

VOLUME THREE OF THE
RIYRIA CHRONICLES

The DEATH *of*
DULGATH



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN



The DEATH *of* DULGATH



PRAISE FOR MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

“This epic fantasy showcases the arrival of a master storyteller.” — Library Journal on *Theft of Swords*

“A delightful, entertaining and page-turning read that reminds us just how enjoyable, and how good The Riyria Revelations series is. A must-buy for all fantasy lovers.” — The Founding Fields on *Rise of Empire*

“Heir of Novron is the conclusion to the Riyria Revelations, cementing it in a position as a new class of modern fantasy: traditional in setting, but extremely unconventional in, well, everything else.” — Drying Ink on *Heir of Novron*

“Snappy banter, desperate stakes, pulse pounding sword play, and good old fashioned heroics are all on full display here.” — 52 Book Reviews on *The Crown Tower*

“With less gore and a smaller cast of characters than George R.R. Martin’s “Song of Ice & Fire” but equally satisfying, Sullivan’s epic fantasy will be gaining fans at exponential rates.” — Library Journal on *The Rose and the Thorn*

“This is social science fiction that H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov could have written, with the cultural touchstones of today. A modernized classic, Hollow World is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers.” — Staffer’s Book Reviews on *Hollow World*

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MICHAEL'S NOVELS INCLUDE:

The First Empire Series: *Age of Myth* • *Age of Swords* • *Age of War* • *Age of Legends* • *Age of Empires*

The Riyria Revelations: *Theft of Swords* • *Rise of Empire* • *Heir of Novron*

The Riyria Chronicles: *The Crown Tower* • *The Rose and the Thorn* • *The Death of Dulgath*

Standalone Titles: *Hollow World*

ABOUT THE DEATH OF DULGATH

(from the back cover)

THREE TIMES THEY TRIED TO KILL HER. **T**HEN A PROFESSIONAL WAS HIRED. **S**O WAS **R**IYRIA.

When the last member of the oldest noble family in Avryn is targeted for assassination, Riyria's Royce and Hadrian are hired to foil the plot. Three years have passed since Hadrian, the war-weary mercenary, and Royce, the cynical ex-assassin, joined forces to become rogues-for-hire. All has gone well until they're asked to help prevent a murder. Now they must venture into an ancient corner of the world to save a mysterious woman who knows more about Royce than is safe and cares less about herself than is sane.

From the best-selling author of the Riyria novels comes the third installment of The Riyria Chronicles. Although part of a series, it's designed to thrill both new readers looking for a fun, fast-paced fantasy and Riyria veterans wishing to reunite with old friends. For those wishing to experience the entire Riyria saga, two reading options exist:

Publication Order: *Theft of Swords* • *Rise of Empire* • *Heir of Novron* • *The Crown Tower* • *The Rose and the Thorn* • *The Death of Dulgath*

Chronological Order: *The Crown Tower* • *The Rose and the Thorn* • *The Death of Dulgath* • *Theft of Swords* • *Rise of Empire* • *Heir of Novron*



WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NOVELS

The First Empire

Age of Myth (June 2016) • *Age of Swords* • *Age of War* • *Age of Legends* • *Age of Empire*

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (*The Crown Conspiracy* and *Avempartha*)

Rise of Empire (*Nyphron Rising* and *The Emerald Storm*)

Heir of Novron (*Wintertide* and *Percepliquis*)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

The Death of Dulgath

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

ANTHOLOGIES

Unfettered: The Jester

Unbound: The Game

Unfettered II: Little Wren and the Big Forest

Blackguards: Professional Integrity

The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria

Triumph Over Tragedy: Traditions

The Fantasy Faction Anthology: Autumn Mists

Help Fund My Robot Army: Be Careful What You Wish For

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've been locked in a room for over two-and-a-half years, the only light—the soft glow of a computer screen. That's how I remember it, anyway. After finishing *Hollow World*, I began working on what was supposed to be a trilogy called *The First Empire*. Three books became five, and two-and-a-half years slipped away.

Readers of *The Riyria Chronicles* began requesting book three immediately after *The Rose and the Thorn*'s release in September 2013. The *Chronicles*—previously expected to be a flop because prequels are the third rail of publishing—did surprisingly well. I apologize to everyone who has been anxiously awaiting this book, but at least the wait is over!

If you are new to the *Riyria* stories, you certainly can start with this book. The first two *Riyria Chronicles* told the origin story of how Royce and Hadrian met. With that tale told, this book was freed to tell a standalone adventure. If you do want to read other *Riyria* novels, then you should know there are two different ways you can approach the saga.

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Chronological Order: *The Crown Tower* • *The Rose and the Thorn* • *The Death of Dulgath* • *Theft of Swords* • *Rise of Empire* • *Heir of Novron*

Personally, I prefer order of publication, but I've heard from people who have read chronologically and they've been equally pleased with the experience.

If you are wondering if there will be a next Royce and Hadrian story, the answer is: I just don't know. As I've mentioned elsewhere, I'm protective of the duo and would rather have them leave early than stay too long. Because of that, I never know if there will be more until after a *Chronicle*'s release. If you want to advocate for more, by all means drop me an email. Even if you don't, you can still reach out. I always love hearing from people. My address is: michael.sullivan.dc@gmail.com.

One of the really cool things about this project was the ability to showcase an aspiring writer's work. We asked for submissions from anyone and everyone. I sifted through 176 entries and narrowed it down to fifteen good stories. From there it went to the final three. Robin helped me decide on the winner. I wish all of them could have been included—each one was deserving. In today's super-saturated world of publishing, exposure often makes the difference between success and failure. Robin and I hope that you'll like the story we've included, and if you do, please look for more from T.C. Powell and help spread the word.

One last thing I should mention. If you are interested in learning more about the novel creation process, I've created an e-book entitled: *The Making of the Death of Dulgath*. It's free, so just drop me an email at the address above. Some people might find the process interesting.

Now turn the page, tap the screen, or adjust the volume. Old friends are waiting to take you on a new adventure.

Thanks for all the amazing support!

Michael J. Sullivan

October 2013

*To 1,876 generous backers
and one amazingly supportive woman.
I couldn't have done it without you.*

MAPS

It is difficult to get high resolution maps to show up well on some e-reader devices. For this reason, there are high resolution copies of the maps online, which you can reference at your pleasure. They can be found at: <http://www.michaelsullivan-author.com/maps.html>. You can also access them at the following links: [Map of Elan](#) | [Details of Dulgath Region](#).



Detail Map of the area where *The Death of Dulgath* takes place.



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The DEATH *of*
DULGATH



BY
MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

RIYRIA
ENTERPRISES





CHAPTER ONE
THE NEW SIGN

If anyone had asked Royce Melborn what he hated most at that moment, he would've said dogs. Dogs and dwarves topped his list, both equally despised for having so much in common—each was short, vicious, and inexcusably hairy. Royce's contempt for them had grown over the years for the same reason: They had caused him an incalculable amount of grief and pain.

That night it was a dog.

At first, he thought the furry creature on the mattress in the third-floor bedroom was a rodent. The dark thing with a curled tail and flat nose was small enough to be a good-sized sewer rat. Royce was pondering how a rat had gotten into a posh place like the Hemley Estate when it rose to its feet. The two stared at each other, Royce in his hooded cloak holding the diary and the mongrel on its four tiny legs. One second of held breath lasted long enough for Royce to realize his mistake. He cringed, knowing what would come next, what *always* came next, and the little beast didn't disappoint.

The mutt began barking. Not a respectable growl or deep-throated woof but an ear-piercing series of high-pitched yaps.

Definitely not a rat. Why couldn't you be a rat? I never have problems with rats.

Royce reached for his dagger, but the rodent-dog leapt away, its tiny nails skittering on the hardwood. He hoped it would flee. Even if the little monster woke its master, it wouldn't be able to explain that a hooded stranger had invaded Lady Martel's boudoir. Aroused from a blissful sleep, the owner might throw something at the mutt to shut it up. But this was a dog, after all, and like dwarves they never did what he wanted. Instead, the animal stayed a safe distance away, yipping its turnip-sized head off.

How can such a tiny thing make so much noise?

The sound echoed off marble and mahogany, amplifying into a wailing alarm.

Royce did the only thing he could: He leapt out the window. Not his planned exit, not even his third choice, but the poplar tree was within jumping distance. He caught a broad branch, pleased it didn't break under his weight. The tree, however, shook, rustling loudly in the quiet of the dark courtyard. By the time his feet hit the ground, Royce wasn't surprised to hear—

"Stop right there!" The husky voice was perfectly suited for the job.

Royce froze. The man coming at him held a crossbow: cocked, loaded, and aimed at his chest. The guard looked disappointingly competent; even his uniform was neat. Every button accounted for and glinting in the moonlight, each crease sharp as a blade. The guy had to be an overachiever, or worse—a professional soldier reduced to guard duty.

"Keep your hands where I can see them."

Not at all an idiot.

Behind the first guard came a second. He trotted over with heavy footfalls and a jangling of strap and metal chains. Taller than the first, he wasn't so well attired. The sleeves on his coat were too

short, the lack of a button ruined the symmetry of the side-by-side brass rows, and a dark stain marred his collar. Unlike the first guard, ~~this second one didn't have a crossbow.~~ Instead, he carried three swords: a short one on his left hip, a slightly longer one on the right, and a huge spadone blade on his back. These weren't the weapons of Hemley guards, but the man holding Royce at bay didn't spare a glance when the second guard jogged up.

Drawing the shortest of his three swords, this second man didn't point it at Royce. Instead, he placed the sword tip against the back of the first guard's neck. "Put the bow down," Hadrian said.

The man hesitated only an instant before letting the crossbow fall. The impact jarred the trigger and sent the bolt whispering through the grass of the manicured lawn. Behind them, the rodent-dog still yapped, the sound muffled by the walls of the mansion. Now that his partner had things in hand, Royce tucked the book into his belt and glanced toward the manor. No lights. Nobles were sound sleepers.

Turning back, he found Hadrian still holding the fastidious guard at sword's point. "Kill him and let's get going."

The guard stiffened.

"No," Hadrian said with the indignation Royce would've expected if he'd asked his partner to throw out a good bottle of wine.

Royce sighed. "Not again. Why do we always have this argument?"

The ex-crossbowman had his shoulders hunched, hands in fists, still expecting the thrust that would end his life. "It's all right. I won't raise the alarm."

Royce had seen the look many times and thought the guy was doing well. No blubbering, no screams, no begging. He hated when his victims fell to their knees and whimpered, although he had to admit that made killing them easier. "Shut up," he ordered, then glared at Hadrian. "Kill him and let's go. We don't have time for a debate."

"He dropped the bow," Hadrian pointed out. "We don't need to kill him."

Royce shook his head. There was that word again—*need*. Hadrian used it often, as if justification were a requirement for killing. "He's seen me."

"So? You're a guy in a dark hood. There's hundreds of men in hoods."

"Can I say something?" the guard asked.

"No," Royce snapped.

"Yes," Hadrian replied.

"I have a wife." The man's voice shook.

"Man's got a wife." Hadrian nodded sympathetically while still holding the blade against the guard's neck.

"Kids, too—three of 'em."

"Maribor's beard, he's got *three* kids," Hadrian said with a decisive tone and drew back his sword.

The guard let out a breath. Somehow, he and Hadrian both assumed that the ability to reproduce had some relevance in this situation. It didn't.

"And I've got a horse," Royce declared with the same righteousness. "Which I'll ride away on just as soon as you kill this poor bastard. Stop dragging this out. *You're* being cruel, not me. Get it over with."

"I'm not going to kill him."

The guard's eyes widened in hopeful anticipation; a tiny smile of relief tugging at the corners of his mouth. He looked at Royce for confirmation, for a sign he would indeed see another sunrise.

Royce heard the sound of a door bursting open, and someone called out, "Ralph?" Lights were coming on in the house. Seven windows on four floors glowed with candles.

Maybe it just took that long to light them.

“Here!” Ralph shouted back. “Intruders! Get help!”

No, of course he wouldn't raise the alarm.

That did it. Royce reached for his dagger.

Before he touched the handle, Hadrian clubbed Ralph with the pommel of his sword. The guard dropped to the grass beside his spent bow. Whether Hadrian had hit the man as a result of his shout or because Royce went for his dagger was impossible to tell. Royce wanted to think the former, but suspected the latter.

“Let's get out of here,” Hadrian said, stepping over Ralph and pulling Royce by the arm.

I wasn't the one delaying us, Royce thought, but he didn't bother arguing. Where one crossbow existed, there would be others. Crossbows were neither short nor hairy, but ought to be on his list. He and Hadrian ran along the shadow of the wall, skirting the blooming rosebushes, although Royce didn't know why they bothered. In his sentry getup, Hadrian sounded like a fully tacked carriage horse.

Melengar's Galilin Province was a tranquil, agrarian region not prone to the threat of thievery, and the estate of Lord Hemley suffered from woefully ineffective security. While Royce had spotted as many as six guards on various scouting missions, that night there had only been three: a sentry at the gate, Ralph, and the dog.

“Ralph!” someone shouted again. The voice was distant, but it carried across the open lawn.

Behind them in the darkness, five lanterns bobbed. They moved in the haphazard pattern of a bewildered search party or a host of drunken fireflies.

“Aaron, wake everyone up!”

“Let Mister Hipple loose,” a woman's voice shouted in a vindictive tone. “He'll find them.”

Above it all, the incessant yipping of the rodent-dog continued—Mister Hipple, no doubt.

The front gate was unmanned. The guard stationed there must have run for help after Ralph's shout. As they passed through unopposed, Royce marveled at Hadrian's luck; the man was a walking rabbit's foot. Three years in Royce's School of Pragmatism had barely scratched his partner's idealistic enamel. If Mister Hipple had been a larger, more aggressive animal, they might not have escaped so easily. And while Hadrian was more than capable of killing any dog, Royce wondered if he would have.

It has puppies, Royce! Three of 'em!

The two reached the safety of the dense thicket where they'd left their horses. Hadrian's was called Dancer, but Royce never saw any point in naming his. While stowing the diary in a saddlebag, Royce asked, “How many years were you a soldier?”

“In Avryn or Calis?”

“All of it.”

“Five, but the last two years were...well, less formal.”

“Five years? You fought in the military for *five years*? Saw battles, right?”

“Oh yeah—brutal ones.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You're mad I didn't kill Ralph, aren't you?”

Royce paused a moment to listen. No sound of pursuit, no lights in the trees, not even the yips of manic rodent-dog chasing them. He swung a leg over the saddle and slid his foot into the stirrup on the other side. “You think?”

“Look, I just wanted to do *one* lousy job where nobody got killed.” Hadrian stripped off the uniform's waistcoat and replaced it with his wool shirt and leather tunic from his saddlebag.

“Why?”

Hadrian shook his head. “Never mind.”

“You’re being ridiculous. We’ve done plenty of jobs where we didn’t kill anyone. Anyway, it’s fine.” Royce grabbed his reins, which he kept knotted together.

“It’s what? What did you say?”

“Fine. It’s fine.”

“Fine?” Hadrian raised a brow.

Royce nodded. “Are you going deaf?”

“I just...” Hadrian stared up at him, puzzled. Then a scowl took over. “You’re coming back later, aren’t you?”

The thief didn’t reply.

“Why?”

Royce turned his horse. “Just being thorough.”

Hadrian climbed into his own saddle. “You’re being an ass. There’s no reason to. Ralph will never pose any threat.”

Royce shrugged. “You can’t know that. Do you understand the meaning of the word *thorough*?”

Hadrian frowned. “Do you understand the meaning of the word *ass*? You don’t need to kill Ralph. *There it was again*—need.

“Let’s argue later. I’m not killing him tonight.”

“Fine.” Hadrian huffed, and together they trotted out of the brush and back onto the path that led the road.



The two rode side by side on the open lane. Rain began falling before they reached the King’s Road. The sun was up by then, although it was difficult to tell with the heavy clouds leaving the world a charcoal smear. Blissfully, Hadrian remained silent. In any given tavern, whether he knew someone or not, Royce’s partner would strike up a conversation. The man would talk to strangers with the ease of reunited friends. He’d clap them on the back, buy a round of drinks, and listen to riveting tales such as the one about the goat who had repeatedly gotten into a neighbor’s garden.

When just the two of them were out on the road, Hadrian commented on trees, cows, hillsides, clouds, how hot or cold the weather was, and the status of everything from his boots—which needed new soles—to his short sword—which could use a better wrap for the handle. Nothing was too insignificant to warrant remark. The abundance of bumblebees or the lack of the same would launch him into a twenty-minute discourse. Royce never spoke during any of it—didn’t want to encourage his partner—but Hadrian carried on about his bees, the flowers, and the mud, another favorite topic of self-discussion.

Despite his indefatigable insistence on blabbering to himself, Hadrian was always silenced by rain. Perhaps it put him in a bad mood or the pattering made it difficult to hear himself. Whatever the reason, Hadrian Blackwater was quiet in the rain, so Royce loved stormy days. Luck remained with him nearly the whole way home. Melengar was experiencing one of its wettest springs in recent memory.

Royce looked over from time to time as they rode. Hadrian kept his head down, his hood crushed and sagging with the weight of water.

“Why don’t you ever talk when it rains?” Royce finally asked.

Hadrian hooked a thumb under the front of his hood, lifting it to peer out. “What do you mean?”

“You talk all the time, but not when it rains—why?”

Hadrian shrugged. “Didn’t know it bothered you.”

“It doesn’t. What bothers me is when you blather nonstop.”

Hadrian peered over, and a little smile grew in the shadow of his sopping hood. “You like my talking, don’t you?”

“I just got done saying—”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t have said anything if you really liked the silence.”

“Trust me,” Royce said. “I *really* like the silence.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What’s *uh-huh* supposed to mean?”

Hadrian’s smile widened into a grin. “For months we’ve ridden together while I’ve held whole conversations by myself. You’ve never joined in, and some of them were really good, too. You haven’t said a word, but now that I’ve stopped—look at you...yapping away.”

“A single question isn’t *yapping away*.”

“But you expressed an interest. That’s huge!”

Royce shook his head. “I just thought there might be something wrong with you—obviously I was right.”

Hadrian continued to grin with an overly friendly look of self-satisfaction, as if he’d scored a point in some imaginary contest. Royce pulled his own hood down, shutting Hadrian out.

The horses plodded along through mud and occasionally gravel, shaking the water from their heads and jangling their bridles.

“Sure is coming down, isn’t it?” Hadrian said.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Farmer’s wife back in Olmsted said it’s the wettest spring in a decade.”

“I’ll slit your throat as you sleep. I really will.”

“She served soup in cups because her husband and Jacob—that’s her sleep-all-day-drink-all-night brother-in-law—broke her good ceramic bowls.”

Royce kicked his horse and trotted away.



Royce and Hadrian were back on Wayward Street in the Lower Quarter of Medford. Spring was nearly over; in other parts of the world, flowering trees were busily trading pink petals for green leaves, and warm breezes blew earthy scents while farmers rushed to finish their planting. On Wayward, it meant four days of steady rain had once again made a murky pond in the low spot at the end of the street. And as usual, the water level reached the open sewer that ran behind the buildings. Euphemistically known as the Bridges, the sewer bled into the growing lake, spreading the reek of human and animal waste.

The rain was still coming down as Royce, Gwen, and Hadrian stood on the planked porch of Medford House, staring across the muddy pond at the new sign over the door of the tavern. A fine lacquered board hung from a wrought-iron elbow brace, displaying the crisp image of a vibrant scarlet bloom and a curling stem that sported a single sharp thorn. Surrounding the flower were the elegantly scripted words: THE ROSE AND THE THORN

The sign looked oddly out of place in front of the dingy tavern with its saddle-backed roof of mismatched shingles and weathered timbers. For all its dilapidation, the alehouse and eatery had substantially improved. Only a year before, what had been known as The Hideous Head needed no illustration to explain itself to its illiterate patrons. Grime-covered windows and muck-splattered walls told everyone what they needed to know. Since gaining control of the tavern, Gwen had cleaned

up the dirt and the muck, but the real improvements had been inside. The new sign was the first enhancement to the exterior.

“Beautiful,” Hadrian said.

“It will look better in sunlight.” Gwen folded her arms in judgment. “The blossom turned out perfect. Emma did the drawing and Dixon helped with the painting. Rose would have liked it, I think.” Gwen looked up at the dark clouds. “I hope she somehow sees—sees her rose hanging above Grue’s old door.”

“I’m sure she can,” Royce told her.

Hadrian stared at him.

“What?” Royce shot back.

“Since when do you believe in an afterlife?” Hadrian asked.

“I don’t.”

“Then why did you say—”

Royce slapped his hand on the porch rail, which had just enough rain on it to splatter. “You see?” he appealed to Gwen. “This is what I have to deal with. He admonishes me about my behavior. *Why can’t you smile*, he says. *Why didn’t you wave back to the kid? Would it have killed you to be polite to the old woman? Why can’t you ever say a kind word?* And now, when I try to be a little considerate, what do I get?” Royce held out both of his palms, as if presenting Hadrian to her for the first time.

Hadrian continued to stare at him, but now with pursed lips, as if to say, *Really?* Instead, he replied, “You’re only being nice because she’s here.”

“Me?” Gwen asked. Standing between them, she swiveled her head to look from one to the other, as innocent as a dewdrop. “What do I have to do with this?”

Hadrian rolled his eyes, threw his head back, and laughed. “You *are* a pair. Whenever the two of you are together, it’s like I’m with strangers—no, not strangers—opposites. He becomes a gentleman and you feign ignorance of men.”

Royce and Gwen maintained their defensively blank looks.

Hadrian chuckled. “Fine. Let today henceforth be known as Opposites Day. And as such I’m going across the Perfume Sea to have a drink at the Palace of Fine Food and Clean Linens.”

“Hey!” Gwen snapped, bringing her hands to her hips in a huff of indignation.

“Yeah!” Royce said. “Who’s the rude one now?”

“Stop it. You’re scaring me.” Hadrian walked off, leaving them alone.

“I missed you,” Gwen told him after Hadrian had gone inside, her eyes on the rain as it boiled the giant puddle.

“Was only a few days,” Royce replied.

“I know. Still missed you. I always do. I get scared sometimes—worried something bad will happen.”

“Worried?”

She shrugged. “You might get killed, be captured, or maybe meet a beautiful woman and never come back.”

“How can you worry? You know the future, right?” he joked. “Hadrian said you read his palm once.”

Gwen didn’t laugh. Instead, she said, “I’ve read many palms.” She looked up at the sign with the single blooming rose, and sadness crossed her face.

Royce felt like stabbing himself. “Sorry, I...I didn’t mean...”

“It’s all right.”

It didn’t feel all right. Royce’s muscles tightened. Both hands became fists, and he was glad she wasn’t looking at him. Gwen had a way of seeing through his defenses. To everyone else he was a

solid wall fifty feet high with razor-sharp spikes on top and a moat at its base; to Gwen he was a curtainless window with a broken latch.

“But I do worry,” she said. “It’s not like you’re a cobbler or bricklayer.”

“You shouldn’t. These days I don’t do anything worth worrying about. Hadrian won’t let us. I’m stuck with fetching lost possessions, stopping feuds—did you know we helped a farmer plow his field?”

“Albert got you a job plowing?”

“No, Hadrian did. Farmer took sick, and his wife was desperate. They owe money.”

“And *you* plowed a field?”

Royce smirked at her.

“So Hadrian plowed and you watched.”

“I tell you, the things he does.” Royce sighed. “Just doesn’t make sense sometimes.”

Gwen smiled at him. She was likely siding with Hadrian; most people did. Everyone thought good deeds were great—publicly at least—and her expression was one of patient understanding, as if she were too polite to say so. It didn’t matter. She was smiling at him, and for that brief moment it wasn’t raining. For that instant the sun shone, and he had never been an assassin and she had never been a prostitute.

He reached out, wanted desperately to touch her and hold that moment in his arms, to kiss that smile and make it more than a fleeting brilliance he would otherwise only recall as a dying spark. Then he stopped.

Gwen looked down at his faltering hands, then up at his face. “What is it?”

Is that disappointment in her voice?

“We’re not alone,” he said, nodding across the street to where three wretched figures moved in the shadows near the kitchen door. “You need to talk to your bartender. Dixon is dumping scraps outside the door, and you’re drawing flies.”

Gwen looked over. “Flies?”

“Elves. They’re pawing through your garbage.”

Gwen squinted. “Oh, I didn’t even see them.” She waved a hand. “It’s fine. I told Dixon to give them any leftover food. I hope he’s not just throwing it in the mud. I’ll need to get a barrel or set out table.”

Royce grimaced while watching the miserable creatures. The rags clinging to their bodies were little more than torn scraps pretending to be clothes. Soaked with the rain, the elves looked like skin-wrapped skeletons. Feeding them was an example of cruelty by kindness. Gwen gave them false hope. Better to let them die. Better for them, better for everyone.

He looked at her. “You realize they’ll just come back. You’ll never get rid of them.”

Gwen nudged him and pointed up Wayward Street. “Albert’s here.”

On foot and veiled behind the hazy curtain of solid rain, Albert Winslow approached the dreaded pond with disgust. Soaked through and through, the viscount’s new brimless hat lay flat against his head, sliding down one side of his face. His cloak was plastered to his body. He looked at the murky lake and then across at them with a frown. “If it’s always going to be like this,” he called across, “can’t you put in a bridge for your moat, Gwen?”

“I don’t have a charter governing the street,” she called back. “Or the Bridges, for that matter. You’ll need to take that up with the king, or at the very least the Lower Quarter Merchants’ Guild.”

Albert looked down at the churning pond and grimaced as he waded in. “I want a horse!” he shouted at the clouds as the water reached the middle of his calves. “I’m a viscount, for Maribor’s sake! I shouldn’t have to wade through a sewer just to report in.”

“Can’t afford three,” Royce replied. “Can barely afford feed for the two.”

“Can now.” Albert pulled back his cloak to reveal a purse. He shook it. “We got paid.”



Six shiny gold coins stamped with the Melengar Falcon and twenty silver bearing the same image lay on the table in the Dark Room. The only room without a single window, it once was used for all manner of kitchen storage. Gwen had transformed the space to serve as the headquarters for Riyria, Hadrian and Hadrian’s rogues-for-hire operation. She’d added a fireplace for warmth and light, and the table where Albert had emptied his purse.

Royce brought over a candle. Every kingdom and city-state produced their own coins, but the tenent was international and supposed to be of consistent weight—equal to a typical robin’s egg. A silver tenent weighed the same as a gold tenent, but it was larger and thicker to make up for the lighter metal. That was the intention, and, for the most part, it held true. These felt to be honest coins.

“You got away clean, by the way.” Albert stood by the fire and pulled off his sodden hat. “Lady Martel either doesn’t know her diary was taken or is too embarrassed to report it. I’m guessing the latter.”

Albert began to wring his hat out onto the floor.

“No, no, no!” Gwen shouted at him. “Here—give me that. Oh, and just get out of the rest of your things. They have to be washed. Dixon, can you please get a blanket?”

Albert raised his brows at Gwen as she stood with hands out, waiting. He glanced at Royce and Hadrian with questions in his eyes. Neither said a word. Both responded with grins.

“Albert, do you really think you have anything I haven’t seen before?” Gwen asked.

Albert frowned, wiped the wet hair from his face, and began to unhook his doublet. “Anyway, as I was saying, Lord Hemley hasn’t called for so much as a search. According to our employer, Lady Constantine, Lady Martel only reported a nasty scare in the middle of the night that turned out to be nothing.”

“Nothing?” Royce asked.

“I’m not sure Ralph and Mister Hipple would agree,” Hadrian said.

“What kind of scare did she say they had?” Royce inquired.

Albert shrugged off the dripping brocade, which Gwen took. The big bartender returned with a blanket, and they traded material. “Can you please give this to Emma and ask her to do what she can?”

“Tell her to be careful,” Albert said. “That’s expensive.”

“We know,” Royce reminded him.

“Emma is experienced with brocade,” Gwen assured him as Dixon left. “Now let’s have those stockings and breeches.”

“Can I have a chair?”

“After the breeches are off.”

“What was the nasty scare Lady Martel mentioned?” Royce asked again.

“Oh—” Albert chuckled as he rolled off his long stockings. “She said a raccoon came in through the bedroom window and set her dog to barking. Hearing the noise, one of the grounds’ guards came running, and, in the dark, he banged his head against a poplar branch. He called out, thinking he’d been attacked.”

“*Thinking* he’d been attacked?” Royce asked.

“His story was that two guys broke in and threatened to kill him. Lady Martel called him delusional.”

Royce took a seat opposite the fire and tapped his fingertips together. He wondered what was in

that diary that made Lady Martel want to avoid an investigation.

Hadrian just laughed.

“What?” Albert asked, handing over his second stocking, which Gwen took with a look of disdain.

“Lady Martel just saved Ralph’s life,” Hadrian said.

“Oh really? Who’s *Ralph*?”

“The delusional guard. Royce has been waiting for the rain to stop, and then he was going to pay ole Ralph a visit.”

Albert clapped his hands together. “Then it’s a day for everyone to celebrate, isn’t it?”

“After the breeches are off.” Gwen scowled.

“Are you this way with *all* your customers?” Albert asked.

“You’re not a customer, Albert.”

“No—I’m a viscount.”

After a short pause, everyone burst out laughing. “All right, all right, here, take my trousers! Take them. What do I need trousers for? I’ve already lost all my dignity.”

“Who needs dignity when you have coin?” Royce tossed him a stack of silver pieces topped with gold.

Albert caught them as if he were a practiced juggler. Standing naked before the fire, he appraised the coins with a smile. “I’m noble once more!”

“Wrap this around you.” Gwen handed him the blanket. “We’ve seen enough of your nobility for one day.”

She gathered up the rest of his clothes and headed out.

Albert draped himself in the soft wool and sat in a chair as close to the hearth as he could get without setting himself on fire. Rubbing the coins between his fingers, he said, “Silver and gold are so pretty. It’s a shame you have to trade them away.”

“And these won’t last.” Royce sighed, then faced Albert. “At the rate we’ve been taking jobs, and the small purses, things are getting tight. We need something that pays more.”

“Actually, I have another job ready to go. This one is worth—get this—twenty *gold* tenents *plus* expenses. Which is good because it’s way down in southern Maranon.”

Royce and Hadrian sat up.

“That was fast,” Hadrian said. “You don’t normally work that hard.”

“True, but this one fell into our laps.” A drop of water slipped down Albert’s face, and he paused to scrub the wet from his hair with a corner of the blanket. “Sounds incredibly easy, too.”

“You’re not qualified to judge, Albert,” Royce said.

“Ah, but this one is. They don’t even want you to do anything.”

Royce leaned forward and eyed the viscount. “Who pays twenty yellow for nothing? What’s the job?”

“It seems that someone is trying to kill Lady Nysa Dulgath.”

“We aren’t guards for hire.”

“Oh, she has guards. Lady Dulgath is a countess and will soon be the ruler of a tiny province in the southwest corner of Maranon once she pledges fealty to King Vincent. Apparently her father, the Earl Beadle Dulgath, recently passed, and she’s his only child.”

“Was he murdered?” Royce asked.

“No. Old age. The fellow was ancient, nearly sixty. But someone has it out for his daughter. From what I’ve been told, there’ve been three attempts on her life in the last month. After those failures, they want a professional. That’s where you come in.” Albert looked squarely at Royce.

“I wouldn’t call assassinating a countess *nothing*. Besides, you know how he gets about those kinds of jobs.” Royce gestured toward Hadrian.

Albert waved a hand. “No, you misunderstand. You’re not being hired to kill her. Rumors say they’ve already hired someone.”

Royce shook his head. “Unless they went cheap, the hired hand is a bucketman for the Black Diamond. The BD and I have an understanding not to interfere with each other.”

“I remember,” Albert said. “But they don’t want you to catch the killer. Your job is to assess the situation and inform Sheriff Knox how *you* would go about killing Lady Dulgath so he can formulate plans to prevent it.”

“Why me?”

Albert smiled. “I let it slip that you used to be an assassin for the Black Diamond.”

Royce glared.

“No one in Maranon cares about what you’ve done elsewhere. These are nobles we’re talking about. Morality works on a sliding scale for them. They’re excited to have someone with experience.”

“Sounds...” Hadrian began and searched for the word.

“Suspicious,” Royce provided.

“I was thinking *odd*,” Hadrian said. “But yeah. It’s strange. Is it possible this sheriff is the one who wants her dead?”

“Unlikely. I’m not certain he even knows about this. He’s not the one who hired us. And I don’t think this client is in the habit of assassinating heads of state.”

“And who has? Hired us that is.”

Albert hesitated a moment, then said, “The Church of Nyphron.”



CHAPTER TWO

THE ARTIST

Sherwood Stow held his paintbrush with unconscious effort as he stared at Lady Nysa Dulgath. The woman stood ten feet away, one hand poised over her stomach and the other at her side, clasping a pair of riding gloves as if she were about to race off on a hunt. She stood divinely straight, chin high and level so the dangling pearl earrings hung in precise balance. Her hair was up, braided, coiled, and wreathed her head like a royal diadem. She wore an exquisite gold silk-brocade dress with billowing sleeves, and around her shoulders a grinning-faced fox stole curled, as if it, too, were delighted to be so near this magnificent woman. While the lady's gaze was regal in its elevated, distant focus, Sherwood's only regret was she wasn't looking at him. She was, in fact, staring over his head at the chandelier that hung at the center of her private study.

The room was small by Castle Dulgath standards. *Intimate* was how Sherwood thought of it, like a dressing room or a parlor used for courting. Even more so since parlors came staffed with chaperones and they were the only two present in the study.

"Why don't you look at me?" Sherwood asked.

"Is that a requirement?" the lady replied, her eyes fixed on the chandelier. Her lips held fast to an indifferent near-smile, the obligatory face of state. Usually he appreciated subjects who could maintain a certain statuesque quality while he painted, but she took the request to an extreme. Nysa wasn't posing for him; she was hiding.

"Let's say it's a request."

"Request denied." The words were as sweetly neutral as her lips, neither warm enough to suggest familiarity nor cold enough to imply displeasure.

I can't even tell if she's breathing.

Nysa was altogether too stiff. This, of course, was the image she wished to portray, but Sherwood Stow wasn't interested in painting the soon-to-be Countess of Dulgath. He was after the woman. And while he never spoke the name publicly, in his mind he always thought of her as Nysa—never Lady Dulgath.

The Dulgath line was an edifice, a monument, a dust-covered dynasty of renown. Nysa was a woman in her early twenties—he didn't know how early, difficult to tell because her body possessed youthful vigor, but her eyes were ancient. A beautiful and mysterious being of light, but her movements exposed the charade. Too graceful. Sherwood had known many women—ladies, princesses, even queens—but none possessed a fraction of her poise and elegance. Nysa was a spiraling leaf caught by a breeze, and if she landed on the surface of a placid lake she'd leave no ripple.

"Mister Stow, isn't it usually customary when painting to actually bring the brush to the canvas?" she said to the chandelier. "You've stood there for twenty minutes mixing paint and holding that bristled stick aloft, but never once have you employed it."

“How can you tell while looking at the chandelier?”

“Seeing and looking are unrelated. You, of all people, should know that.”

Sherwood nodded and once more added walnut oil to the thickening umber. His old master, Yardley, was no doubt heaving in his grave. Yardley had always insisted on working with egg tempera, but Sherwood preferred oil. Not only did it enable him to give a translucent depth in his portraits, but its slow drying time granted him the luxury to do...well...everything.

“Yes, indeed, and since you know that as well, you understand the necessity for my delay and the importance of going slow.”

“Slow doesn’t properly define you, Mister Stow. A bead of honey in winter is slow. It pours, as if with great reluctance, but it does pour. You, Mister Stow, are not a drizzle of honey. You’re a rock.”

“Pity. I do so like honey. Perhaps you could reconsider your assessment?”

“A rock, I say. A vast block of granite, immobile and resolute in your refusal to budge.”

“Am I, now?”

“How else do you account for two months of daily, hour-long sessions? That’s sixty hours. I’ve heard good artists have been known to finish a portrait in a week’s time.”

“True. True.” He tapped his chin with a finger, leaving a bit of paint. “I suppose the only explanation is I’m not a good artist.”

Sherwood corked his bottle of oil and set it back on the easel’s tray along with the stained rags and vials of pigments, some of which were deceptively expensive. Beyond the Sea—or Ultramarine—was the most prized because the stone used to make the dark blue paint had to cross the ocean from the same fabled land whence came the incomparable Montemorcey wine. The paint was worth twenty times its weight in gold. Luckily, few non-artists knew this or his brethren would be routinely beaten and robbed.

“You admit it then?”

“Absolutely, I’m not a *good* artist.” He used the rag he’d made from his last decent shirt to wipe oil that had dripped from the stem of his brush to his hands. No matter how much care he employed, his hands were magnets for paint and oil. “I’m the *best* artist.”

She let out an uncharacteristic puff, which was almost a laugh, while one delicate brow rose in skeptical declaration. “You are an arrogant man.”

Finally, a reaction.

“No, I’m confident; there is a difference. Arrogance is an unjustified belief in oneself. Confidence is the simple understanding of one’s abilities. I do not boast about being a great lover—although I very well may be. On that particular subject, I simply am not in a position to accurately judge. I leave that determination to the women I entertain.”

This time both of her brows rose, creating the tiniest crease in her forehead.

“But we were discussing art, and when it comes to that, I *am* an expert. So you can trust me when I say there isn’t a greater artist than I, and the reason I say that is because there is no finer judge of artistic merit than myself.”

“Mister Stow, I don’t believe I can trust you about art or anything else. How can I when you refuse to let me look at your work? You’ve denied everyone even a glimpse at your two-month masterpiece.”

“Truth isn’t created on schedules.”

“Truth? Is it truth you are painting? I thought it was me.”

“I am painting you—or at least trying to—but you are causing the delay by your refusal to cooperate.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You hide from me.”

“I—” Her eyes almost shifted. He saw the pupils quiver with the struggle. Biting her lower lip, she

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