her ladyship's buttons were secure. She brushed the wrinkles out of Alenda's cloak and then repeated the procedure on herself.

"I wish I could tell that stupid driver who I am," Alenda whispered. "Then I'd tell him a few more things."

"Don't even think that way. Maribor forbid your father should ever learn you came here."

The two women were dressed in matching woolen cloaks, and with their hoods up, little more than their noses were visible. Alenda scowled at Emily and brushed her fidgeting hands away.

"You're being such a mother hen, Emmy. I'm sure women have come into this establishment before."

"Women, yes, but I doubt any ladies have."

As they entered the narrow wooden doorway of the tavern, the pungent odor of smoke, alcohol, and a scent that Alenda had previously smelled only in a privy assaulted them. The din of twenty conversations fought each other for supremacy while a fiddler worked a lively tune. Before a bar, a small crowd danced, hammering their heels loudly on the warped wooden floor, keeping time to the jig. Glasses clinked, fists pounded on tables, and people laughed and sang far louder than Alenda thought dignified.

"What do we do now?" Emily's voice emanated from the depths of her woolen hood.

"I suppose we look for the viscount. Stay close to me."

Alenda took Emily's hand and led the way, weaving through the tables and dodging the dancers and a dog that was gleefully licking up spilled beer. Never in her life had Alenda been in such a place. Vile-looking men surrounded her. Most were dressed in rags, and more than a few were shoeless. She spotted only four women in the place, all were barmaids dressed indecently in tattered gowns with plunging necklines. To Alenda, their manner of dress invited men to paw at

## THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

them. A toothless, hairy beast grabbed one of the barmaids around her waist. Dragging her to his lap, he ran his hands along the length of her body. Alenda was shocked to see the girl giggle instead of scream.

At last, Alenda spotted him. Viscount Albert Winslow was dressed, not in his typical doublet and hose, but in a simple cloth shirt, wool pants, and a neatly tailored suede vest. His vestige was not entirely without noble adornment, sporting a lovely, if not ostentatious, plumed hat. He sat at a small table with a stocky, black-bearded man dressed in cheap work clothes.

On their approach, Albert Winslow stood and pulled out chairs for them. “Welcome, ladies,” he said with a cheerful smile. “So glad you were able to meet me this evening. Please sit down. May I order you both something to drink?”

“No, thank you,” Alenda replied. “I was hoping not to stay very long. My driver is not a considerate man, and I would like to conclude our business before he decides to strand us here.”

“I understand and, might I say, very wise of you, your ladyship. But I am sad to say your delivery has not yet arrived.”

“It hasn’t?” Alenda felt Emily give her hand a squeeze of support. “Is there something wrong?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know. You see, I am not privy to the inner workings of this operation. I don’t concern myself with such trifles. You should understand, however, this wasn’t an easy assignment. We have taken days to prepare, and any number of things could have transpired that might create delays. Are you sure there’s nothing I may order for you?”

“Thank you, no,” Alenda replied.

“At least take a seat, won’t you?”

Alenda glanced at Emily, whose eyes were awash with concern. They sat down, and as they did, she whispered to Emily, “I know, I know. I shouldn’t deal with thieves.”

“Make no mistake, your ladyship,” the viscount said in reassurance.

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“I would not waste your time, money, or risk your station if I didn’t have the utmost confidence in the outcome.”

The bearded man seated at the table chuckled softly. He was dark and seedy with skin as tan as leather. His huge hands were callused and dirty. Alenda watched as he tipped his mug to his lips. When he withdrew the cup, droplets of ale ran unchecked through his whiskers and dripped onto the tabletop. Alenda decided she did not like him.

“This is Mason Grumon,” Winslow explained. “Forgive me for not introducing him sooner. Mason is a blacksmith here in Medford’s Lower Quarter. He’s—a friend.”

“Those chaps you hired are very good,” Mason told them. His voice reminded Alenda of the sound her carriage wheels made when traveling over crushed stone.

“Are they?” Emily asked. “Could they steal the ancient treasures of Glenmorgan from the Crown Tower of Ervanon?”

“What’s that?” Winslow asked.

“I once heard a rumor about thieves who stole treasure from the Crown Tower of Ervanon and replaced it the very next night,” Emily explained.

“Why would anyone do such a thing?” Alenda asked.

The viscount chuckled softly. “I’m sure that’s merely a legend. No sensible thief would behave in such a way. Most people don’t understand the workings of thieves. The reality is that most of them steal to line their pockets. They break into homes or waylay travelers on the open road. Your bolder variety might kidnap nobles and hold them for ransom. Sometimes, they even cut off a finger of their victim and send it to a loved one. It helps to prove how dangerous they are and reinforces that the family should take their demands seriously. In general, they are an unsavory lot to be sure. They care only about making a profit with as little effort as possible.”

Alenda felt another squeeze on her hand. This one was so tight it caused her to wince.

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“Now your better class of thief, they form guilds, sort of like masonry or woodworkers guilds, although far more hush-hush, you understand. They are very organized and make a business out of thievery. They stake out territories where they maintain a monopoly on pilfering. Oftentimes, they have arrangements with the local militia or potentate that allow them to work relatively unmolested for a fee, as long as they avoid certain targets and abide by accepted rules.”

“What kind of rules could be acceptable between officers of a province and known criminals?” Alenda asked skeptically.

“Oh, I think you’d be quite surprised to discover the number of compromises made to maintain a smoothly functioning kingdom. There is however, one more type of malefactor—the freelance contractor or, to put it bluntly, thief-for-hire. These rogues are hired for a particular purpose, such as obtaining an item in the possession of a fellow noble. Codes of honor, or *fear of embarrassment*,” he said with a wink, “require them to seek out a professional as their only recourse.”

“So, they’ll steal anything for anyone?” Alenda asked. “The ones you hired for me, I mean.”

“No, not anyone—only those who are willing to pay the number of tenents equal to the job.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if the client is a criminal or a king?” Emily chimed in.

Mason snorted. “Criminal or king, what’s the difference?” For the first time during their meeting, he produced a wide grin that revealed several missing teeth.

Disgusted, Alenda turned her attention back to Winslow. He was looking in the direction of the door, straining to see above the tavern patrons. “You’ll have to excuse me, ladies,” he said, abruptly standing up. “I need another drink, and the wait staff seems preoccupied. Look after the ladies, won’t you, Mason?”

“I’m not a bloody wet nurse you daffy old sod!” Mason shouted after the viscount as he left the table and moved off through the crowd.

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“I’ll...I’ll not have you referring to her ladyship in such a way,” Emily declared boldly to the smith. “She is no infant. She is a noble woman of title, and *you* had best remember your place.”

Mason’s expression darkened. “This *is* my place. I live five bloody doors down. My pa helped build this infernal pub. My brother works here as a ruddy cook. My mother used ta work here as a cook too, up until she died being hit by one of yer fancy noble carriages. This is *my* place. *You’re* the one who needs to be remembering yours.” Mason slammed his fist down on the table, causing the candle, and the ladies, to jump.

Alenda pulled Emily close. *What have I gotten myself into?* She was starting to think Emily was right. She should never have trusted that no-account Winslow. She really did not know anything about him except that he attended the Aquesta Autumn Gala as a guest of Lord Daref. Of all people, she should have learned by now that not all nobles are noble.

They sat in silence until Winslow returned without a drink.

“Ladies, if you’ll please follow me?” the viscount beckoned.

“What is it?” Alenda asked concerned.

“Just please, come with me, this way.”

Alenda and Emily left the table and followed Winslow through the haze of pipe smoke and the obstacle course of dancers, dogs, and drunks to the back door. The scene behind the tavern made everything they endured so far appear virtuous. They entered an alley that was almost beyond comprehension. Trash lay scattered everywhere and excrement, discarded from the windows above, mixed with mud in a wide-open trench. Wooden planks, serving as bridges, crisscrossed the foul river of slime, causing the ladies to hold their gowns above their ankles as they shuffled forward.

A large rat darted from a woodpile to join two more in the sewage trough.

“Why are we in an alley?” Emily whispered in a quivering voice to Alenda.

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“I don’t know,” Alenda answered, trying desperately to control her own fear. “I think you were right, Emmy. I should never have dealt with these people. I don’t care what the viscount says; people like *us* simply shouldn’t do business with people like *them*. I can just imagine what my father would think.”

The viscount led them through a wooden fence and around a pair of shanties to a poor excuse for a stable. The shelter was little more than a shack with four stalls, each filled with straw and a bucket of water.

“So good to see you again, your ladyship,” a man out front addressed them.

Alenda could tell it was the big one of the pair, but she could not remember his name. She had only seen them briefly through an arranged meeting by the viscount, which had been on a lonely road on a night darker than this. Now, with the moon more than half-full and his hood thrown back, she could make out his face. He was tall, rugged in feature and dress, but not unkind or threatening in appearance. Wrinkles, which may have come from laughter, tugged at the edges of his eyes. Alenda thought his demeanor was remarkably cheerful, even friendly. She could not help but think he was handsome, which was not the reaction she expected to have about anyone she might meet in such a place. He was dressed in dirt-stained leather and wool, and was well armed. On his left side, he had a short sword with an unadorned hilt. On his right, was a similarly plain, longer, wider sword. Finally, slung on his back was a massive blade, nearly as tall as he was.

“My name is Hadrian, in case you have forgotten,” he said and followed the introduction with a suitable bow. “And who is this lovely lady with you?”

“This is Emily, my maid.”

“A maid?” Hadrian feigned surprise. “For one so fair, I would have guessed her to be a duchess.”

Emily inclined her head and for the first time on this trip, Alenda saw her smile.

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“I hope we didn’t keep you waiting too long. The viscount tells me he and Mason were keeping you company?”

“Yes, they were.”

“Did Mr. Grumon tell you the tragic tale of his mother being run down by an insensitive royal carriage?”

“Why, yes, he did. And I must say—”

Hadrian held up his hands in mock defense. “Mason’s mother is alive and well. She lives on Artisan Row in a home considerably nicer than the hovel where Mason resides. She has never been a cook at The Rose and Thorn. He tells that story to every gentleman or lady he meets to put them on the defensive and make them feel guilty. You have my apologies.”

“Well, thank you. He was rather rude and I found his comments more than a little disturbing, but now,” Alenda paused. “Did you...I mean, do you have...were you able to get them?”

Hadrian smiled warmly, then turning he called over his shoulder in the direction of the stable.

“Royce?”

“If you knew how to tie a proper knot, I wouldn’t be taking so long,” said a voice from inside. A moment later, the other half of the pair emerged and joined them.

Alenda’s memory of him was easier to recall because he was the more disturbing of the two. He was smaller than Hadrian was and possessed elegant features, dark hair and dark eyes. He was dressed in layers of black with a knee-length tunic and a long flowing cloak that gathered about him like a shadow. Not a single weapon was visible upon him. Despite his smaller size and apparent unarmed state, Alenda feared this man. His cold eyes, expressionless face, and curt manner had all the warmth of a predator.

From his tunic, Royce drew forth a bundle of letters bound with a blue ribbon. Handing them to her, he said, “Getting to those letters before Ballentyne presented them to your father wasn’t easy. As far as

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aces go, it was very close but ultimately successful. You might want to burn those before something like this happens again.”

She stared at the package as a smile of relief crossed her face. “I... I can’t believe it! I don’t know how you did it, or how to thank you!”

“Payment would be nice,” Royce replied.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she handed the bundle to Emily, untied the purse from her waist, and handed it to the thief. He quickly scanned the contents, snapped the purse closed, and tossed it to Hadrian, who slipped it in his vest as he headed for the stables.

“You’d better be careful. It’s a dangerous game you and Gaunt are playing,” Royce told her.

“You read my letters?” she asked fearfully.

“No. I’m afraid you didn’t pay us that much.”

“Then, how did you know—”

“We overheard your father and Archibald Ballentyne talking. The marquis appeared not to believe the earl’s accusations, but I am certain he did. Letters or no letters, your father will be watching you closely now. Still, the marquis is a good man. He’ll do the right thing. My guess is he’s so relieved Ballentyne doesn’t have proof to take to court that your affair won’t bother him much. However, as I said, you’d better be more careful in the future.”

“How would the likes of *you* know anything about *my* father?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I say your father? I meant the other marquis, the one with the appreciative daughter.”

Alenda felt as though Royce had slapped her across the face.

“Making friends again, Royce?” Hadrian asked as he led two horses from the stable. “You’ll have to forgive my friend. He was raised by wolves.”

“Those are my father’s horses!”

Hadrian nodded, “We left the carriage behind a bramble patch by the river bridge. By the way, I think I might have stretched out one of your father’s doublets. I put it and the rest of his things back in the carriage.”

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“You were wearing my father’s clothes?”

“I told you,” Royce repeated, “it was close, very close.”



They called it the Dark Room because of the business conducted in it, but the little back room at The Rose and Thorn was anything but gloomy. Several candles set in sconces on the walls and on the meeting table, along with a nice-sized fire burning in the hearth, gave off a warm, friendly light. A row of copper pots, reminders of the days when the Dark Room doubled as kitchen storage, hung from an exposed wooden beam. There was only enough room for one table and a handful of chairs, but it was more than enough for their purposes.

The door opened, and a small party filed in. Royce poured himself a glass of wine, took a seat near the fire, removed his boots, and wiggled his toes before the hearth. Hadrian, Viscount Albert Winslow, Mason Grumon, and a pretty young woman opted for chairs at the meeting table. Gwen, the owner of the tavern, always prepared a fine feast when they returned from a job, and tonight was no exception. This evening’s selections included a pitcher of ale, a large roast, a loaf of freshly baked sweet bread, boiled potatoes, a cloth-wrapped cask of white cheese, carrots, onions, and the big pickles from the barrel normally kept behind the bar. For Royce and Hadrian, she spared no expense, which included the black bottle of Montemorcey wine she imported all the way from Vandon. Gwen always kept it on hand because it was Royce’s favorite. Despite how appealing everything looked, Hadrian showed no interest in any of it. He focused his attention on the woman.

“So, how did it go last night?” Emerald asked, sitting atop Hadrian’s lap and pouring him a frothy stein of the inn’s homebrew. Her real name was Falina Brockton, but all the girls who worked at the tavern, or Medford House next door, went by monikers for their own safety. Emerald, a bright and cheery waif, was the senior barmaid at The Rose

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and Thorn and one of only two women allowed in the Dark Room when a meeting was in session.

“It was cold,” he told her, encircling her waist with his arms. “As was the ride here, so I desperately need warming.” He pulled her to him and began kissing her neck as a sea of brunette waves engulfed him.

“We did get paid, didn’t we?” Mason asked.

The blacksmith had started to prepare a heaping plate almost the instant he sat down. Mason was the son of the former pre-eminent Medford metalworker. He had inherited his father’s shop but had lost it through a gambling habit coupled with bad luck. Forced out of Artisan Row, he landed in the Lower Quarter, where he fashioned horseshoes and nails, making enough to pay for his forge, drinks, and the occasional meal. For Royce and Hadrian, he offered three benefits: he was cheap, he was local; and he was solitary.

“We did indeed. Alenda Lanaklin paid us the full fifteen gold tenents,” Royce said.

“Quite the haul,” Winslow declared, happily clapping his hands.

“And my arrows? How’d they work?” Mason asked. “Did they anchor in the tiles?”

“They anchored just fine,” Royce said. “Getting them out was the problem.”

“The release failed?” Mason asked concerned. “But I thought—well, I’m no fletcher. Ya should’a gone to a fletcher. Told ya that, didn’t I? I’m a smith. I work with steel, not wood. That fine-toothed saw I made—that worked, didn’t it? That’s a smithing product, by Mar! But not the arrows, and for sure, not ones like you wanted. No, sir. I done said ya should’a gotten a fletcher and ya should’a.”

“Relax, Mason,” Hadrian said, emerging from Emerald’s mane. “Of the two, the anchor was the most important, and it worked perfectly.”

“O’course it did. The arrow tips are metal, and I know metal. I’m just disappointed the rope release didn’t work. How did ya get the rope down? Ya didn’t leave it there, did ya?”

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“Couldn’t, the guard would have spotted it on his next pass,” said Royce.

“So, how’d ya do it?”

“Personally, I would like to know how you did the whole thing,” Winslow said. Like Royce, he was sitting back with his feet up and mug in hand. “You never let me in on the details of these operations.”

The Viscount Albert Winslow came from a long line of landless gentry. Years ago, one of his ancestors lost the family fief. Now all that remained was his title. This was enough to open doors closed to the peasantry or merchant class and was a step better than the common baronage, at least at first glance. When Royce and Hadrian first met him, he was living in a barn in Colnora. The pair invested a little money on clothes and a carriage, and he aptly performed the delicate duties of liaison to the nobles. With an allowance funded by them, the viscount convincingly attended every ball, gala, and ceremony, patrolling the political pressure cooker for business leads.

“You’re too visible, Albert,” Hadrian explained. “Can’t afford to have our favorite noble hauled to some dungeon where they cut off your eyelids or pull off your fingernails until you tell them what we’re up to.”

“But if they torture me, and I don’t know the plan, how will I save myself?”

“I’m sure they’ll believe you after the fourth nail or so,” Royce said with a wicked grin.

Albert grimaced and took another long drink of his ale. “But you can tell me now, can’t you? How did you get past the iron door? When I met with Ballentyne, I had the impression a dwarf with a full set of tools couldn’t get it open. It didn’t even have a lock to pick, or a latch to lift.”

“Well, your information was very helpful,” Royce said. “That’s why we avoided it completely.”

The viscount looked confused. He started to speak but instead remained silent and cut himself a piece of the roast beef.

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Royce took a sip of his wine, and when he did, Hadrian took over the tale. “We scaled the exterior of the east tower, or rather Royce did, and he dropped me a rope. It wasn’t as tall, but it was the closest to the one Archibald had the letters in. We used Mason’s arrows to connect the two towers and, with our knees wrapped around the rope, inched our way across the length hand over hand.”

“But there are no windows in the tower,” Albert protested.

“Who said anything about using a window?” Royce interjected. “The arrows anchored in the taller tower’s roof.”

“Yep, as I said, that was quality craftsmanship,” Mason said proudly.

“So, that gets you to the tower, but how did you get in? Through the chimney?” Albert inquired.

“No, it was too small, and last night there was a fire burning,” Hadrian said, “so we used Mason’s second little tool, a small saw, and cut the roof on a bevel. All in all, the night was going pretty much according to plan, until Archibald decided to visit his study. We figured he’d have to leave eventually, so we waited.”

“We should have just slipped down, cut his throat, and taken the letters,” Royce insisted.

“But we weren’t being paid for that, were we?” Hadrian reminded him. Royce rolled his eyes in response. Ignoring him, Hadrian continued. “As I was saying, we lay there waiting and the wind on the top of that tower was bitter. The bastard must have sat in that room for two hours.”

“You poor thing,” Emerald purred and nuzzled him like a cat.

“The good news was he actually looked at the letters while we were watching him through the cuts, so we knew right where the safe was. Then a carriage came into the courtyard, and you’ll never guess who it was.”

“The marquis arrived while you were on the roof?” Albert asked with his mouth full of roast beef.

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“Yep—that’s when our timetable got really tricky. Archibald left the tower to meet the marquis, and we made our move.”

“So,” Emerald chanced, “you opened the roof like the top of a pumpkin.”

“Exactly. I lowered Royce into the study. He picked the safe, dumped the dummy letters, and I hauled him back up. Just as we replaced the roof section, Archibald and Victor walked in. We waited to make sure they did not hear us. Incredibly, he presented the letters right there and then. I must say, it was hilarious watching Archibald’s reaction when he discovered the blank replacements. Things got pretty loud at this point, so we decided we better take the chance and rappelled down the tower to the courtyard below.”

“That’s amazing. I was telling Alenda sometimes problems occur during a job, but I had no idea I was telling the truth. We should have charged her extra,” Albert interjected.

“It crossed my mind,” Royce replied, “but you know Hadrian. Still, we’ve made a nice profit on both sides of this one.”

“But wait, you didn’t explain how you got the rope off the side of the tower if my releases didn’t work?”

Royce sighed. “Don’t ask.”

“Why not?” The smith looked from one to the other. “Is it a secret?”

“They want to know, Royce,” Hadrian said with a wide grin.

Royce frowned. “He shot it off.”

“He did what?” Albert asked, sitting up so abruptly his feet hit the floor with a clap.

“Hadrian used another arrow to cut the rope at the roofline.”

“But, that’s impossible,” Albert declared. “No man can shoot the width of a rope at—what was it—two hundred feet maybe, in total darkness!”

“There *was* a moon,” Royce corrected. “Let’s not make more out

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of this than it already is. You forget I have to work with him. Besides, it's not like he did it in a single shot."

"How many arrows?" Emerald inquired.

"What's that, sweetie?" Hadrian asked, wiping foam from his mouth with his sleeve.

"How many arrows did it take for you to cut the rope, silly?"

"Be honest," Royce told him.

Hadrian scowled. "Four."

"Four?" Albert said. "It was much more impressive when I imagined it as one lone shot, but still—"

"Do you think the earl will ever figure it out?" Emerald asked.

"The first time it rains I figure," Mason said.

There was a triple tap on the door and the stocky smith pushed back his chair and crossed the room. "Who is it?" he challenged.

"Gwen."

Sliding the deadbolt free, he opened the door, and an exotic-looking woman with long, thick black hair and dazzling green eyes entered.

"A fine thing when a woman can't get access to her own back room."

"Sorry, gal," Mason said, closing the door behind her, "but Royce would skin me alive if I ever opened the door without asking first."

Gwen DeLancy was an enigma of the Lower Quarter. A Calian immigrant, she survived in the city as a prostitute and fortune-teller. Her dark skin, almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones were uniquely foreign. Her talent for eye makeup and an eastern accent made her an alluring mystery that the nobles found irresistible. Yet Gwen was no simple whore. In three short years, she turned her fortunes around, buying up shop rights in the district. Only nobles could own land, but merchants traded the rights to operate a business. Before long, she owned or possessed an interest in a sizable section of Artisan Row and most of the Lower Quarter. Medford House, commonly known as The House, was her most lucrative establishment. Despite its back alley

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location, gentry from far and near frequented this expensive brothel. She had a reputation for being discrete, especially with the identities of men who could not afford to be seen frequenting a brothel.

“Royce,” Gwen said, “a potential customer visited The House earlier this evening. He was quite anxious to speak to one of you. I set up a meeting for tomorrow evening.”

“Know him?”

“I asked the girls. None of them have ever seen him before.”

“Was he serviced?”

Gwen shook her head. “No, he was just after information about thieves for hire. Funny how a man always expects prostitutes to know everything when he is looking for answers but assumes a girl will take *his* secrets to her grave.”

“Who talked to him?”

“Tulip. She said he was foreign, dark-skinned, and she mentioned an accent. He might be from Calis, but I didn’t bump into him so I can’t tell you for sure.”

“Was he alone?”

“Tulip didn’t mention any companions.”

“Want me to talk to him?” Albert asked.

“Na, I’ll do it,” Hadrian said. “If he’s poking around these parts, he’ll probably be looking for someone more like me than you.”

“If you like, Albert, you can be here tomorrow and watch the door for strangers,” Royce added. “I’ll keep an eye on the street. Has there been anyone new hanging around?”

“It has been pretty busy, and there are a few people I don’t recognize. There are four people right now in the main bar,” Gwen mentioned, “and there was a different party of five a few hours ago.”

“She’s right,” Emerald confirmed. “I waited on the five.”

“What were they like? Travelers?”

Gwen shook her head. “Soldiers, I think. They weren’t dressed like it, but I could tell.”

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“Merces?” Hadrian asked.

“I don’t think so. Mercenaries are usually troublesome, grabbing the girls, shouting, picking fights—you know the type. These guys were quiet, and one was a noble I think. At least some of the others referred to him as baron something—Trumbul I think it was.”

“I saw some like that up on Wayward Street yesterday,” Mason said. “Might’a been as many as twelve.”

“Anything going on in town?” Royce asked.

They looked at one another doubtfully.

“Do you think it has anything to do with those rumors about killings out near the Nidwalden River?” Hadrian asked. “Maybe the king is calling up support from other nobles.”

“Are you talking about the elves?” Mason asked. “I heard about that.”

“Me too,” Emerald said. “They say elves attacked a village or something. I heard they slaughtered everyone—some even while they slept.”

“Who said that? That doesn’t sound right,” Albert commented. “I’ve never known an elf to look a man in the eye, much less attack one.”

Royce grabbed his boots and cloak and headed for the door. “You’ve never known an elf, Albert,” he said as he abruptly left.

“What’d I say?” Albert asked staring at everyone with an innocent expression.

Emerald shrugged.

Hadrian took out Alenda’s purse and tossed it at the viscount. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Royce can be moody at times. Here, divvy out the profits.”

“Royce is right, though,” Emerald said. She appeared pleased that she knew something they did not. “The elves that attacked the village were *wild* elves, full-bloods. The half-breeds from around here are nothing but a bunch of lazy drunks.”

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“A thousand years of slavery can do that to a person,” Gwen pointed out. “Can I have my cut, Albert? I have to get back to work. We’ve got a bishop, the magistrate, and the Brotherhood of Barons visiting The House tonight.”



Hadrian was still sore from the previous day’s exertion when he took a seat at an empty table near the bar and observed the patrons of the Diamond Room. The name came from its odd, stretched rectangle shape, caused by how the addition fit into the space between the tavern and the brothel next door. Hadrian knew, or was familiar with, almost everyone in the room. Lamplighters, carriage drivers, tinkers, they were the usual late crowd who came in after work for a meal. They all had the same tired, worn-out, dirty look about them as they sat with their heads bowed over their plates. Each was dressed in a coarse work shirt and poor fitting britches gathered at the waist like the mouth of a sack. They chose this room because it was quieter, and they could eat in peace. One individual, however, stood out.

He sat alone at the far end of the room his back to the wall. His table remained bare except for the standard tavern candle. He had not bought a drink or a plate. He wore a wide-brimmed felt hat with one side pinned up by a lavish blue plume. His doublet, worn over a brilliant gold satin waist shirt, was made of rich black and red brocade with stuffed shoulders. At his side was a saber attached to a fine-studded, leather girdle matching his high, black riding boots. Whoever he was, he was not hiding. Hadrian also noted a bundle beneath the table on which he rested one boot at all times.

Once Royce sent Emerald over with the news that the street was clear of associates, Hadrian got up and walked the length of the room, stopping before the empty chair in front of the stranger.

“Care for some company?” he asked.

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“That depends,” the man replied, and Hadrian noted the slight saucy accent of a Calian native. “I am looking for a representative of an organization called Riyria. Do you speak for that group?”

“That depends on what you want,” Hadrian replied with a small grin.

“In that case, please sit down.”

Hadrian took the seat and waited.

“My name is Baron Dellano DeWitt, and I am looking to hire men of talent. I was told there were a few in the area that could be had for a price.”

“What kind of talents are you looking to buy?”

“Procurement skills,” DeWitt said simply, “I have an item I need to make disappear. If at all possible, I would prefer it to disappear completely. But it has to happen tonight.”

Hadrian smiled. “Sorry, I am quite certain Riyria won’t work under such tight constraints. Too dangerous. I hope you understand.”

“I’m sorry about the timing. I tried to reach your organization last night, but I was told you were unavailable. I am in a position to make it worth the risk.”

“Sorry, but they have very strict rules.” Hadrian started to get up.

“Please, listen. I have asked around. Those who know the pulse of this city tell me there is a pair of independent professionals who take on such jobs if the price is right. How they manage to work with impunity outside of the organized guilds is a matter of speculation, but the fact remains that they do. This is a testament to their reputation, is it not? If you know these men, the members of this Riyria, I beg you, implore them to assist me.”

Hadrian considered the man. Initially, he thought him to be another of the many self-absorbed nobles looking for a chuckle at some royal banquet. Now, however, the man’s demeanor changed. There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

“What’s so important about this item?” Hadrian asked as he eased back into his seat. “And why does it have to disappear tonight?”

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“Have you heard of Count Pickering?”

“Master swordsman, winner of the Silver Shield and the Golden Laurel? He has an incredibly beautiful wife named...Belinda, I think. I’ve heard he has killed at least eight men in duels because of how they have looked at her, or so the legend goes.”

“You’re unusually well informed.”

“Part of the job,” Hadrian admitted.

“In a contest of swords, the count has only been beaten by Braga, the Archduke of Melengar, and that was in an exhibition tournament on the one day he didn’t have his sword. He was forced to use a replacement.”

“Oh, right,” Hadrian said as much to himself as to DeWitt. “He’s the one with the special rapier he won’t duel without, at least not in a real fight.”

“Yes! The count is very superstitious about it,” Dewitt said nothing more for a moment and looked uncomfortable.

“Did you stare at the count’s wife too long?” Hadrian inquired.

The man nodded and bowed his head. “I’ve been challenged to a duel tomorrow at noon.”

“And you want Riyria to steal the count’s sword.” It was a statement not a question, but DeWitt nodded again.

“I am with the retinue of Duke DeLorkan of Dagastan. We arrived in Medford two days ago, part of a trade negotiation hosted by King Amrath. They held a feast upon our arrival and Pickering was there.” The baron wiped his face nervously. “I’ve never been to Avryn before—for Maribor’s sake, I didn’t know who he was! I didn’t even know she was his wife until I was slapped in the face with a glove. I’m scheduled to duel him tomorrow at noon so the sword must be stolen tonight.”

Hadrian sighed. “That is not an easy job. Taking a prized sword from the bedside of—”

“Ah...but I have made it easier,” DeWitt told him. “The count, like

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me, is staying with the king for the negotiations. His quarters are very near my duke's room. Earlier this evening, I slipped into his room and took his sword. There were so many people around I panicked and dropped it in the first open room I found. It must be removed from the castle before he notices it is missing since a search will surely find it."

"So, where is it now?"

"The royal chapel," he said. "It's not guarded and is just down the hall from an empty bedroom with a window. I can make certain the window will be open tonight. There are also ivy vines just outside the wall below the window. It should be a simple thing really."

"Then why don't *you* do it?"

"If thieves are caught with the sword, all that will happen is the loss of their hands, but if *I* am caught, my reputation will be destroyed!"

"I can see the reason for your concern," Hadrian said sardonically, but DeWitt appeared oblivious.

"Exactly! Now, seeing as how I have done most of the work, it doesn't sound so bad, does it? Before you answer, let me add this to the proposal."

With some strain, the baron pulled the bundle from beneath his foot and placed it on the table. A hearty metallic jingle sounded when the saddlebag hit the wood. "Inside you'll find one hundred gold tenets."

"I see," Hadrian responded, staring at the bags and trying to breathe at an even pace. "And you are paying up front?"

"Of course, I'm not a fool. I know how these things work. I'll pay you half now and half when I get the sword."

Hadrian took another controlled breath of air, still nodding and reminding himself to stay calm. "So, you're offering *two hundred* gold tenets?"

"Yes," DeWitt said with a look of concern. "As you can see, this is very important to me."

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“Apparently, if the job is as easy as you say.”

“Then you think they will do it?” he asked eagerly.

Hadrian sat back in his chair, just as DeWitt leaned forward anxiously. He looked like a man set before a judge awaiting sentencing on a murder charge.

Royce would kill him if he agreed. One of the basic rules they had established for Riyria was that they would not take jobs on short notice. They needed time to do background checks, verify stories, and case potential targets. Still, DeWitt’s only crime was choosing the wrong moment to look at a beautiful woman, and Hadrian knew he held the man’s life in his hands. There was no chance he could hire anyone else. As DeWitt mentioned, no independent thieves, other than them, would dare take a job in a guild city. The officers of the Crimson Hand would not allow any of their boys to do it for the same reason Hadrian felt he ought to turn it down. On the other hand, Hadrian was not really a thief and was not familiar with all their various deliberations. Royce was the one who grew up on the streets of Ratibor, picking pockets to survive. He was the professional burglar, the ex-member of the infamous Black Diamond Guild. Hadrian was a warrior, a soldier who preferred his battles to be fair and in the daylight.

Hadrian was never completely comfortable with most of the tasks they did for nobles. They wanted to embarrass a rival, to hurt an ex-lover, or to increase their standing in the strange and twisted world of high-stakes politics. The gentry hired them because they possessed fortunes and could afford to pay for their games. To them, that is what life was—one big chess match with real knights, kings, and pawns. There was no good or evil, no right or wrong. It was all just politics. A game within a game with its own set of rules and no values. Their squabbles however, did provide a fertile field for them to harvest profits. Not only were the nobles rich and petty, they were also dim-witted. How else could Royce and Hadrian receive payment from the Earl of Chadwick to intercept letters Alenda Lanaklin sent to Degan Gaunt

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only to turn around and double their profit by stealing them back? They simply asked Albert to contact Alenda with the news Ballentyne had her letters and an offer to help her get them back. Their business was profitable, but ugly. Just another game he played in a world where heroes were legends and honor was a myth.

He tried to rationalize that what he and Royce did was not that horrible. After all, Alenda could certainly afford it. People like Mason and Emerald needed the money more than a wealthy marquis' daughter. Besides, perhaps it taught her a valuable lesson that might save her father's reputation and lands. Yet, it was still just a way of lying to himself. Trying to convince his conscience that what he was doing was right, or at least not wrong. He desired to do a job with merit, one with which he could actually save a man's life, one with intentions that resembled what he remembered as virtuous.

"Sure," he said.



When Hadrian finished speaking, the silence in the Dark Room was thick with anticipation. Only three men were present and when Hadrian stopped both he and Albert turned their attention to Royce. As expected, the thief did not look pleased and began slowly shaking his head even before he spoke. "I can't believe you took this job," he scolded.

"Look, I know it is short notice, but his story checks out, right?" Hadrian asked. "You followed him back to the castle. He is a guest of King Amrath. He didn't make any side trips. I can verify he appears to be from Calis, and none of Gwen's girls heard anything to contradict his claims. The job looks clean."

"*Two hundred gold tenents* to slip a sword out an open window—you don't find that suspicious?" Royce asked with a tone of amazed disbelief.

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“Personally, I would call it a dream come true,” Albert mentioned.

“Maybe they do things differently in Calis. It’s pretty far away,” Hadrian argued.

“It’s not *that* far,” Royce shot back. “And how is it this DeWitt is walking around with that much coin? Does he always travel to international trade meetings carrying bags bursting with gold? Why did he bring it?”

“Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he sold a valuable ring tonight, or perhaps he obtained a loan using the good name of the Duke DeLorkan. It’s even possible that he got it from the duke himself. I am certain the two of them didn’t ride up here on a couple of ponies. The duke likely travels in a huge caravan of wagons. To them, several hundred gold coins might not be unusual.”

Hadrian’s voice became more serious. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see this guy. He’s facing a virtual execution tomorrow. How much is gold worth if you’re dead?”

“We just got done with a job. I was hoping to take a few days off, and now you’ve signed us up for a new one.” Royce sighed. “You say DeWitt was scared?”

“He was sweating.”

“So, that’s what this is really about. You want to take the job because it’s for a good cause. You think risking our necks is worth it so long as we can pat ourselves on the back afterwards.”

“Pickering will kill him—you know it. And he’s not the first.”

“He won’t be the last either.”

Hadrian sighed and, folding his arms across his chest, sat back in his chair. “You’re right; there will be others. So, imagine we pinch the sword and get rid of the damn thing. The count never sees it again. Think of all the happy men who could finally look at Belinda without fear.”

Royce chuckled. “So, now it’s a public service?”

“And there is the two hundred gold tenents,” Hadrian added.

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“That’s more money than we’ve made all year. Cold weather is coming, and with that coin, we could sit out the winter.”

“Well, at least now you are talking some sense. That would be nice,” Royce admitted.

“And it’s only a couple hours of work, just a quick climb and grab. You’re the one always telling me how bad the security is at Essendon Castle. We’ll be done and in bed before dawn.”

Royce bit his lower lip and grimaced, refusing to look at Hadrian.

Hadrian saw his opening and pressed his advantage. “You remember how cold it was on top of that tower. Just think how cold it will be in a few months. You can spend the winter safe and warm, eating richly and drinking your favorite wine. Then of course,” Hadrian leaned closer, “there’s the snow. You know how you hate the snow.”

“All right, all right. Grab the gear. I’ll meet you in the alley.”

Hadrian smiled. “I knew there was a heart in there somewhere.”



Outside, the night was even colder than it had been. A slick frost formed on the roads. Winter snows would indeed be falling soon. Despite what Hadrian thought, Royce did not actually hate snow. He liked the way it blanketed the Lower Quarter, dressing it up in an elegant white gown. Nevertheless, its beauty came with a cost; tracks remained in snow and made his job much harder. Hadrian was right, after tonight they would have enough cash set aside to spend the whole winter in quiet hibernation. With that much money, they could even consider opening a legitimate business. He thought about it every time they scored big, and he and Hadrian discussed it on more than one occasion. A year ago, they talked seriously about opening a winery, but it did not suit them. That was always the problem. Neither could think of any lawful business that was right for them.

He stopped in front of Medford House. Appearing to grow

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out of The Rose and Thorn, The House was nearly as large as the tavern. Gwen had linked the two buildings by additions so customers could move back and forth freely without exposing themselves to the elements, or public scrutiny. Gwen DeLancy was a genius. He had never known anyone like her. She was clever and intelligent beyond reason, and she was more open and sincere than anyone he had ever met. She was a paradox to him, an impossible mystery he could not solve—she was an honest person.

“I thought you might stop by,” Gwen said, stepping out onto the porch of The House and wrapping a cape about her shoulders. “I was watching for you through the doorway.”

“You have good eyes. Most people never see me when I walk a dark street.”

“You must have wanted to be seen then. You were coming to visit me, weren’t you?”

“I just wanted to be sure you received your portion of the payment last night.”

Gwen smiled. As she did, Royce could not help but notice how beautifully her hair shimmered in the moonlight.

“Royce, you know you don’t have to pay me. I’d give you anything you asked for.”

“No,” Royce insisted. “We use your place as a base. It’s dangerous, and for that, you get a part of the profit. We’ve been over this.”

She stepped closer and took his hand. Her touch was soothingly warm amidst the chilling air. “I also wouldn’t own The Rose and Thorn if it wasn’t for you. There’s a very good chance I wouldn’t even be alive.”

“I have no idea what you speak of, your ladyship,” Royce said as he performed a formal bow. “I can prove I wasn’t even in town that night.”

She stared at him with the same smile. He loved to see her happy, but now her brilliant green eyes searched for something, and Royce turned away, letting go of her hand.

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“Listen, Hadrian and I are taking that job. We have to do it tonight so I need to—”

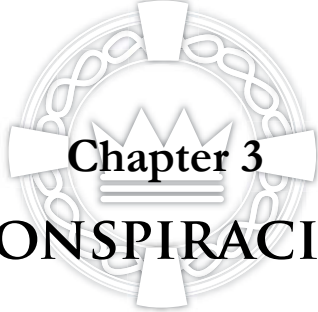
“You’re a strange man, Royce Melborn. I wonder if I’ll ever really know you.”

Royce paused and then softly said, “You already know me better than any woman should, more than is safe for either of us.”

Gwen stepped toward him again, her heeled shoes crunching on the frosty ground, her eyes intense with pleading. “Be careful, won’t you?”

“I always am.”

With his cloak billowing in the wind, he walked away. She watched him until he entered a shadow and was gone.



## Chapter 3

# CONSPIRACIES

**T**HE CROWNED FALCON standard flew from the highest tower of Essendon Castle, marking the presence of the king. Essendon was the royal seat of Avryn and the kingdom of Melengar, and although not especially large or powerful, it was nevertheless an old and respected realm. The castle, an imposing structure of elaborate gray walls and towers, stood at the center of Medford, the hub of the city's four distinct quarters of Gentry Square, Artisan Row, the Common Quarter, and the Lower Quarter. Like most cities in Avryn, Medford lay behind the protection of a strong outer wall; nevertheless, the castle also had its own fortifications partitioning it from the general city. This inner wall, crowned with crenellated parapets where skilled archers kept watch from behind stone merlons, did not completely encircle the castle. Instead, it connected to a large, imposing keep that served as its rear barrier. The height of the keep and the wide moat surrounding its base kept the king's home well protected.

During the day, merchants wheeled carts to the castle wall and positioned themselves on either side of the gate, forming a tent city of bustling vendors, entertainers, and lenders who sought to do business with the castle inhabitants. This wave of local commerce receded at

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sunset because citizens of the city could not pass within fifty feet of the walls from dusk until dawn. This restriction was strictly enforced by royal archers who rarely hesitated to fire at those who ventured too close at night. Pairs of guards, dressed in chain mail with steel helmets bearing the falcon standard of Melengar, patrolled the perimeter of the castle. They walked casually, with thumbs in their sword belts, often discussing events of the day or their off duty plans.

Royce and Hadrian watched the pace of the guard's routine for an hour before moving toward the rear of the keep. Just as DeWitt had explained, negligent gardeners had ignored a spider-work of thick-stemmed vines tracing their way up the stone. Unfortunately, the vines did not reach as high as the windows. On this frosty late autumn night, the swim across the moat was bone chillingly cold. The ivy, however, proved to be quite reliable, and the climb was as easy as ascending a ladder.

"I now know why DeWitt didn't want to do this himself," Hadrian whispered to Royce as they hung from the ivy. "After being frozen in that water, I think if I fell right now I would shatter on impact."

"Just imagine how many chamber pots are dumped into it each day," Royce mentioned as he drove a small, ringed spike into the seam between two stone blocks.

Hadrian looked up at the many windows he presumed led to bedrooms and cringed at the implications. "I could have lived without that bit of insight." He pulled a strap harness from his satchel and fastened it to the eyelet of the spike's ring.

"Just trying to take your mind off the cold," Royce said, tapping in another spike.

Although tedious and tense, the process was surprisingly fast, and they reached the lowest window before the guards completed their circuit. Royce reached out and tested the shutter. As promised, it was open. He pulled it gently back, just a hair, and peered inside. A moment later, he climbed in and waved Hadrian up.

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A small bed draped in a rich burgundy canopy took up the center of one wall. A dresser with a washbasin stood beside it. The only other piece of furniture was a simple wooden chair. A modest tapestry of hounds hunting deer covered much of the opposite wall. Everything was neat but sterile. There were no boots near the door, no jacket thrown across the chair, and the bed covers showed no wrinkles. The room was unused.

Hadrian remained silent near the window as Royce moved across the room to the door. He watched as the thief's feet tested the surface of the floor before committing his weight. Royce mentioned once how he had been in an attic on a job when he hit a weak board and fell through the bedroom ceiling. This floor was stone, but even stones had loose mortar or contained ingenious hidden traps or alarms. Royce made it to the door where he crouched and paused to listen. He motioned a sign for walking with his hand and then began counting on his fingers for Hadrian to see. There was a pause, and then he repeated the signal again. Hadrian crossed the room to join his friend and the two sat waiting for several minutes in silence.

Eventually Royce lifted the door latch with gloved hands but did not open it. Outside they could hear the heavy footfalls of hard boots on stone, first one set, and then a second. As the steps faded, Royce opened the door slightly and peered out. The hall was empty.

Before them lay a narrow hallway lit by widely spaced torches, whose flames cast flickering shadows, which created an illusion of movement on the walls. They entered the hall, quietly closed the door behind them, and quickly moved approximately fifty feet to another door. Ornate and elaborately carved, it had gilded hinges and a metal lock. Royce tried the door and then shook his head. He knelt and pulled a small kit of tools from his belt pouch while Hadrian moved to the far side of the hall. From where he stood, he could see the length of the corridor in both directions as well as a portion of the stairs that entered from the right. He stood ready for any trouble, which came sooner than he expected.

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A sound echoed in the corridor to his right, and Hadrian could hear the faint noise of hard heels on stone coming in their direction. Still on his knees, Royce worked the lock as the steps grew closer. Hadrian moved his hand to the hilt of his sword when at last the thief quickly opened the door. Trusting to luck that the room was empty, the two slipped inside. Royce softly closed the door behind them, and the footsteps passed without pause.

They were in the royal chapel. Banks of candles burned on either side of the large room. Supporting a glorious vaulted ceiling, elaborate marble columns rose near the chamber's center. Four rows of wooden pews lined either side of the main aisle. Cinquefoil-shaped adornments and blind-tracery moldings common to the Nyphron Church decorated the walls. Alabaster statues of Maribor and Novron stood behind the altar. Novron, depicted as a strong handsome man in the prime of his youth, was kneeling, sword in hand. The god Maribor, sculpted as a powerful, larger-than-life figure with a long beard and flowing robes, loomed over Novron, placing a crown upon the young man's head. The altar itself consisted of an ornately carved wooden cabinet with three broad doors and a rose-colored marble top. Upon it, two more candles burned and a large gilded tome lay open.

DeWitt had told Hadrian he left the sword behind the altar, and they headed toward it. As they approached the first set of pews, both men froze in mid step. Lying there, face down in a pool of freshly spilled blood, was the body of a man. The rounded handle of the nondescript dagger protruded from his back. While Royce made a quick survey for Pickering's sword, Hadrian checked the man for signs of life. The man was dead, and the sword was nowhere to be found. Royce tapped Hadrian on the shoulder and pointed at the gold crown that had rolled to the far side of a pillar. The full weight of the situation registered with both of them—it was time to leave.

They headed for the door. Royce paused only momentarily to listen to ensure the hall was clear. They slipped out of the chapel, closed the door, and moved down the hall toward the bedroom.

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*“Murderers!”*

The shout was so close and so terrifying that they both spun with weapons drawn. Hadrian had his bastard sword in one hand, his short sword in the other. Royce held a brilliant white-bladed dagger.

Standing before the open chapel door was a bearded dwarf.

*“Murderers!”* The dwarf cried again, but it was not necessary. The sounds of footfalls could already be heard, and an instant later, soldiers, with weapons drawn, poured into the hallway from both sides.

*“Murderers!”* the dwarf continued pointing at them. *“They’ve killed the king!”*

Royce lifted the latch to the bedroom door and pushed, but the door failed to give way. He pulled, and then pushed again, but the door would not budge.

*“Drop your weapons, or we’ll butcher you where you stand!”* a soldier ordered. He was a tall man with a bushy moustache that bristled as he gritted his teeth fiercely.

*“How many do you think there are?”* whispered Hadrian. The walls echoed with the sounds of more soldiers about to arrive.

*“Too many,”* Royce replied.

*“Be a lot less in a minute,”* Hadrian assured him.

*“We won’t make it. I can’t get the door opened; we have no exit. I think someone spiked it from the inside. We can’t fight the entire castle guard.”*

*“Put them down now!”* The soldier in charge shouted and took a step closer while raising the level of his sword.

*“Damn.”* Hadrian let his blades drop. Royce followed suit.

*“Take them,”* the soldier barked.



Alric Essendon awoke, startled by the commotion. He was not in his room. The bed he was lying in was a fraction of the size and lacked

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the familiar velvet canopy. The walls were bare stone, and only a small dresser and wash table decorated the space. He sat up, rubbing his eyes and soon realized where he was. He had accidentally fallen asleep, apparently several hours ago.

He looked over at Tillie, her bare back and shoulder exposed above the quilt. Alric wondered how she could sleep with all the shouting going on. He rolled out of bed and felt around for his nightshirt. Determining his clothing from hers was easy to do even in the dark. Hers was linen; his was silk.

Awakened by his movement, Tillie groggily asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, go back to sleep," Alric replied.

She could sleep through a hurricane, but his leaving always woke her. That he had fallen asleep was not her fault, but he blamed her just the same. Alric hated waking up here. He hated Tillie even more, and was conscious of the paradox. Throughout the day, her need for him attracted Alric, but in the morning, it repulsed him. Of all the castle servants, however, she was by far the prettiest. Alric did not care for the noble ladies his father invited to court. They were haughty, formal, and considered their virginity more valuable than the crown. He found them dull and irritating. His father thought differently. Alric was only nineteen, but already his father was pressuring him to pick a bride.

"You'll be king someday," Amrath told him. "Your first duty to the kingdom is to sire an heir." His father spoke of marriage as if it was a profession, and that was how Alric saw it as well. For him, this, or any form of work, was best avoided—or at least postponed as long as possible.

"I wish you could spend the whole night with me, my lord," Tillie babbled at him as he pulled his nightshirt over his head.

"Then you should be grateful I dozed as long as I did." With his toes he felt along the floor for his slippers and, finding them, he slid his feet into the warm fleece lining.

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“I am, my lord.”

“Good night, Tillie,” Alric said as he reached the door and stepped outside.

“Good—” Alric closed the door before she finished.

Tillie usually slept with the other maids, in a dorm near the kitchens. Alric brought her to the little vacant bedroom on the third floor of the castle for privacy. He did not like taking girls to his room—his father’s bedroom was right next door. The vacant room was on the north side of the castle, and because it received less sunlight, it was always cooler than the royal chambers. He pulled his nightshirt tight and shuffled down the corridor toward the stairs.

“I’ve checked all the upper floors, Captain, he’s not there,” Alric heard someone say from just up the steps. By his curt tone, he guessed the speaker to be a sentry. He spoke to them rarely, but when he did, they were always abrupt as if words were a commodity in short supply.

“Continue the search, down to the prisons if necessary. I want every room examined, each pantry, cabinet, and wardrobe. Do you understand?”

Alric knew that voice well, it was Wylin, the master-at-arms.

“Yes, sir, right away!”

Alric heard the sentry trotting down the steps, and he saw the soldier stop abruptly the moment he met Alric’s gaze. “I found him, sir!” he shouted with a hint of relief.

“What’s going on, Captain?” Alric called out even as Wylin and three other castle guards rushed down the steps.

“Your Royal Highness!” the captain knelt briefly, bowing his head, and then rose abruptly. “Benton!” he snapped at the soldier. “I want five more men here protecting the prince *right now*. Move!”

“Yes, sir!” the soldier snapped a salute and ran back up the stairs.

“Protecting me?” Alric said. “What’s going on?”

“Your father’s been murdered.”

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“My father? What?”

“His Majesty, the king...we found him in the royal chapel stabbed in the back. Two intruders are in custody. The dwarf Magnus confirmed it. He saw them murder your father, but he was powerless to stop them.”

Alric heard Wylin’s voice, but he could not understand the words. They did not make sense. *My father is dead?* He had just spoken with him before he went to Tillie’s room not more than a few hours ago. *How could he be dead?*

“I must insist that you remain here, Your Highness, under heavy guard until I finish sweeping the castle. They may not be alone. I am presently conducting a—”

“Insist what you like, Wylin, but get out of my way. I want to see my father!” Alric demanded, pushing past him.

“King Amrath’s body has been taken to his bedroom, Your Highness.”

*His body!*

Alric did not want to hear any more. He ran up the steps, his slippers flying off his feet.

“Stay with the prince!” Wylin shouted after him.

Alric reached the royal wing. There was a crowd in the corridor that moved aside at his approach. As he reached the chapel, its door lay open with several of the chief ministers gathered inside.

“My prince!” he heard his Uncle Percy call to him from inside, but he did not stop. He was determined to reach his father.

*He couldn’t be dead!*

He rounded the corner, passed his own room, and rushed into the royal suite. Here the double doors were open as well. Several ladies in nightgowns and robes stood just outside weeping loudly. Inside, a pair of older women busied themselves wringing out pink-stained linens in a washbasin.

To the side of the bed stood his sister Arista, dressed in a burgundy

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and gold gown. Her arms wrapped around the bedpost, which she gripped so tightly that her fingers were white. She stared at the figure on the mattress with eyes that were dry but wide with horror.

On the pale white sheets of the royal bed lay King Amrath Essendon. He still wore the same clothes Alric had seen him in before he retired for the night. His face was pale, his eyes were closed, and near the corner of his lips, there was a tiny tear of dried blood.

“My prince—I mean, Your Royal Majesty,” his uncle corrected himself as he followed him into the bedchamber. His Uncle Percy always looked older than his father did—his hair was very gray, his face wrinkled and drooping; however, he possessed the trim elegant build of a swordsman. He was still in the process of tying up his robe as he entered. “Thank Maribor you are safe. We thought you might have met a similar fate.”

Alric was at a loss for words. He just stood staring at the still body of his father.

“Your Majesty, do not worry. I will take care of everything. I know how hard this must be. You’re still a young man and—”

“What are you talking about?” Alric looked at him. “Take care of what? What are you taking care of?”

“A number of things, Your Majesty. There is the securing of the castle, the investigation as to how this happened, the apprehension of those responsible, arrangements for the funeral, and of course, the eventual coronation.”

“Coronation?”

“You are king now, sire. We will need to arrange your crowning ceremony, but that, of course, will wait until we have everything else settled.”

“But I thought...Wylin told me the murderers have been captured.”

“He captured two of them. I’m just making certain there aren’t anymore.”

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“What will happen to them?” He looked back at the still form of his father. “The killers, what will happen to them?”

“That is up to you, Your Royal Majesty. Their fate is yours to decide, unless you would prefer I handle the matter for you, since it can be quite unpleasant.”

Alric turned to his uncle. “I want them to die, Uncle Percy. I want them to suffer horribly and then die.”

“Of course, Your Majesty, of course. I assure you they will.”



The dungeons of Essendon Castle lay buried two stories beneath the earth. Ground water seeped through cracks in the walls and wet the face of the stone. Fungus grew in the mortar between stone blocks, and mold coated the wood of doors, stools, and buckets. The foul, musty smell mixed with the stench of decay, and the corridors echoed with the mournful cries of doomed men. Despite the rumors told in Medford’s taverns, the castle dungeons had a limited capacity. Needless to say, the prison staff found room for the king-killers. They moved prisoners to provide Royce and Hadrian with their own private cell.

News of the king’s death did not take long to spread, and for the first time in years, the prisoners had something exciting to talk about.

“Who’da thought I’d outlast old Amrath,” a graveled voice muttered. He laughed, but the laughter quickly broke into a series of coughs and sputters.

“Any chance the prince might review our sentences on account of all this?” A weaker, younger voice asked. “I mean it’s possible, isn’t it?”

This question was met with a lengthy silence, more coughing, and a sneeze.

“The guard said they stabbed the bastard in the back right in his own chapel. What does that say about his piety?” A new bitter voice

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questioned. “Seems to me he was asking for a bit too much from the man upstairs.”

“The ones that done it ’ere in our old cell. They moved me and Danny out to make room. I saw ’em when they shifted us, two of ’em, one big, the other little.”

“Anyone know ’em? Maybe they was trying to break us out and got sidetracked, eh?”

“Gotta have some pretty big brass ones to kill a king in his own castle. They won’t get a trial, not even a fake one. I’m surprised they’ve lived this long.”

“Gonna want a public torture before the execution. Things been quiet a long time. Haven’t had a good torture in years.”

“So why ya think they did it?”

“Why don’t you ask ’em?”

“Hey, over there? You conscious in that cell of yours? Or did they beat you stupid?”

“Maybe they’re dead.”

They were not dead, but neither were they talking. Royce and Hadrian stood chained to the far wall of their cell, their ankles locked in stocks, and their mouths gagged with leather muzzles. They had only been there for the better part of an hour, but already the strain on Hadrian’s muscles was painful. The soldiers had removed their gear, cloaks, boots, and tunics, leaving them with nothing but their britches to fight the damp chill of the dungeon.

They hung listening to the rambling conversations of the other inmates. The conversation halted at the sound of heavy approaching footfalls. The door to the cellblock opened and banged against the interior wall.

“Right this way, Your Royal Highness—I mean, Your Royal Majesty,” the voice of the dungeon warden said rapidly.

A metal key twisted in the lock, and the door to their cell creaked open. Four royal bodyguards led the prince and his uncle, Percy Braga

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inside. Hadrian recognized Braga, the Archduke and Lord Chancellor of Melengar, but he had never seen Alric before. The prince was young, perhaps no more than twenty. He was short, thin, and delicate in appearance with light brown hair that reached to his shoulders, and only the ghost of a beard. His stature and features must have come from his mother because the former king had been a bear of a man. He wore only a silk nightshirt with a massive sword strapped comically to his side by an oversized leather belt.

“These are the ones?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Braga replied.

“Torch,” Alric commanded, snapping his fingers impatiently as a soldier pulled one from the wall bracket and held it out for him. Alric scowled at the offer. “Hold it near their heads. I wish to see their faces.” Alric peered at them. “No marks? They haven’t been whipped?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Braga said. “They surrendered without a fight and Captain Wylin thought it best to lock them up while he searched the rest of the castle. I approved his decision. We can’t be certain these two acted alone in this.”

“No, of course not. Who gave the order to gag them?”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty.”

“Do you wish their gags removed?” Percy inquired.

“No, Uncle Percy—oh, I can’t call you that anymore, can I?”

“You’re the king now, Your Majesty. You can call me whatever you wish.”

“But it isn’t dignified, not for a ruler, but *archduke* is so formal—I will call you, Percy, is that all right?”

“It is not my place to approve of your decisions any longer, sire.”

“Percy it is then, and no, leave their gags on. I have no desire to hear their lies. What will they say except that they didn’t do it? Captured killers always deny their crimes. What choice do they have? Unless they wish to take their last few moments of life to spit in the face of their king. I won’t give them the satisfaction of that.”

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“They could tell us if they were working alone or for someone else. They could even tell us who that person or persons might be.”

Alric continued to study them. His eyes focused on a twisted mark in the shape of an M on Royce’s left shoulder. He squinted and then, out of frustration, snatched the torch from a guard and held it painfully close to Royce’s face for a moment. “What is this here? Like a tattoo, but not quite.”

“A brand, Your Majesty,” Braga replied. “It is the Mark of Manzant. It would seem this creature was once an inmate of Manzant Prison.”

Alric looked puzzled. “I didn’t think inmates were released from Manzant, and I wasn’t aware anyone has ever escaped.”

Braga appeared puzzled as well.

Alric then moved to inspect Hadrian. When he observed the small silver medallion that hung around his neck, the prince lifted it, turned it over with mild curiosity, and then let it go with disdain.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alric said. “I really don’t think they look like the type to volunteer information. In the morning have them hauled out to the square and tortured. If they say anything of merit, have them beheaded.”

“If not?”

“If not, quarter them slowly. Draw their bowels into the sun and have the royal surgeon keep them alive as long as possible. Oh, and before you do, make certain heralds have time to make several announcements. I want a crowd for this. People need to know the penalty for treason.”

“As you wish, sire.”

Alric started for the door, and then stopped. He turned and struck Royce across the face with the back of his hand. “He was my father, you worthless piece of filth!” The prince walked out, leaving the two hanging helplessly awaiting the dawn.

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Hadrian could only guess how long they had been hanging against the wall; perhaps two or three hours had passed. The faceless voices of the other inmates grew less frequent until they stopped entirely, silenced with boredom or sleep. The muzzle covering his mouth became soaked with spit and he found it difficult to breathe. His wrists were sore where the shackles rubbed and his back and his legs ached. To make matters worse, the cold tightened his muscles, making the strain even more painful. Not wanting to look at Royce, he alternated between closing his eyes and staring at the far wall. He did his best to avoid thinking about what would happen when daylight came. Instead, his mind was full of thoughts of self-incrimination—this was his fault. His insistence on breaking rules landed them where they were. Their death was on his hands.

The door opened, and once more, a royal guard, this time accompanied by a woman, entered the cell. She was tall, slender, and dressed in a gown of burgundy and gold silk, which shimmered like fire in the torch light. She was pretty, with auburn hair and fair skin.

“Remove their gags,” she ordered briskly.

The jailers rushed to unbuckle the straps and pull off the muzzles. “Now leave us, all of you.”

The jailers promptly exited.

“You too, Hilfred.”

“Your Highness, I’m your bodyguard. I need to stay to—”

“They are chained to the wall, Hilfred,” she snapped and then took a breath to calm herself. “I am fine, now please leave and guard the door. I want no interruptions by anyone. Do you understand?”

“As you wish, Your Highness.” The guard bowed and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

She moved forward, carefully studying the two of them. On her belt

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was a jeweled kris dagger. Hadrian recognized the long wavy blade as the type used by eastern occultists for magical enchantments. Presently he was more concerned with its other use—as a deadly weapon. She toyed with the dragon-shaped hilt as if she might draw it forth and stab them at any moment.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked Hadrian.

“Princess Arista Essendon,” Hadrian replied.

“Very good.” She smiled at him. “Now who are you and don’t bother lying. You will be dead in less than four hours, so what is the point?”

“Hadrian Blackwater.”

“And you?”

“Royce Melborn.”

“Who sent you here?”

“A man by the name of DeWitt,” Hadrian replied. “He is a member of the Duke DeLorkan’s group from Dagastan, but we weren’t sent to kill your father.”

“What were you sent to do?” Her painted nails clicked along the silver handle of the dagger, her eyes intent on them.

“To steal Count Pickering’s sword. DeWitt said the count challenged him to a duel here last night at a dinner party.”

“And what were you doing in the chapel?”

“That’s where DeWitt said he hid the sword.”

“I see...” She paused a moment as her mask of stone wavered. Her lips began to tremble, and her eyes well up with tears. She turned away from them, trying to compose herself. Her head was bowed and Hadrian could see her small body lurching.

“Listen,” Hadrian said, “for what it’s worth, we didn’t kill your father.”

“I know,” she said her back still turned.

Royce and Hadrian exchanged glances.

“You were sent here tonight to take the blame for the murder. Both of you are innocent.”

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“Are you—” Hadrian began, but stopped. For the first time since their capture, he felt hopeful, but thought better of it. He turned to Royce. “Is she being sarcastic? You can usually tell better than I.”

“Not this time,” Royce said, his face tense.

“I just can’t believe he’s really gone,” Arista muttered. “I kissed him goodnight—it was only a few hours ago.” She took a deep breath and straightened before turning to face them. “My brother has set plans for the two of you. You’ll be tortured to death this morning. They’re building a platform where you will be drawn and quartered.”

“We have already heard the details from your brother,” Royce said dismally.

“He is the king now. I can’t stop him. He is determined to see you punished.”

“You could talk to him,” Hadrian offered hopefully. “You could explain that we’re innocent. You could tell him about DeWitt.”

Arista wiped her eyes with the insides of her wrists. “There is no DeWitt. There was no dinner party here last night, no duke from Calis, and Count Pickering hasn’t visited this castle in months. Even if any of that were true, Alric wouldn’t believe me. Not a person in this castle will believe me. I am an emotional girl; that’s what they’ll say. ‘She is distraught. She is upset.’ I can do no more to stop your execution tomorrow than I could do to save my own father’s life tonight.”

“You knew he was going to die?” Royce asked.

She nodded, fighting the tears again. “I knew. I was told he would be killed, but I didn’t believe it.” She paused for a moment to study their faces. “Tell me, what would you do to get out of this castle alive before morning?”

The two glanced at each other in stunned silence.

“I’m thinking anything,” Hadrian said. “How about you, Royce?”

His partner nodded. “I’d have to say I’m good with that.”

“I can’t stop the execution,” Arista explained, “but I can see to it that you get out of this dungeon. I can return your clothes and

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weapons, and I can tell you a way to reach the sewers that run under this castle. I think they will take you out of the city. You should know that I have never personally explored them.”

“I...I wouldn’t think so,” Hadrian said, not really certain he was hearing everything correctly.

“It is imperative that when you escape, you leave the city.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Hadrian explained. “We’d probably do that anyway.”

“And one more thing, you must kidnap my brother.”

There was a pause as they both stared at her.

“Wait, wait, hold on. You want us to *kidnap* the Prince of Melengar?”

“Technically, he’s the King of Melengar now,” Royce corrected.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot,” Hadrian muttered.

Arista walked back to the cell door, peeked out the window, and then returned.

“Why do you want us to kidnap your brother?” Royce asked.

“Because whoever killed my father will kill Alric next, and before his coronation, I imagine.”

“Why?”

“To destroy the Essendon line.”

Royce stared at her. “Wouldn’t that place you at risk as well?”

“Yes, but the threat to me will not be serious as long as Alric is thought to be alive. He is the crown prince. I am only the silly daughter. Besides, one of us has to stay here in order to run the kingdom and find my father’s murderer.”

“And your brother couldn’t do that?” Hadrian asked.

“My brother is convinced *you* killed him.”

“Oh, right—you have to forgive me. A minute ago I was about to be executed, and now I’m going to kidnap a king. Things are changing a bit fast for me.”

“What are we supposed to do with your brother once we’ve gotten him out of the city?” Royce asked.

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“I need you to take him to Gutaria Prison.”

“I’ve never heard of the place,” Royce said. He looked at Hadrian, who shook his head.

“I’m not surprised; few people have,” Arista explained. “It is a secret ecclesiastical prison maintained exclusively by the Church of Nyphron. It lies on the north side of Windermere Lake. You know where that is?”

They both nodded.

“Travel around the edge of the lake; there is an old road that rises up between some hills; just follow it. I need you to take my brother to see a prisoner named Esrahaddon.”

“And then what?”

“That’s it,” she said. “Hopefully, he will be able to explain everything to Alric well enough to convince him of what is going on.”

“So,” Royce said, “you want us to escape from this prison, kidnap the king, cross the countryside with him in tow while dodging soldiers who I assume might not accept our side of the story, and go to another secret prison so that he can visit an inmate?”

Arista did not appear amused. “Either that, or you can be tortured to death in four hours.”

“Sounds like a really good plan to me,” Hadrian declared. “Royce?”

“I like any plan where I don’t die a horrible death.”

“Good. I will have two monks come in to give you last rites. I’ll have your chains removed and the stocks opened so you can kneel. You will take their frocks, lock them in your place, and silence them with the gags. Your things are right outside in the prison office. I will tell the warden that you’re taking them for the poor. I’ll have my personal bodyguard Hilfred escort you to the lower kitchens. They won’t be active for another hour or so. You should have the place to yourselves. A grate near the basin lifts out for sweeping debris into the sewer. I will speak to my brother and convince him to meet me at the kitchens

alone. I assume you are capable fighters?”

“He is.” Royce bobbed his head toward Hadrian.

“My brother isn’t so you should be able to subdue him easily. Be certain not to hurt him.”

“This is likely a really stupid question for me to ask,” Royce said, “but what makes you think we won’t just kill your brother, leave his body in the sewer to rot, and then just disappear?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “Like you, I simply don’t have a choice.”

## THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

*If you enjoyed this novel, you will be happy to learn that...*

The Crown Conspiracy is the first of a six book series entitled the Riyria Revelations. This saga is neither a string of sequels nor a lengthy work unnaturally divided. Instead, the Riyria Revelations was conceived as a single epic tale told through six individual episodes. While a book may hint at building mysteries or thickening plots, these threads are not essential to reach a satisfying conclusion to the current episode—which has its own beginning, middle, and end.

Eschewing the recent trends in fantasy toward the lengthy, gritty, and dark, the Riyria Revelations brings the genre back to its roots. Avoiding unnecessarily complicated language and world building for its own sake; this series is a distillation of the best elements of traditional fantasy—great characters, a complex plot, humor, and drama all in appropriate measures.

While written for an adult audience the Riyria Revelations lacks sex, graphic violence, and profanity making it appropriate for readers 13 and older.

# About the Author

Born in Detroit Michigan, Michael J. Sullivan has lived in Vermont, North Carolina and Virginia. He worked as a commercial artist and illustrator, founding his own advertising agency in 1996, which he closed in 2005 to pursue writing full-time. His first published novel *The Crown Conspiracy* was released in October 2008. He currently resides in Fairfax, Virginia with his wife and three children.

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2009 National Indie Excellence Award Finalist

2008 ReaderViews Literary Award Finalist

2007 Foreword Magazine Book of the Year Finalist

Named One of the 2008 Notable Indie Books by Fantasy Book Critic

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# THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

**R**oyce Melborn, a skilled thief, and his mercenary partner, Hadrian Blackwater make a profitable living carrying out dangerous assignments for conspiring nobles until they become the unwitting scapegoats in a plot to murder the king. Sentenced to death, they have only one way out...and so begins this epic tale of treachery and adventure, sword fighting and magic, myth and legend.

*"Simply put, I couldn't put this book down and, when I did, I went and picked up the sequel right after."*

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