

## Chapter 1

# The Messenger

He always knew he would die this way, alone on a desolate stretch of road. The forest pressed close from both sides and his trained eyes recognized the debris barring his path was not the innocent result of a weakened tree. Pulling forcefully on the reins his horse whinnied and jerked her head. She snorted in frustration while fighting the bit. Like him, she sensed danger.

He glanced behind and to either side at the trees standing in summer gowns of deep green. Nothing moved in the early morning stillness; nothing betrayed the tranquil facade except the pile before him. The deadfall was not natural. Even from this distance, he saw the brightly colored pulp of fresh cut wood. It was a barricade.

*Thieves?*

A band of highwaymen likely crouched under the forest's cover, watching, waiting for him to draw near and fall into their trap. He tried to focus his thoughts as his horse panted beneath him. This was the shortest route north to the Galewyr River and he needed to get through quickly. Breckton was preparing to invade the Kingdom of Melengar and he must deliver the dispatch before the knight launched his attack. Before setting out his commander and the regents personally expressed the importance of this mission. They were counting on him—*she* was counting on him. Like thousands of others, he stood in the freezing square on Coronation Day just to catch a glimpse of Empress Modina. He never did see her. After nearly five hours an announcement explained she was too consumed with the affairs of the new Empire to make an appearance. Ascended from the peasant class the new ruler had no time for frivolity.

He removed his cloak and tied it behind the saddle revealing the gold crown on his tabard. They might let him pass. Surely, they knew the Imperial army was nearby, and Sir Breckton would not stand for the waylaying of an Imperial messenger. Thieves might not be fearful of that fool Earl Ballentyne, but even highwaymen would think twice before crossing the earl's knight. Other commanders might ignore a bloodied or murdered dispatch rider, but Sir Breckton would take it as a personal assault on his honor, and insulting Breckton's honor was tantamount to

suicide. Besides, Chadwick was part of the Empire now, and an attack on its messenger would be an affront to the new Empress—the Heir of Novron.

He refused to fail.

Brushing the hair from his eyes, he took a fresh grip on the reins and advanced cautiously. As he neared the barricade, he saw movement. Leaves quivered. A twig snapped. He pivoted his mount and prepared to bolt. He was a good rider, fast and agile. Couriers for the palace were carefully selected and he was one of the best. His horse was a well-breed three-year-old; once he spurred her, they would never catch him. He tensed in the saddle and leaned forward preparing for the lurch, but the sight of Imperial uniforms stopped him.

A pair of soldiers trudged to the road from the trees and grudgingly peered at him with the dull expression common to foot soldiers. They were dressed in red tabards emblazoned with the crest of Sir Breckton's command. As they approached, the larger one chewed a stalk of rye while the smaller man licked his fingers and wiped them on his uniform.

"You had me worried," he said with an even mix of relief and irritation. "I thought you might be highwaymen."

The little guy smiled. He was a thin dolt who took little care with his uniform. Two shoulder straps were unfastened causing the leather tongues to stand up like tiny wings on his shoulders. "Did ya 'ear that, Bill? He thoughts we was thieves. Not a bad idea, eh? We should cut us some purses—charge a toll as it were. At least we'd make a bit 'o coin standin' out 'ere all day. 'course Breckton would skin us alive, iff'in 'e 'eard."

The taller soldier, most likely a half-wit mute, nodded in silent agreement. At least he wore his uniform smartly. It fit him better and he took the time to wear it properly. Both were rumpled and stained likely from sleeping outdoors, but such was the life of an infantryman and one of the many reasons he preferred being a courier.

"Clear this mess. I have an urgent dispatch. I need to get through to the Imperial army command at once."

"Here now, we 'ave orders too, ya know? We're not ta let anyone pass," the smaller said.

"I am an Imperial courier you fool!"

"Oh," the guard responded with all the acumen of a wooden post and glanced briefly at his partner who maintained his dim expression. "Well, that's an all together different set of apples, now isn't it?" He petted his horse's neck. "That would explain the lather you've put on this 'ere

girl, eh? She looks like she could use a drink. We got a bucket and there's a little stream just over—”

“I have no time for that. Just get that pile out of the road and be quick about it.”

“Certainly, certainly. You don't 'ave ta be so rough. Just tell us the watchword and Bill and me, we'll haul it outta yer way right fast.” He said as he dug for something caught in his teeth.

“Watchword?”

The soldier nodded. He pulled his finger out and sniffed at something with a sour look before giving it a flick. “You know, the password. We can't be lettin' no spies through 'ere. There's a war on after all.”

“I've never heard of such a thing. I wasn't informed of any password.”

“No?” The smaller soldier raised an eyebrow as he took hold of the horse's bridle.

“I spoke to the regent's themselves and I—”

The larger of the two pulled him from his horse. He landed on his back hitting the ground hard and banging his head. A jolt of pain momentarily blinded him and when he opened his eyes the soldier loomed over him with a blade to his throat.

“Who do you work for?” he growled.

“Whatcha doing, Bill?” the smaller guard asked still holding his horse.

“Trying to get this spy to talk, that's what.”

“I—I'm not a spy. I'm an Imperial courier. Let me go!”

“Bill, our orders says nothin' about interrogatin' 'em. Iff'in they don't know the watchword we cuts they's throats and tosses 'em in the river. Sir Breckton don't 'ave time ta deal with every fool we get on this 'ere road. Besides who ya think 'e works for? The only ones fightin' us is Melengar, so 'e works for Melengar. Now slit 'is throat and I'll 'elp you drag 'im ta the river as soon as I ties up this 'ere 'orse.”

“But I *am* a courier!” he shouted.

“Sure ya is.”

“I can prove it. I have dispatches for Sir Breckton. They're in the saddlebag.”

The two guards exchanged dubious looks. The smaller one shrugged and searched the bags pulling out a leather satchel. He withdrew a wax-sealed parchment and promptly broke, unfolded, and examined it.

“Well iff’in that don’t beat all. Looks like ’e is telling the truth, Bill. This ’ere looks like a real gen-u-wine dispatch for his lordship.”

“Oh?” the other asked as worry crossed his face.

“Sure looks that way. Better let ’im up.”

The soldier sheathed his weapon and extended a hand to help the rider to his feet, his face downcast. “Ah—sorry about that. We were just following orders, you know?”

He shoved him away and snatched the document from the smaller guard. “When Sir Breckton sees this broken seal he’ll have your heads!”

“Us?” The smaller guard laughed. “Like Bill ’ere said, we was just followin’ ’is orders. You were the one who failed ta get the watchword a’fore riding ’ere. Sir Breckton, ’e is a stickler for rules. ’e don’t like it when ’is orders aren’t followed. ’course you’ll most likely only lose a ’and or maybe an ear for ya mistake. Iff’in I was you, I’d see iff’in I could heat the wax up enough ta reseal it.”

“That would ruin the impression.”

“Ya could say it was hot and what with the sun on the pouch all day the wax melted in the saddlebag. Better than losing an ’and or an ear, I says. Besides, busy nobles like Breckton aren’t gonna study the seal a’fore openin’ an urgent dispatch, but ’e will notice iff’in the seal is broken. That’s fer sure.”

The courier looked at the document flapping in the breeze and felt his stomach churn. He had no choice, but he wouldn’t do it here with these idiots watching. He remounted his horse.

“Clear the road!” he barked.

The two soldiers dragged the branches clear and he kicked his horse racing her up the trail.



Royce watched the courier ride out of sight before taking off his Imperial uniform. Turning to face Hadrian he said, “Well, that wasn’t so hard.”

“Bill?” Hadrian asked as the two slipped into the forest.

Royce nodded. “Remember complaining yesterday that you’d rather be an actor? I was giving you a part: Bill, the Imperial checkpoint guard. I thought you did rather well with it.”

“You know, you don’t need to mock *all* my ideas.” Hadrian frowned as he pulled his own tabard over his head. “Besides, I still think we should consider it. We could travel from town to town performing in dramatic plays, even a few comedies.” Hadrian gave Royce an appraising look, “though maybe you should stick to drama—maybe tragedies.”

Royce glared back.

They dodged branches while pulling off their coifs and gloves and stuffed them in their tabards. Walking downhill, they reached one of the many small rivers that fed the great Galewyr. Their horses were staked in a clearing surrounded by thickets. The animals lazily swished their tails keeping the flies at bay.

“What? I think I would make a superb actor. I can see myself as a dashing leading man. We could definitely land parts in *The Crown Conspiracy*. I’ll play the handsome swordsman that fights the villain and you—well, you can be the other one.”

“You worry me sometimes, Hadrian. You really do.”

“Why not actors? It’s safe and could be fun.”

“It would be neither safe nor fun. Besides, traveling actors is not what comes to mind when I consider settling down.”

“Well that’s easy for you to say. You have Gwen. To be honest I don’t understand why you still do this. If I had what you do I would never take another job.”

“We do it because it is who we are, and with the war Alric is willing to pay top fees for information.”

Hadrian suppressed a sarcastic snort. “Sure top fees for us, but what about the other costs? I happen to know Breckton. He may work for that idiot Ballentyne, but he’s no fool himself. He’ll certainly look at the seal and won’t buy the story about it softening in the saddlebag.”

“I know,” Royce began as he sat on a log exchanging the Imperial boots for his own, “but after telling one lie, his second tale about Imperial guards breaking the seal will sound even more outlandish, so they won’t believe anything he says.”

Hadrian paused in his own efforts to switch boots and scowled at his partner. “You realize they’ll probably execute him for treason?”

Royce nodded. “Which will neatly eliminate the only witness.”

“You see, that’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Hadrian sighed and shook his head.

Royce could see the familiar melancholy wash over his partner's face. It reappeared all too often lately. He could not fathom his friend's moodiness. These strange bouts of depression usually followed successes, and frequently led to a night of heavy drinking. When the pair failed on a job, even on those occasions when they were caught and awaiting retribution, he never lamented as he did at these times.

He wondered if Hadrian even cared about the money anymore. He took only what was needed for drinks and food and left the rest with Gwen. Royce might understand better if they were making a living by picking pockets or robbing homes. But they worked under contract and were now in the service of a king no less. It was almost too clean for Royce's taste. Hadrian had no concept of real filth. He had not grown up in the muddy streets of Ratibor.

He decided to try and reason with him. "Would you rather they find out and send a detachment to hunt us down?"

"No, I just hate being the cause of an innocent man's death."

"No one is innocent my friend, and you aren't the cause...you're more like..." he searched for words, "the grease beneath the skids."

"Thanks, I feel *so* much better."

Royce folded the uniform and along with the boots placed them neatly into his saddlebag. Hadrian still struggled to rid himself of the black boots that were too small. With a mighty tug he jerked the last one off and threw it down in frustration. Reluctantly he picked up the boot and began wrestling his gear into the satchel. Forcing them as deep as possible the result was less than satisfactory and he strapped the flap down and buckled it as tight as he could. He glared at the pack and sighed again.

"You know, if you organized a little better it wouldn't be so hard to fit."

Hadrian looked at him with a puzzled expression. "What? Oh—no, I'm...it's not the gear."

"What is it then?" Royce pulled his black cloak on adjusting the sleeves and collar.

"I don't know," the fighter replied mournfully while stroking his horse's neck. "It's just that—well—I thought by now I'd have done something more—with my life I mean."

"Are you crazy? Most men work themselves to death on a small bit of land that isn't even theirs. You're free to do as you choose and go wherever you want."

“I know, but when I was young I used to think I was—well—special. I used to imagine that I would triumph in some great purpose, win the girl, and save the kingdom, but I suppose every boy feels that way.”

“I didn’t.”

Hadrian scowled at him. “I just had this idea of who I would become and being a two-bit spy wasn’t part of that picture.”

“We are significantly more successful than *two-bits*.” Royce corrected him, “And certainly so as of late.”

“That’s not the point. I was successful as a mercenary too. It’s not about the money. It’s the fact I survive like some parasite.”

“Why is this suddenly coming up now? For the first time in years, we’re making good money with a steady stream of *respectable* jobs. We’re in the employ of a king for Maribor’s sake. We can actually sleep in the same bed two nights in a row and not worry about being arrested. Just last week the captain of the city watch smiled while waving at me.”

“It’s not the amount of work; it’s the *kind* of work. It’s the fact that we’re always lying. If that courier dies, it’ll be our fault. Besides, it’s not sudden. I’ve felt this way for years. Why do you think I’m always suggesting we do something else? Do you know why I broke the rules and took that job to steal Pickering’s sword? The one that nearly got us executed.”

“For the unusual sum of money offered?”

“No, that’s why *you* took it. I wanted the job because it seemed like the right thing to do. For once I had the chance to help someone who really deserved to be helped or so I thought at the time.”

“And becoming an actor is the answer?”

Hadrian untied his horse. “No, but as an actor, I could at least *pretend* to be virtuous. I could imagine I was a hero, swinging my sword for a noble cause. I suppose I should just be happy to be alive, right?”

Royce did not reply. The nagging sensation was surfacing again. He hated keeping secrets from Hadrian and found himself once more wrestling with his conscience, which had only recently made an appearance. Royce defined right and wrong by the moment. Right was what was best for him—wrong was everything else. He stole, lied, even killed people when necessary.

This was his craft and he was good at it. There was no reason to apologize, no need to pause or reflect. The world was at war with him and all measures were equal.

The whole world was changing and it unnerved Royce who preferred his world constant with each variable accounted for. Lines on maps shifted daily, and power slipped from one set of hands to another. Time was flowing too fast and events were too unexpected. He felt like he was crossing a frozen lake in late spring. He tried to pick a safe path, but the surface cracked beneath his feet. Still, there were some things he could control—some changes he could hold back. Besides, not telling Hadrian was for his friend's own good. Like a bad cold, the sensation would go away. It always did. What bothered him was how it kept coming back.

Climbing on Mouse, his short gray mare, Royce thought a moment. "We've been working pretty hard lately. Maybe we should take a break and go on a little vacation."

"I don't see how we can," Hadrian replied. "With the Imperial army preparing to invade Melengar, Alric is going to need us now more than ever."

"You'd think that wouldn't you."