The Jester

By Michael J. Sullivan
I N T R O D U C T I O N

Thank you for pre-ordering The Crown Tower. I'm very excited to present more stories with Royce and Hadrian and I hope you enjoy reading the Chronicle Tales as much as I enjoyed writing them.

This short story was originally written for the Unfettered Anthology. If you are unfamiliar with that project, it's a compilation of stories by some of the biggest names in fantasy (and me) to help Shawn Speakman pay a huge medical bill from fighting and winning against cancer. Shawn had previously had another form of cancer and as such he was uninsurable the second time around. Here is a list of authors that came out in support of Shawn and contributed to Unfettered.

Terry Brooks
Patrick Rothfuss
Robert Jordan & Brandon Sanderson
David Anthony Durham
R.A. Salvatore
Lev Grossman
Jennifer Bosworth
Jacqueline Carey
Tad Williams
Peter V. Brett
Naomi Novik
Michael J. Sullivan
Carrie Vaughn
Daniel Abraham
Todd Lockwood
Blake Charlton
Kevin Hearne
Robert V.S. Redick
Eldon Thompson
Shawn Speakman
Peter Orullian
Shawn generously made The Jester available as part of this pre-order campaign and I hope you'll show your appreciation by checking out Unfettered, and if it looks like something of interest, then by all means buy a copy. Ebook versions are found at all outlets (Kindle, Nook, iBookstore) and print copies are available from Shawn's publishing company Grim Oak Press.


Grim Oak Press
PO Box 45173
Seattle, WA 98145

www.grimoakpress.com

Again, thank you for supporting my writing, and now here's the story.
The characters of Royce and Hadrian came to me during my self-imposed ten-year hiatus from writing. After crafting twelve novels and spending a decade getting nowhere, I had determined that publication was hopeless, and I had vowed never to write creatively again. But they kept invading my mind, and as hard as I tried to silence them, I finally gave in, on one condition: that I would write a book that I wanted to read and forgo any thoughts of publication. What a fun time I had bringing these two rogues to life. My wife decided to circumvent my plans and got the books published, and hence Riyria was born.

The six books of The Riyria Revelations were released by Orbit in three two-book omnibus volumes, and while I thought that would be the end of Royce and Hadrian, readers clamored for more. Because I didn’t want to “tack on” to a carefully choreographed ending, The Riyria Chronicles were born to explore adventures that occurred during the twelve years the pair were together before Revelations began.

The short story I’ve provided is a Chronicles tale. It takes place after the events of The Rose and the Thorn and before those of Theft of Swords. Even so, it’s a stand-alone story and no prior experience with any of my books is required to enjoy it to its fullest.

Crafting a work for Unfettered was quite a daunting experience. I wanted to help Shawn and his cause, but how could I not be intimidated by the esteem of the authors I’d be sharing the
pages with? Like Riyria, I hope that I rose to the challenge, and that you’ll be entertained by
“The Jester,” a story of adventure, bonds of friendship, and a recognition that the choices we
make dictates the future we find.

— Michael J. Sullivan
Hadrian discovered that the most fascinating thing about plummeting in total darkness wasn’t the odd sense of euphoria instilled from the free fall or the abject terror derived from anticipating sudden death, but that he had the opportunity to contemplate both.
The drop was that far.

The four had plenty of time to scream, which they did the moment the rope had snapped. Hadrian wasn’t sure if Royce yelled. He couldn’t hear him—and doing so wasn’t in his partner’s nature—but Wilmer would have drowned him out anyway. The pig farmer was so loud that his shrieks ricocheted off the stone walls and bounced back before any of them hit the water. Whatever air they had left was driven from their lungs by the vicious slap and suffocating cold.

The impact would have hurt anyone, and Hadrian already had a broken leg. He nearly blacked out from the pain. Maybe he did, if only for an instant, but the immediate plunge into ice-cold water woke him. Just deep enough. Hadrian pushed off the bottom with his good leg and hoped he would reach air in time. Normally weighed down by three swords, this was the first time he was happy to have lost two—not so much lost as one having been shattered and the other devoured.

He broke the surface with a gasp.

“Hadrian?” Royce called.

Turning, Hadrian spotted his friend, bobbing. The soaked hood collapsed over his head, as if a bat hugged his face.

“Still alive,” he yelled back.

A flurry of splashing near him suggested neither Wilmer nor Myra could swim. Wilmer had never impressed Hadrian as athletic in any way. Given that walking had proved difficult for the pig farmer, swimming might be as impossible as flying. Similarly, Hadrian imagined Myra’s
past experience with bodies of water would have been limited to lying in a brass tub while servants added scented oils and refilled her wine cup.

“There’s a blue light behind you,” Royce pointed out after peeling off his hood. “Looks like the edge of the pool is just ten feet or so. Can you make it?”

Hadrian turned and spotted the eerie glow coming from the cavern wall. Royce was right. The edge of the little lake was close. The subterranean pond was less a basin and more a stone fissure filled with water—likely with straight sides. The ice-cold pool sapped Hadrian’s strength, freezing his muscles and strangling his breath. A death trap.

“I can try,” Hadrian replied, still struggling to keep his head above the surface. Over his shoulder he called out, “Myra? Wilmer? You okay?”

“Forget about them,” Royce said. “Get yourself out.”

Hadrian struggled to see in the dim light. He could hear both Wilmer and Myra gasping, coughing. “I don’t think they can swim.”

“Not my problem—not yours either. Get to the edge.”

“If you won’t help them, I—”

“You’ll what? Help them drown?” Royce asked. He was somewhere behind Hadrian, somewhere in the dark, hardly making a sound. “You’ll be lucky to get out alive on your own.”

Royce was right, but when had that ever mattered? “I’ll do what I can.”
“All right, all right!” Royce barked, the familiar frustration in his voice. “I’ll help them. But get yourself out. I can’t save everyone.”

Hadrian swam as best he could, happy to be wearing leather and wool rather than chain mail. While down to only one sword, the two-handed spadone strapped to his back was still the biggest and heaviest he owned. His left arm, numb and useless, hung limp. The distance wasn’t far, just a few kicks away, but he only had one good leg. At least the cold water soothed the burns on his back, and—if the pool wasn’t putrid—it might help clean the claw marks raked across his chest.

Working as best he could, Hadrian swam until he reached the ledge. He hung for a moment, catching his breath. Then, using his elbow for leverage, he lifted and rolled onto the stone floor, carefully avoiding the burns on his back and the cuts on his chest. He lay on his side, panting, feeling the water drain from his clothes.

Opening his eyes, Hadrian saw they were in yet another massive chamber of the never-ending cave complex. How many were there? How deep did they run? How long could they keep going? They must have been a week underground. All the food they had brought was gone, but Royce still carried some of the wolf meat.

They all would have died if it hadn’t been for Royce. Not that his partner cared about Wilmer or Myra. They had stopped being important when the level of danger exceeded the twenty-five gold tenents Myra had offered them to serve as escorts. After only the first night inside, Hadrian had been convinced Royce would have abandoned the fee, along with Myra and
Wilmer, if doing so would have caused a magic exit to appear. As it was, Hadrian worried what would happen when the wolf meat ran out.

They must be at the bottom. The roots of the mountain—that’s what was written on the map; that’s how the jester described the heart of the Farendel Durat range. Hadrian had always considered mountains to be beautiful—but learned this was only true from the outside and from a distance. On the inside, they proved terrifying.

The others crawled out of the inky pool, shivering in the faint glow emanating from the cluster of gems embedded in the cave wall. Myra looked dead, the blue light draining her skin of color, thin hair plastered flat. Upon first meeting, she had been lively as a rabbit and spoke so quickly they had needed her to repeat everything. Lying on the stone, coughing, shivering from the wetness, the widowed wife of the candle merchant looked more her age. Somewhere in her thirties, or maybe older, she was finally sapped of the insatiable drive that had powered her. The exhaustion showed in her eyes, a blurry, unfocused stare. She was a dormouse, caught too far from her hole by a bright light. She wanted it to be over—they all did.

Wilmer lay facedown a few feet away. Never more than a rag, his thin, homespun tunic—blackened on one side and bloodied on the other—had become the stained road map of where they’d been. Wilmer was still coughing, still spitting. That scream of his must have cost a lot of air. He’d likely swallowed water on the way up.

“Nice place, this,” Hadrian said and grunted, trying to shift position. “I think we should stay awhile.”

Royce knelt beside him, panting. “I’ll ask the innkeeper for extra pillows and blankets.”
“Tell him I’ll have the special—the special is always the best.”

Royce pulled up Hadrian’s shirt to examine the burns and the claw marks.

Hadrian saw him grimace. “Oh—nice bedside manner, pal. Why don’t you just pull my cloak over my face and recite something religious.”

“If I knew anything religious, I might.”

“Did we get away?” Myra asked.

No one answered.

Hadrian was afraid to—afraid to jinx what little luck they found by hitting the pool instead of jagged rocks. Gods looked for such hubris when deciding where to step, and so far good fortune had been scarce.

Of the group, Royce showed the least wear. His hood and cloak had survived without a tear, although he did have a nasty-looking cut across his forehead. His expression was sullen, but that was normal for Royce. It was only when he smiled that Hadrian worried.

Royce turned and cocked his head, like a dog listening. Always the first sign, the early indicator that life was about to get ugly again. Over the course of their underground journey, Hadrian had come to see his friend as a canary in a mine. He wished he could have been surprised to see his friend’s expression darken, but by then he would have been more astonished to discover they were safe. A second later, Hadrian heard the distant banging for himself. A long, familiar, striding rhythm that sounded like a god beating out a cadence using thunder as a drum.
“Nope,” Royce finally told Myra, as he helped Hadrian to his good leg.

“Why doesn’t it stop?” Wilmer cried. “Why doesn’t anything in here ever stop?” He was slapping the floor with his palms, fingers spread out.

The banging became hammering and then pounding as the sound grew nearer.

“Go! Go! Go!” Royce shouted, and they were up and running again. Hadrian limped, using his partner as a crutch.

Wilmer also struggled, his side still bleeding. The stain around the snapped arrow shaft had grown almost up to his arm and down to his hip. In contrast, Myra made better time, her wet skirt hiked to her thighs, modesty abandoned in favor of survival. They ran the only way possible, the only way they could see—toward the light.

“Door!” Royce shouted. Abandoning Hadrian, he raced ahead. Reaching it first, he knelt, as if proposing marriage.

Of course it was locked. He expected nothing less from that miserable place. Hadrian had never seen a lock that Royce couldn’t open, but they were in a race. The frightening bangs of giant footfalls became terrifying booms. Hadrian chanced a look but couldn’t see it. The thing was still in the darkness, and his imagination just made the panic more justifiable.

“Open!” Royce announced, and they raced through. Shoving the door closed behind them muffled the thunderous steps but also blotted out the light. Hadrian heard Royce twist the lock then the sound of a board sliding into place.
“We need a light,” Myra said.

“You’re the candle maker!” Wilmer shouted.

“Everything is wet.”

“Give me a second,” Royce said.

Outside, the thundering steps closed in.

Sparks flared several times before a flame developed, revealing Royce. Kneeling on the floor, he blew into a pile of gathered debris. Myra pulled candles out of her pack and began lighting them.

She must have a million in there.

Before setting out, Myra had possessed eight separate bags of luggage—some with hats, another with makeup, and several filled with fancy gowns. An entire bag had been devoted to uncomfortable shoes. Hadrian had persuaded her to leave most of them behind. His argument had become irresistibly convincing when everyone refused to help carry her load. She had kept only a single knapsack with food, water, the map pieces, and candles. As she opened her pack this time, Hadrian realized all that remained were the pieces of map and the candles.

Flickering light revealed an octagonal chamber the size of a barn. Chisel marks revealed a room carved out of the mountain—the handiwork of the jester.

Had he done this all himself?
It seemed impossible that anyone could hew a hall from solid stone. Dwarves were legendary for their mastery of such things, but Hadrian had long since been convinced the jester hadn’t worked alone. Even so, it must have taken years.

In the center of the chamber, a chest the size of a wagon sat on a stone dais. Built of steel with brass corners and coin-sized rivets, it was secured by a formidable padlock. On the far side of the room stood another door, also cast from steel with its own massive lock. The last remaining item was an iron lever and the thick chain that connected it to the keystone holding up the arched ceiling.

Royce was busy shoving another brace across the door they’d entered, and with the light of Myra’s many candles, Hadrian could see it was old and rotted. The door itself was an even greater concern. The iron hinges were rusted, the wood grooved from worms and termites. As the pounding grew closer, they all backed away, staring with anticipation at the rickety door that had become their castle gate.

“Better open that other door, Royce,” Hadrian said.

“Wait!” Myra shouted, and all of them froze. “It’s another choice.”

Hadrian looked to Royce.

“I think she’s right. We’ll get to choose only one.” His partner said, shaking his head in disgust. “By Mar, I hate this short bastard. First Manzant prison and now this—I’m really starting to develop a dislike for dwarves.”

“So it’s another trap?” Hadrian asked.
“What are we gonna do?” Wilmer’s voice was rising in octaves again. The man was a human teakettle always on boil.

BOOM!

Something hit the little door and it shook, kicking out a cloud of dust.

Wilmer screamed.

“Shut up!” Royce ordered, and Wilmer clamped both hands over his own mouth.

“This is all his fault,” Myra said. “We were doing fine until he screamed and announced us to everything in the area. He screams at everything! We should never have brought him.”

“We had to,” Hadrian said. “He had the last piece of the map. Besides, Wilmer only started screaming because you turned that statue to the left and made the floor disappear.”

Myra smirked. “I didn’t have a choice. Have you forgotten about the snakes? And Royce wasn’t doing anything.”

“I was busy trying to stop the walls from closing in,” Royce said absently, his sight fixed on the chest, and if Hadrian had to guess, the lock. Anything requiring a key must be like a loose tooth to his partner. “And stopping them was more important than a few snakes.”

“A few? Where’d you learn to count?”

BOOM!
Hadrian felt the impact through the floor that time, and it made one of Myra’s candles wobble. “We’ve got a choice to make, people.” Hadrian leaned against one of the carved walls. “Door, chest, or lever?”

“We came here for the treasure,” Myra pointed out. “We have to open the chest, or what was the point of all this?”

“How can you even think that?” Wilmer shouted. He alone faced the little wooden door. “That—thatthing is out there. A tiny door won’t hold it! But that one might.” He pointed across the room. “We gotta get to the other side now!”

“You’re just panicking.” Myra dismissed him with a wave of her hand that the farmer didn’t see. Nothing could pry his sight from the entrance.

“’Course I’m panicking!” Wilmer balled his hands in fists. “Panicking is what a body does in a spot like this!”

“Why did you even come?” Myra shook her head in disgust and moved away from Wilmer—or was it the door she was getting distance from? Perhaps she was heeding the old adage that one doesn’t need to outrun a monster, just the terrified pig farmer and the guy with the broken leg. Whatever her motives, Myra began following Royce as he approached the chest. She was careful not to pass him and stepped only where he had. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.
“And here I thought you was a smart lady,” Wilmer responded to Myra’s rhetorical question. “You said you had the rest of a map leading to some amazing treasure. Why in Maribor’s name do you think I came along?”

“Royce?” Hadrian called to him. “What’s your choice?”

The thief didn’t answer. Instead, he tilted his head once more, and Hadrian thought his heart might stop. This time, however, the familiar scowl didn’t appear.

“What is it?”

“It’s quiet,” the thief told them.

They all turned to look at the little door and waited. Hadrian was holding his breath without realizing it until he had to take another. By then it was obvious Royce was right. It was quiet. The pounding had stopped.

Hadrian limped closer to the door. Placing a hand on it, he felt the bristles of the stressed wood where it had begun to snap. He listened. Nothing.

“What does that mean?”

Royce shrugged. “I don’t even know what the blazes that thing is out there.”

“Well, it don’t like us,” Wilmer said, his voice down an octave. Turning to look at Myra he added, “And that weren’t my fault. It was yours.”
Myra looked embarrassed and turned away. Setting her pack down on the stone dais in front of the chest, she drew her wet hair out of her face and softly said, “I don’t like spiders.”

Royce, who was on the dais studying the lock, turned and shook his head in disbelief.

“Are you joking?”

“No, I’m deathly afraid of them.”

“Anyone is,” Hadrian said, “when they have teeth and are as big as a river barge.”

“Well, there you have it. I’m vindicated.” Myra sat down and began pulling more candles out of her pack. They were all the same. She must have had a backroom filled with the things.

Myra was even odder than Wilmer, who Hadrian felt could best be described as challenged. A well-to-do widow of a candle baron, she had packed up the family carriage and headed off for fame and glory by spelunking for treasure. Chandlers—wax chandlers especially—supplied the rich and the church with light, making them both wealthy and respected. He couldn’t imagine why she would trade all that for this insanity. Early on, Hadrian had called her the Queen of Wax and received a nasty glare. Maybe Myra wasn’t happy with her inherited candle empire, or perhaps she simply wanted to try lighting one at both ends.

“You shouldn’t have run,” Wilmer told her.

With an armload of candles, Myra moved deeper into the room, establishing new lights as she went. “I’m sorry, okay? But I had no idea that crossing that blasted river would make the wolves attack.”
“It didn’t,” Hadrian said, feeling the pain in his back. “They were just trying to get away from the fire, and of course you were still holding that cursed amulet.”

Myra turned. “We don’t know for certain it was cursed,” she said, drawing sharp looks from all of them. “Okay, maybe it was.” Myra paused, one arm cupping a host of little beeswax sticks to her breasts, the other holding a lit candle. “Oh—but wait. Then I don’t understand. What woke that thing up?” She gestured at the door with the hand holding the candle, and it went out. She sighed miserably and began walking back to the nearest flame.

“I would suspect the explosion did,” Royce said, then added with remembered frustration, “proving me correct that you never feed ravens, no matter how much they beg.” He glowered at Wilmer, who quickly looked away. Turning to Hadrian he asked, “How’s your leg?”

He shook his head. “Hurts.”

“Broken?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Listen,” Wilmer pleaded, raising his arms in desperation. “Can we just decide what we’re gonna do? I don’t understand why we can’t just have Royce unlock this big, beautiful, iron, Maribor-blessed fortress door. Wouldn’t you rather have that standing between us and whatever that thing is?”

“Might be a demon,” Myra offered, as she delicately placed a candle on top of the treasure chest.
“Demons aren’t real,” Royce said.

“You’re so sure, are you?”

“Allow me to rephrase. It would seem unlikely.”

Exhausted, Hadrian sat on the floor and continued watching Myra place another candle, this one on a ledge near the metal door. The room was almost bright.

“We won’t get out of here alive—I just know it,” Wilmer grumbled, and Myra made a clucking sound that was audible even from the back of the room.

Royce finished examining the chest and moved through the rest of the chamber, nimble as a cat and peering in every corner. Granted, he didn’t have a broken leg, nor had he been burned or clawed, but still, Hadrian marveled at Royce’s stamina. He’d even outlasted Myra, a feat Hadrian had once thought impossible.

How long has it been?

Hadrian straightened his back and felt the pain in his shoulder and the stab in his leg. This job was feeling much too similar to the Crown Tower, the first mission he and Royce had done together. It had nearly killed both of them. More than six years had passed since forming their little thieves-for-hire business, which they named Riyria—an elvish word for two. This job felt a lot like that one, and it wasn’t the first time Hadrian suspected they wouldn’t live through this ordeal. It wasn’t even the first time that day.
Wilmer sat only a few feet away, hunched on the floor, his head between his knees. He rocked and muttered to himself—maybe singing, or possibly praying. With Wilmer, it was hard to tell. The farmer’s hair hung in the way, obscuring his face. When he wiped his cheeks, Hadrian realized the man was crying.

Wilmer was an easier clam to open than Myra. They’d seen his home. Calling the little hovel a shack would be flattery. A more accurate assessment would be to say he had two pigsties. He lived alone—not just in his hovel, but because his farm was in the middle of nowhere. From what little Wilmer had said, Hadrian guessed he, his mother, and the pigs used to live somewhere else but were driven out into the wilds—something Wilmer had done. Then his mother had died, leaving him with only his pigs. Hadrian imagined they had become more like children or siblings than livestock. Wilmer must have been desperate to have left them. Maybe he expected they would only be gone a day or two.

“Wilmer, how in the world did a pig farmer get one of the map pieces?” Hadrian asked. “I thought only nobles of the old empire received them.”

“That’s true,” Myra answered for him. “His piece was given to Governor Hilla, whose descendants are now the Kenward family. Turns out his mother worked for the Kenwards once.”

“Lord Kenward thought me mum was special,” Wilmer said.

“I bet he did.” Myra smirked. “When he died, Kenward left the map section to her. Maybe he thought it was funny.”
“It weren’t funny. That map is cursed.” Wilmer sighed, then turned so that the lights illuminated the arrow in his side. “That fall snapped the end off. Don’t really hurt much though—not if I don’t move.”

“Then don’t move,” Royce said.

“Shouldn’t we pull it out?”

“No.” Hadrian held up a warning hand. “You’ll bleed like a spigot, and we don’t have any more bandages. That shaft is working like a cork in a bottle.”

“That’s another thing,” Myra said, returning from her lighting expedition to look at Wilmer. “Why aren’t you dead? Anyone else gets hit by an arrow, they die—you don’t even stop talking.”

“Just lucky, I guess.” Wilmer looked up at the ceiling, which appeared ready to cave in. “I don’t think our chances are very good. None of us will survive this place. Thing is—it’s all a joke, ain’t it? I mean, that dwarf made jokes for a living, right?”

“He was the imperial jester,” Myra said.

“If this is a joke, it isn’t funny.” Royce walked back to them. “I can’t find any other way out besides that steel door. No way to continue forward, at least. We could go back the way we came in, but I don’t think that’s wise.”

“So the choice is still the door, the chest, or the lever,” Hadrian said.

“The door is the only thing that makes any sense,” Wilmer insisted.
Myra shook her head in frustration and pretended to pull her own hair. “What in Maribor’s name do you know about sense? The door isn’t the answer. It’s way too obvious.”

“You think pulling that lever and bringing the roof down is the smart thing to do?” Wilmer asked with a sarcastic tone. “Because that definitely ain’t obvious.”

She glared at the farmer. “That’s also obvious—obviously stupid. Although I’d almost like to, just to see you crushed under a mountain of rock.”

“But what would be the point of opening the chest?” Hadrian asked. “We’d still be trapped. All the gold in the world won’t help.”

“No one said a thing about gold,” Myra replied. “The legend says the emperor’s jester stole, and I quote, ‘the most valuable thing anyone could ever possess.’ You people have such small imaginations. We’re talking about the ancient Novronian Imperial Palace here. The greatest empire the world has ever known. They conquered the dwarves and elves and forced them to pay tribute for centuries. The jester was probably once a dwarven king they had enslaved. And everyone knows how dwarves hoard precious gems. The old empire also had wizards so powerful they could move mountains and redirect rivers. The bloody Rhelacan itself might be sitting in that chest.”

“What’s that?” Wilmer asked.

“No one really knows; a weapon of some sort that won the war against the elves. I’m just saying whatever is in that chest might be magical and could give us the power to escape these caverns. We might be able to lop the whole top of the mountain off and just walk away.”
“What do you think, Royce?” Hadrian asked.

“I’m wondering where the battering ram went,” he said. His partner was focused on the little wooden door and seemed more bothered by it than before.

“Back to that hall of scary lights, I hope.” Wilmer was up and walking, not heading toward anything, just pacing in a circle. His still-wet feet left a damp trail. He stopped in his orbital trek and glanced around. “When you think about it, this is the nicest room we’ve found so far.”

“That’s what frightens me,” Royce said, then once more tilted his head.

“Not again,” Hadrian muttered. “What is it?”

“Water,” Royce said before running off to the far side of the room, grabbing one of Myra’s lighted candles on the way.

They all watched as he climbed the rear wall. From that distance, Royce appeared to be little more than a shadow. His trek was so fast and fluid that he could have been some dark liquid spilling uphill. When he reached the top corner, he set the candle on a ledge and they all saw the problem. Water was leaking from a crevice near the ceiling. A column of dark streaks discolored the stone below it. The room looked like it was weeping.

“So?” Wilmer said. “It’s just water—right?”

“Yeah,” Royce replied. “But it wasn’t there before.”

BOOM!
This time the impact didn’t come from the little door, and they heard a pop near the rear wall, which turned the trickle into a spray.

“Oh how nice, Royce,” Myra said. “Your friend is back. Must have heard you were missing him.”

“Not my friend,” Royce replied. “But it looks like he was off causing mischief. Maybe you’re right. Maybe he is a demon.”

BOOM!

The rear wall cracked, and more water surged in. It hissed under pressure, kicking out a rooster tail far enough to spray the side of the metal chest. Hadrian wondered if there might be some river or lake above them. Perhaps they had traveled far enough west to be under the ocean itself. The force of the water looked likely to win the battle against the walls, but even if no more breaching occurred, the floor was solid stone, and there was no drain.

Hadrian said, “We have almost an inch of water gathering here.”

“All right, that settles it. I’m ordering you to open that chest,” Myra told Royce, who looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “Look, I hired you—so do what I say. You two were supposed to be an accomplished pair of thieves—”

“Technically, he’s the thief,” Hadrian said. “I’ve never made that claim.”

“No—you’re right, Viscount Winslow assured me you could fight. Good with a blade, I think he said. Only I haven’t seen anything out of either of you to prove your worth. You
couldn’t even steal the map piece. How hard could that have been? He’s a pig farmer, for Maribor’s sake. He lived in a shack on a lonely road in the middle of nowhere. He didn’t even have that many pigs! You had three swords, and you’re twice his size. You should have just killed him and taken the map.”

Royce looked at Hadrian and raised both hands palms up, as if to say, “See?”

“Is that how you got the other pieces?” Hadrian asked Myra.

The woman stopped. The rush of the water was loud, but he knew she’d heard him. Still Myra hesitated, turning slowly. “What?”

“You said that an old man gave you the other pieces, but did he? Did he just give them to you?”

Hadrian could see it on her face—she was considering lying. Any other time, anywhere else, she probably wouldn’t have hesitated. He had long suspected Myra was a good liar but buried deep under a mountain in a sealed room filling with water, she must have realized there wasn’t much point.

“He was an old man and dirt poor,” she replied. “Figured a rich widow could be persuaded to finance an expedition for a quarter of the recovered treasure—a quarter! He had seven of the eight map pieces and told me Wilmer had the last.”

“Did you poison him?” Royce asked. There was no accusation in his tone, merely professional curiosity.
“I run a candle shop not an alchemy store.”

Royce shrugged. “It’s just a common choice for women.”

“Maybe for the women in your social circle, but all I had on hand was a lot of hot wax.”

This made Wilmer grimace, shocked Hadrian, and even Royce looked impressed.

Myra rolled her eyes. “What kind of person do you think I am? I smothered him with a pillow while he slept.” She folded her arms and huffed. “So why didn’t you kill Wilmer?”

“You know I’m right here!” the pig farmer yelled.

BOOM!

The room shuddered once more. Dust rained from the ceiling, and all of them looked up to see if some new and more immediate disaster was about to befall them. When the stones hanging over their heads remained unaffected, the party shared a communal sigh.

“I asked Royce not to,” Hadrian said.

“He’s annoying that way,” Royce added.

“It wasn’t necessary. Wilmer offered his piece in exchange for a fair share. His only condition was to come along.”

“And Maribor’s beard, was that ever a mistake,” Wilmer said. “Might have been better if you had killed me.” He looked at the thief. “Would have been quick and painless, right?”
Royce shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

“At least it would have been over and done with. These last few days have been the worst of my life.”

“Coming from you, that’s really saying something.” Myra sloshed over toward Royce through ankle-deep water.

The tight bun on top of her head had come loose, and her hair cascaded over her shoulders, making Myra looked like some fairy-tale swan princess. Lines of gray frosted darker locks, lending her a mystical quality—then again, Hadrian might have lost more blood than he realized.

“I should have hired someone else. Viscount Winslow told me you had escaped from the Manzant salt mines, and I got too excited. You just don’t find many people who have experience with dwarven constructions. But this whole trip has been a complete disaster. You’ve done a pathetic job.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Royce said. “And you don’t even have a scratch.”

“Oh, I have plenty of scratches. I can assure you.”

“What are you complaining about?” Wilmer asked, pointing at the arrow in his side.

“And if Hadrian hadn’t killed those wolves, you’d—”

“And how about when I caught your shoe?” Wilmer said. “You’d be nearly barefoot if it weren’t for me.”
She looked at him incredulously, then turned back to glare at Royce. “Okay, fine, but none of that matters if we drown down here.” Myra looked down. Several of the map pieces and an armada of candles had escaped her pack and were floating on the surface. “I’m telling you the way out is some sort of magical item hidden in that chest, so once more I’m ordering you to open it!”

BOOM!

The creature had returned to the little door, and the two braces bucked and threatened to splinter. The water was nearly knee deep.

“Okay, forget it,” Myra said. “I’m begging you to open it.”

“We don’t need the treasure,” Wilmer yelled. “We need to get out! It’s one of them tests, ain’t it? You’re just letting your greed get the best of you. If we open the chest, there could be some kind of explosion that traps us.” He looked up at the ceiling. “Maybe kill us too.”

“You know, there’s really no reason to believe we have only one choice,” Myra said.

“You were the one who suggested it,” Hadrian reminded her.

“I know, and maybe it’s true, but maybe it isn’t. Everything up to this point could have been designed to frighten us away. We might be able to just open the chest, grab the treasure, unlock the door, run out into the beautiful mountain meadow where we left our horses, and all live happily ever after.”

“Are you still drinking that stuff?” Royce asked.
“No!” she shouted. Then a melancholy looked crossed her face. “Hadrian threw away the last bottle that the faerie king gave me.” She shot Hadrian a wicked stare.

“How many times must I tell you,” Hadrian said. “That thing wasn’t a faerie king, and what you were drinking certainly wasn’t wine.”

BOOM!

The room shook, and a good-sized chunk of rock punched out of the wall. The spray of water became a torrent.

“Time’s up,” Royce said, as the water began to rise at an alarming speed.

“Open the chest!” Myra shouted.

“For the love of Maribor, open the door or we’ll all die!” Wilmer cried.

Royce turned to Hadrian and in a low voice asked, “What would you do?”

Hadrian looked at the chest, which supported one of the few remaining undisturbed candles; most of the rest had been snuffed out by the rising water. Then he glanced at the giant steel door and finally at the lever and the chain leading to the ceiling where the keystone held everything in place. “I think Wilmer is right.”

“The door it is,” Royce said.
“No, that’s not what I meant.” Hadrian shook his head. “I mean he was right about not opening the chest. Only a greedy person would do that, and I’m starting to think the jester set this whole thing up to make a deliberate point. So the answer won’t be greed.”

“Right—so we open the door,” Royce waded a step forward, through waist-deep water, reaching for his tools.

“No, not the door. Only a coward would choose that door.”

“You aren’t planning to fight that thing out there, are you? Because I don’t think you’re up to it.”

“No, that’s not what I’m suggesting.”

“So, what are you suggesting? And I would appreciate it if you hurried the explanation. We’re running out of time,” Royce said.

Wilmer and Myra nodded their agreement as they waded closer to hear Hadrian over the frothy roar.

“Think about it. The dwarf stole the treasure, and then tore the map into eight parts. He had the pieces delivered to the nobles who he’d been forced to entertain for years. I suspect dwarves know a lot about greed. I’ll bet most of those nobles, and their descendants, hunted and killed each other over the centuries while collecting the pieces. Just like Myra did. But we’ve been through this place. It would have taken a legion of dwarves to make. Consider what kind of mastermind created it. Do you think the jester was just some clown?”

32
“No time for questions, just tell us, okay?”

“I think you were right, Myra. The dwarf was special—a noble or king perhaps. Maybe he had been hauled to the imperial court to be humiliated by a bunch of greedy cowards—and this—all this is his revenge. The right choice isn’t the chest or the door.”

Royce’s eyes tracked from the chest, to the door, and finally to the chain that led to the lever, which by then had disappeared below the water’s surface.

Royce smiled. “Only a fool would pull the lever.”

“Exactly.”

Royce moved to where the chain disappeared. Hadrian joined his friend, which was easy since he was floating.

“Wait!” Myra shouted. She was looking up and swam deeper into the shadows of the room. Between the rising water and the growing dark, Hadrian lost sight of her. “There’s a key hanging from the ceiling right above the chest now! Look! The banging must have made it slip down.”

“There’s one above the door too!” Wilmer shouted, swimming away and disappearing into the growing darkness as another candle hissed out.

Royce ignored them and started to reach down.

“Wait,” Hadrian told him, then shouted. “Come back! We’re pulling the lever!”
Hadrian noticed the water rising frighteningly fast. Did one of them do something to cause that? He couldn’t tell, couldn’t see them. Wilmer would be at the door by then all the way on the far side. Myra was likely in the center of the room, just a few dozen feet away, but the water had already snuffed out almost all of the candles. When it reached the ceiling, and the last one went out, they would never find their way back. Even if they knew how to swim, it would be impossible with only a single breath of air. Still he waited while the water level consumed chain links, ticking out the seconds.

“Can you hear me?” Hadrian yelled.

“They aren’t coming,” Royce said, looking impatient as the two bobbed closer to the ceiling.

“Do it!” Hadrian shouted.

“You sure?”

“No, but do it anyway.”

“Good enough for me.”

Royce disappeared below the surface.

The chain stretched taut. The keystone was yanked free and fell into the froth. Hadrian braced himself for the ceiling’s collapse, but none of the other stones moved.

“It’s an exit!” Royce shouted the moment his head broke the surface. “Take a breath and swim!”
“Broken leg. Bad arm. And I can’t see in the dark the way you can. Maybe you should just—”

“Shut up and hold your breath.”

The water rose, and the last candle was snuffed out as the room topped off. Hadrian had seen no sign of Myra or Wilmer.

He struggled to find the hole in the darkness, his fingers fumbling over rough stone. Grabbing him from behind, Royce shoved Hadrian into the opening where their heads broke the surface. With the room below filled, the water had nowhere else to go and surged up the narrow shaft, bubbling, frothing like a fountain and lifting the two up with it.

“Did you see them?” Hadrian asked. “Did you see Myra or Wilmer?”

From somewhere above, a white light shone enough for Hadrian to see Royce’s face. He was grimacing. “The door and the chest were both open.”

“And? Did they get out?”

“In a way, I suppose. Wilmer’s head was smiling at least.”

“What about Myra?”

“You don’t want to know.”

They spilled out into another chamber, where the water filled a basin that formed a small pool. When the water rose high enough to reach the chiseled edge, it stopped.
The light came from the full moon overhead. They were in a beautiful domed chamber with a crystal roof that allowed the moonlight to illuminate the interior. The space was circular and in the center was the unmistakable shape of a stone coffin. On the far side, Hadrian saw a door, which lacked any sort of latch, lever, or knob. In the very center was a tiny keyhole.

The chamber, vast, flat, and sparsely adorned, possessed an unexpected atmosphere of tranquility. Unlike any room they had visited since descending into the jester's cave, this space felt safe, even hallowed.

Royce and Hadrian glanced at each other, then back at the center of the pool they had just climbed out of. They waited. The surface remained undisturbed except for a single candle that floated, listing to one side. Beyond that, not even a bubble. It could have been a mirror. Slowly they got up. Royce lent Hadrian an arm, and together they made their way out of the pool.

“Look.” Royce pointed out magnificent carvings in the stone walls surrounding the chamber. “This joker just had all kinds of time, didn’t he?”

Hadrian was still looking back at the water.

“If either of them had been at the lever while we were at the door or chest, they wouldn’t have hesitated,” Royce said. “Myra would’ve jumped at the chance to rid herself of us, ensuring she got all the treasure, and Wilmer didn’t have the courage to wait.”

As much as Hadrian wanted to deny it, Royce was right. They had made their choices.
With his partner’s help, they moved to the coffin. Etchings similar to those Royce had pointed out adorned its side. Some of the markings appeared to be writing, but not in a language Hadrian could read. “Pretty,” he said, wiping off the dust.

Together they lifted the lid.

Inside lay a small body, wrapped and decayed. At his head was a multicolored hat with bells, at his feet, a silver box. Royce carefully removed the little container, took a step away, and set it down beneath a shaft of moonlight. The box had no lock, just a simple clasp and hinge. Tilting the lid back, they found the interior lined with fine blue velvet. Inside rested a small stone tablet and a key. Carved into the stone were four sentences that Hadrian could read.

Cowardice and greed will drown one’s soul.
The greatest treasure a person can possess is freedom.
I stole mine by playing the fool.
Now, so have you.

Royce took the key and, with Hadrian in tow, placed it in the lock. A single click echoed. The door swung open, revealing a mountain trail and a starry night.

Hadrian looked behind them.

“What?” Royce asked.

“We should put the box back.”

“Why?”
Hadrian shrugged. “Just seems right. After all we went through with the jester. I feel we owe it to him.”

Royce shook his head. “The little monster tormented us for days—tried to kill us—came damn close.”

“He just wanted justice, or to put it in your language, revenge.”

“That’s fine, only we never did anything to him. We weren’t even after the treasure. It was just a job.”

“Maybe that’s why we got out.”

Royce sighed. “Give me the damn thing.” He replaced the box, closed the coffin, and rejoined Hadrian, who waited leaning against the door. Outside, the night air was sweet with the scent of pine.

Hadrian gave Royce a surprised look when he returned.

“What?”

“I didn’t expect you’d really put it back,” Hadrian admitted, as he wrapped an arm around his friend and the two stepped out, letting the door close behind them.

Royce shrugged. “I owed you.”

“Owed me? For what?”
Royce pulled his hood up, covering his features as the two limped out into a lovely summer’s night. “I would have picked the chest.”