

## Chapter 1

# Colnora

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As the man stepped out of the shadows, Wyatt Deminthal knew this would be the worst, and possibly the last day of his life. Dressed in raw wool and rough leather, the man was vaguely familiar, a face seen briefly by candlelight over two years ago—a face Wyatt hoped he would never see again. The man carried three swords, each one battered, the metal dull, the grips sweat-stained and frayed. Taller than Wyatt by nearly a foot, with broader shoulders and powerful hands, he stood with his weight distributed across the balls of his feet. His eyes locked on Wyatt the way cats stare at mice.

“Baron Delano DeWitt of Dagastan?” It was not a question, but an accusation.

Wyatt felt his heart shudder. Even after recognizing the face, a part of him—the optimist that managed somehow to survive after all these dreadful years—still hoped it might be just a mugging, but with the sound of those words that hope died.

“Sorry, you must be mistaken,” he replied to the man blocking his path, trying his best to sound friendly, carefree—

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guiltless. He even tried to mask his Calian accent to further the charade.

“No, I’m not,” the man insisted as he crossed the width of the alley moving closer, eating up the comforting space between them. His hands remained in full view and this struck Wyatt as more worrisome than if they rested on the pommels of his swords. Even though Wyatt wore a fine saber, the man had no fear of him.

“Well, as it happens, my name is Wyatt Deminthal. I think therefore, that you must be mistaken.”

Wyatt was pleased he managed to say all this without stammering. With great effort, he concentrated on relaxing his body, letting his shoulders droop, his weight rest on one heel. He even forced a pleasant smile. He glanced around casually as any innocent man might.

They faced each other in the narrow, cluttered alley only a few yards from where Wyatt rented a loft. It was dark. A lantern hung a few feet behind him, mounted on the side of the feed store. He could see its flickering glow, the light glistening in puddles the rain left on the cobblestone. Behind him, he could still hear the music of the Gray Mouse Tavern, muffled and tinny. Voices echoed in the distance, laughter, shouts, arguments; the clatter of a dropped pot, followed by the cry of an unseen cat. Somewhere a carriage rolled along, its wooden wheels clacking on wet stone. It was late. The only people on the streets were drunken men, whores, or those with business best done in the dark.

The man took another step closer. Wyatt did not like the look in his eyes. There was a hard edge to them, a serious sense of resolve, but it was the hint of regret he detected that jarred Wyatt the most.

“You’re the fellow who hired me and my friend to steal a sword from Essendon Castle.”

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“I’m sorry. I really have no idea what you are talking about. I don’t even know where this *Essendon* place is. You must have me confused with some other fellow. It’s probably the hat.” Wyatt took off his wide-brimmed cavalier and showed it to the man. “See, it is a common hat in that anyone can buy one, but uncommon at the same time as few people wear them nowadays. You most likely saw someone in a similar hat and just assumed it was me. It’s an understandable mistake. No hard feelings I can assure you.”

Wyatt placed his hat back on, tilting it slightly down in front and cocking it a bit to one side. Aside from the hat, he wore an expensive black and red silk doublet and short flashy cape, but it lacked any velvet trimming, which along with his worn boots, betrayed his station. The single gold ring piercing his left ear, spoke even louder, it was his one concession; a memento to the life he had left behind.

“When we got to the chapel the king was on the floor—dead.”

“I can see this is not a happy story,” Wyatt said tugging on the fingers of his fine red gloves—a habit he had when nervous.

“Guards were waiting. They dragged us to the dungeons. They planned to eviscerate us the next morning.”

“I am sorry you were ill-used, but as I said, I am not this DeWitt, I’ve never heard of him. I will be certain to mention you should our paths ever cross. Who shall I say is looking for him?”

“Riyria,” the fighter told him.

Behind Wyatt, the feed store light winked out and a voice whispered in his ear, “It’s elvish for *two*.”

His heartbeat doubled its pace and before he could turn he felt the sharp edge of a blade at his throat. He froze, barely allowing himself to breathe.

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“You set us up to die,” the voice behind him took over. “You brokered the deal. You put us in that chapel so we would take the blame. I’m here to repay your kindness. If you have any last words, say them now, and say them quietly.”

Wyatt was a good card player. He knew bluffs and the man behind him was not bluffing. He was not there to scare, pressure, or manipulate him. He was not looking for information; he knew everything he wanted to know. It was in his voice, his tone, his words, even the pace of his breath that blew in his ear—he was there to kill him.

“What’s going on Wyatt?” a small voice called.

Down the alley, a door opened and light spilled forth outlining a young girl whose shadow ran across the cobblestones and up the far wall. She was thin with shoulder length hair and wore a nightgown that reached to her ankles exposing her bare feet.

“Nothing Allie—get back inside!” Wyatt shouted unable any longer to mask his fear, his accent fully exposed.

“Who are those two men you’re talking to?” Allie took a step toward them. Her foot disturbed a puddle that rippled. “They look angry.”

“I won’t allow witnesses,” the voice behind him hissed.

“Leave her alone.” Wyatt begged, “She wasn’t involved. I swear. It was just me.”

“Involved in what Wyatt?” Allie asked. “What’s going on?” she took another step.

“Stay where you are, Allie! Don’t come any closer. Please, Allie, do as I say.” The girl stopped. “I did a bad thing once, Allie. You have to understand. I did it for us, for you, Elden and me. Remember when I took that job a few winters back? When I went up north for a couple of days? I—I did the bad thing then. I pretended to be someone I wasn’t and I almost got some people killed. That’s how I got the money for the

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winter. Don't hate me, Allie. I love you, honey. Please just get back inside!"

"No!" she protested. "I can see the knife. They're going to hurt you."

"If you don't they'll kill us both!" Wyatt shouted harshly, too harshly. He did not want to do it, but he had to make her understand.

Allie was crying now. She stood in the alley, in the shaft of lamplight, shaking.

"Go inside honey," Wyatt told her gathering himself and trying to calm his voice. "It will be alright. Don't cry. Elden will watch over you. Let him know what happened. It will be alright."

The little girl continued to sob.

"Please honey you have to go inside now," Wyatt pleaded. "It's all you can do. It's what I need you to do. Please."

"I—love—you, Da—ddy."

"I know honey. I know. I love you too, and I'm *so sorry*."

The girl reluctantly stepped back into the doorway, the sliver of light diminished until the door snapped shut leaving the alley once more in darkness. Only the faint blue light cast from a cloud-shrouded moon filtered into the narrow corridor where the three men stood.

"How old is she?" the voice behind him asked.

"Leave her out of this! Just make it quick—can you give me that much?" Wyatt braced himself for what was to come. Seeing the child broke him. He shook violently, his gloved hands in fists, his chest so tight it was difficult to swallow and hard to breath. He felt the metal edge against his throat and waited for it to move, waited for it to drag.

"Did you know it was a trap when you came to hire us?" The man with three swords asked.

"What?—*no!*"

"Would you still have done it if you knew?"

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“I don’t know—I guess—yes. We needed the money.”

“So you’re not a baron?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“I was a ship’s captain.”

“Was? What happened?”

“Are you going to kill me any time soon? Because I don’t see the point in all these questions.”

“Each question you answer is another breath you take,” the voice from behind him spoke. It was the voice of death, emotionless, and empty. Just hearing it made Wyatt’s stomach lurch as if he were looking over the edge of a high cliff. Not seeing his face, only knowing that he held the blade that would kill him, made it feel like an execution. He thought of Allie, he hoped she would be all right, then realized—she would see him! The thought broke in with surprising clarity. She would rush out after it was over and find him on the street. She would wade through his blood.

“What happened?” the executioner asked again, his voice instantly erasing all other thoughts.

“I sold my ship.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Gambling debts?”

“No.”

“Why then?”

“What difference does it make? You’re going to kill me anyway, so just do it!”

He had steadied himself. He was ready. He clenched his teeth, shut his eyes, but still the killer delayed.

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“It makes a difference,” the executioner whispered in his ear, “because Allie is not your daughter.”

The blade came away from Wyatt’s neck.

Slowly, hesitantly, Wyatt turned to face the man still holding the dagger. He never saw him before. He was smaller than his partner, dressed in a black cloak with a hood that shaded his features revealing only hints of a face—the tip of a sharp nose, the highlight of a cheek, the end of a chin.

“How do you know that?”

“She saw us in the dark. She saw my knife at your throat as we stood deep in shadow across the length of twenty yards.”

Wyatt said nothing. He did not dare move or speak. He did not know what to think. Somehow, something had changed. The certainty of death rolled back a step, but its shadow lingered between them. He had no idea what was happening and he was terrified of making a misstep.

“You sold your ship to buy her. Didn’t you?” the hooded man guessed, “But from whom, and why?”

Wyatt stared at the face beneath the hood—a bleak landscape, a desert dry of compassion. Death was there, a breath away, an utterance remained all that separated eternity from salvation.

The bigger one, the man with three swords, reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. “A lot is riding on your answer. But you already know that. Don’t you? Right now, you’re trying to decide what to say, and of course, you’re trying to guess what we want to hear—don’t. Go with the truth. At least that way, if you’re wrong, your death won’t have been because of a lie.”

Wyatt nodded. He closed his eyes again, took a deep breath and said, “I bought her from a man named Ambrose.”

“Ambrose Moor?” the executioner asked.

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“Yes.”

Wyatt waited but nothing happened. He opened his eyes. The dagger was gone and the three-sword man was smiling at him. “I don’t know how much that little girl cost, but it was the best money you ever spent.”

“You aren’t going to kill me?”

“Not today. You still owe us one hundred tenents, for the balance on that job,” the man in the hood told him coldly.

“I—I don’t have it.”

“Get it.”

Light burst into the alley as the door to Wyatt’s loft flew open with a bang and Elden charged out. He held his mammoth two-headed axe high above his head as he strode toward them with a determined look.

The man with three swords rapidly drew two of them.

“Elden, NO!” Wyatt shouted. “They’re not going to kill me! Just stop.”

Elden paused, his axe held aloft, his eyes looking back and forth between them.

“They’re letting me go,” Wyatt assured him, then turning to look at the two men. “You are, aren’t you?”

The hooded man nodded. “Pay off that debt.”

As the men walked away, Elden moved to Wyatt’s side and Allie ran out to hug him. The three returned to the loft and slipped inside the doorway. Elden took one last look around then closed the door behind them.

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“Did you see the size of that guy?” Hadrian asked Royce still glancing over his shoulder as if the giant might try to sneak up on them. “I’ve never seen anyone that big. He had to be a good seven feet tall, and that neck, and those shoulders, and that axe! I think it would take two of me just to lift it. Maybe he wasn’t human, maybe he was a giant, or a troll. Some people swear they exist. I’ve met a few who say they have seen them personally.”

Royce looked at his friend and scowled.

“Okay, so it’s mostly drunk people in bars who say that, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t possible. Ask Myron he’ll back me up.”

The two headed north up the hill toward the Langdon Bridge. In this more respectable hill-district of Colnora, people were more inclined to sleep at night than to carouse in taverns. Affluent business owners and their managerial staff owned homes here some grander than the palatial houses of upper nobility. The DeLur estate alone had a staff of well over a hundred servants and the gated entrance was wider than three city streets.

They crossed Capital Boulevard, which terminated at the Grand Hanoc, the large stone building with four pillars and broad steps where the city council met. The city was located in Warric, and as such officially fell under the rule of King Ethelred, but he rarely meddled in the city’s affairs. Instead, of a duke or earl, an appointed magistrate and a council of merchants administered the city. They passed laws and heard grievances, as was the custom for more than three hundred years.

Colnora started out as a meager rest stop at the intersection of the Wesbaden and Aquesta trade routes. Originally, a farmer named Hollenbeck and his wife, watered caravans here and granted room in their

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barn to the traders in return for news and goods. Hollenbeck had an eye for quality and always picked the best of the lot. Soon his farm became an inn and he added a store and a warehouse to sell what he acquired to passing travelers. The merchants deprived of first pick by Hollenbeck bought plots next to his farm and opened their own shops, taverns, and roadhouses. The farm became a village, then a city, but still, the caravans gave preference to Hollenbeck. Legend held that the reason for this was their fondness for his wife, a wonderful woman who in addition to being uncommonly beautiful, sang and accompanied herself on the mandolin. It was said that she baked the finest cobblers made from peach, blueberry, and apple. Centuries after her death, when no one could accurately place the location of the original Hollenbeck farm, and few remembered there had ever been such a farmer, they continued to remember his wife—Colnora.

Over the years, the city flourished until it became the largest urban center in Avryn. Shoppers found the latest style in clothes, the most exquisite jewelry and the largest variety of exotic spices at hundreds of shops and marketplaces. In addition, the city was home to some of the best artisans in all of Elan. They took advantage of the wealth of imported materials that flowed into the city. Colnora also boasted of having the finest, most popular inns and taverns in the country. Entertainers had long congregated here prompting Cosmos DeLur, the city's wealthiest resident, and patron of the arts, to construct the DeLur Theater. It was the largest such venue anywhere. A three-story building of brick and wood, it rose dramatically in the center of a bricked square with statues of thinly shrouded women standing to either side of the entry. There was nothing overtly vulgar about the statues, nothing obvious, but the effect was there. The alluring expressions formed by half-closed eyes, and the

way the artist sculpted the shift of their hips, one up, one down—they spoke of seduction, temptation and excitement.

Royce and Hadrian came upon the theatre as they crossed the district and both halted abruptly. A large white painted board depicted the silhouette of two men scaling the outside of a castle tower. It read:

**The Crown Conspiracy**  
**How a young prince and two thieves saved a kingdom**  
**- Evening Shows Daily -**

Royce raised an eyebrow while Hadrian slipped the tip of his tongue along his front teeth. They glanced at each other, but neither said a word before continuing on their way.

Leaving the hill district, they continued along Bridge Street as the land sloped downward toward the river. They passed rows of warehouses—mammoth buildings emblazoned with company brands like royal crests. Some were simply initials, usually the new businesses that had no sense of themselves. Others bore trademarks like the boar’s head of the Bocant Company, an empire whose genesis was pork, or the diamond symbol of DeLur Enterprises.

“You realize he’ll never be able to pay us the hundred?” Hadrian asked as they followed the road around the warehouses to the bridge.

“I just didn’t want him to think he was getting off easy,” Royce explained.

“You didn’t want him to think Royce Melborn went soft at the sight of a little girl’s tears.”

“She wasn’t just *any* girl, and besides he saved her from Ambrose Moor. For that alone he earned one life.”

“That’s something that has always puzzled me. How is it that Ambrose is still alive?”

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“I’ve been side-tracked I suppose,” Royce said in his *lets not talk about this subject* tone, and Hadrian dropped it.

Of the city’s three main bridges, the Langdon was the most remote. It was also the most elegant in design. Made from cut stone, it spanned the river in a shallow arch and was lined every few feet by large ornate lampposts designed in the shapes of swans that when lit, gave the bridge a festive look. Now however, the lights were out, the stone was wet, and it looked oily and dangerous.

“Well at least we didn’t spend the last month looking for DeWitt for nothing,” Hadrian said sarcastically as they crossed the bridge. “I would have thought—”

Royce stopped walking and abruptly raised his hand silencing Hadrian. Both men looked around, and without a word drew their weapons as they moved back to back. Nothing was visible on the bridge the only sound was the distant roar of the tumultuous waters that rushed and churned below them.

“Impressive, Duster,” a man addressed Royce as he stepped out from behind one of the bridge lampposts. His skin pale, his body so slender and boney he swam in his loose britches and shirt. To Hadrian he looked like a corpse someone forgot to bury.

Behind them, Hadrian noted three more men climbing up, crawling onto the span like cockroaches. They all had similar appearances; thin, muscular, each in dark colored clothes. They circled like wolves.

“What tipped you off we were here?” the thin man asked.

“I’m guessing it was your breath, but body odor really can’t be ruled out,” Hadrian replied with a grin noting their positions, their movements, the directions of their eyes.

“Mind ’yer mouth bub,” the tallest of the four threatened.

“To what do we owe this visit, Price?” Royce asked.

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“Funny, I was about to ask you the same,” the thin man replied.

“This is our city after all, not yours—not anymore.”

“Black Diamond?” Hadrian asked Royce.

Royce nodded in reply.

“And you would be Hadrian Blackwater,” Price noted. “I always thought you’d be bigger.”

“And you’re a Black Diamond, I always thought there were more of you.”

Price smiled and held his gaze long enough to suggest a threat, then turned to Royce. “So what are you doing here, Duster?”

“Just passing through,” Royce told him.

“Really? No business?”

“Nothing that would interest you.”

Price stepped away from the swan lamppost and began slowly circling them as he talked. The wind blowing down the river whipped his loose shirt like a flag at mast.

“Well, now you see that’s where you’re wrong. The Black Diamond is interested in everything that happens in Colnora most particularly when it involves you.”

Hadrian leaned over and asked Royce, “Why does he keep calling you *Duster*?”

“That was my guild name.”

“*He* was a Black Diamond?” asked the youngest of the four. He had round, chubby cheeks blown red and blotchy. His narrow mouth wreathed by a thin mustache and goatee.

“Oh yes that’s right, Etcher you’ve never heard of Duster before have you? Etcher is new to the guild only been with us what? Six months? Well you see, Etcher not only was Duster a Diamond, he was an officer,

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bucketman, and one of the most notorious members in the guild's history."

"Bucketman?" Hadrian asked again.

"Assassin," Royce explained.

"He's a legend this one is," Price went on pacing around the stone bridge carefully avoiding the puddles. "The wonder boy of his day, he rose through the ranks so fast it unnerved people."

"Funny," Royce said, "I only remember one."

"Well, when the First Officer of the guild is nervous, so is everyone else. You see, Etcher, back then the Jewel had a man named Hoyte running the show. Hoyte was an ass to most of us—a good thief and administrator—but an ass just the same. So Duster had a lot of support from the lower ranks. Hoyte was concerned Duster might replace him and began ordering him on the most dangerous jobs—jobs that went suspiciously bad. Still, Duster always escaped unscathed making him even more a hero. Rumors began circulating we might have a traitor in the guild. Rather than being concerned, Hoyte saw this as an opportunity."

Price paused in his orator's trek around the bridge and stopped in front of Royce. "You see at that time there were three bucketmen in the guild and all of them good friends. Jade, the guild's only female assassin, was a beauty who—"

"Is this going somewhere Price?" Royce snapped.

"Just giving Etcher a little background, Duster. You wouldn't begrudge me the chance to educate my boys would you?" Price smiled and returned to his casual pacing slipping his thumbs into the loose waistline of his pants. "Where was I? Oh yes, Jade. Hoyte came to Jade one day with the location of where to find the traitor. It was right over there actually," he pointed back across the bridge. "That empty warehouse with the clover symbol on its side. Hoyte told her he didn't know who it

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would be, but whoever she found there would be the traitor and she should eliminate him. Of course, Hoyte told Duster the same thing. Then, like now, bucketmen wore masks to prevent being marked.” Price paused and looked at Royce in feigned sympathy. “You had no idea who she was until it was over did you Duster? Or did you know and kill her anyway?”

Royce said nothing but glared at Price with a dangerous look.

“The last of the three bucketmen was Cutter, who was understandably upset to learn Duster murdered Jade since they were lovers. The fact that his friend was responsible made it personal, and Hoyte was happy to let Cutter settle the score.

“But Cutter didn’t want Duster dead. Instead, he arranged for him to be apprehended by the city guard. Being a strategic mastermind—our best heist planner—Cutter traded a few favors and with some money, bought a trial that resulted in Duster going to the infamous Manzant Prison and Salt Mine. That hole no one ever comes back from. Escape is impossible only somehow Duster managed it. You know we still don’t know how you got out.” He paused, giving Royce a chance to say something.

Again, Royce remained silent.

Price shrugged.

“When Duster escaped he returned to Colnora. First, the magistrate who presided over his trial was found dead in his bed. Then the false witnesses—all three on the same night—and finally the lawyer. Soon, one by one, members of the Black Diamond started disappearing. They turned up in the strangest places: the river, the city square, even the steeple of the church.

“After losing more than a dozen members, the Jewel made a deal. He gave Hoyte to Duster who forced him to confess publicly. Then Duster killed Hoyte and left the body on the Fountain in Hill Square—it was pure artistry. It stopped the war, but the wounds were too deep to forgive.

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Duster left only to reemerge some years later working out of Crimson Hand territory up north, but you're not a member are you?"

"I don't have much use for guilds anymore," Royce replied coldly.

"And who's that?" Etcher asked pointing at Hadrian. "Duster's servant? He's carrying enough weapons for the both of them."

Price smiled at Etcher. "That's Hadrian Blackwater, and I wouldn't point at him, you're likely to lose that arm."

Etcher looked at Price skeptically. "What? He's some kind of killer swordsman. Is that it?"

Price chuckled. "Sword, spear, arrow, even a rock; whatever is at hand. The Diamond doesn't know as much about you, but rumors abound. One says you were a gladiator, another reports you were once a general in a Calian army—successful too if the stories can be trusted. There's even one story circulating that you were the enslaved courtier of an exotic eastern queen."

Some of the other Diamonds including Etcher chuckled at that.

"As much fun as this trip down memory lane has been, Price. Do you have a reason for stopping us?"

"You mean beyond entertainment? Beyond harassment? Beyond reminding you, that this is a Black Diamond controlled city? Beyond informing you that unguilded thieves like yourselves are not allowed to practice here, and that you personally, because so many members still remember your year of terror, are not welcome?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant."

"Actually there is one more thing," Price said. "There's a woman looking for you two."

This was unexpected and Royce and Hadrian glanced at each other curiously.

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“She’s been asking questions all around town about you. She says she’s looking for two thieves named Hadrian and Royce. Now, as entertaining as it has been to hear your names being publicly advertised, it is embarrassing for the Black Diamond to have anyone asking for thieves in Colnora that are not members of the guild. People are apt to get the wrong impression about this city.”

“Who is she?” Royce asked.

“No idea.”

“Where is she?”

“Sleeping under the Tradesmen Arch on Capital Boulevard,” Price said with a smile. “So I think we can rule out her being a noble debutant or a rich merchant’s daughter. Since she is traveling alone, I think you can also rule out the possibility that she is here to kill you or have you arrested. If I had to guess, I should think she is looking to hire you two. I must say that if she is typical of the kind of patrons you two attract, I would consider a more traditional line of work. Perhaps there’s a pig farm you might be able to get a job at—at least you would be keeping the same level of company.”

Price’s tone and expression dropped to a serious level. “Find her, and get her, and yourselves, out of our city by tomorrow night. You might want to hurry. Cleaned up she could be pretty and might fetch a fair price or at least provide several minutes of pleasure for someone. I suspect the only reason she hasn’t been touched so far is that she’s been dropping your names everywhere, and around here Duster is still something of a boogiemán for many.”

Price turned to leave and his mocking tone returned. “It’s actually a shame you can’t stay around, the theater is showing a play about a thief who gets lured into being accused of murdering the King of Medford. It’s loosely based on the real murder of King Amrath several years ago.” Price

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shook his head. “Completely unrealistic. Can you imagine a seasoned thief being lured into a castle to steal a sword to save a man from a duel? Authors!”

Price continued to shake his head as he and the other thieves left them on the bridge and headed down into the streets on the far bank.

“Well that was pleasant don’t you think?” Hadrian said as they retraced their steps heading back up the hill toward Capital Boulevard. “Nice bunch of guys. I feel a little disappointed they didn’t send more members to scare us though.”

“Trust me, they were plenty dangerous,” Royce told him. “Price is the Diamond’s First Officer, and the other two quiet ones were bucketmen. There were also six more, three on each side of the bridge hiding under the ambush lip just in case. They weren’t taking any chances with us. Does that make you feel better?”

“Much, thanks,” Hadrian rolled his eyes.

“Duster, huh?” Hadrian said.

“Don’t call me that,” Royce said darkly, his tone serious. “Don’t ever call me that.”

“Call you what?” Hadrian asked innocently.

Royce sighed then smiled at him. “Walk faster; apparently we have a client waiting.”

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She awoke to the feeling of a rough hand on her thigh.

“Whatcha got in the purse honey?” a harsh voice asked.

Disoriented and confused the girl wiped her eyes. She was in the gutter beneath the Tradesmen’s Arch. Her hair a filthy tangled mess of dirty blond, snarled with leaves and twigs, her dress was tattered, stained,

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and soaking wet where the hem had lain in a puddle. Her feet were bare and covered in dried mud up to her knees. She clutched a tiny purse to her chest whose drawstring she had looped over her head. To most passing by in the dark she might easily appear as a bundle of trash discarded on the side of the road, or a pile of cloth and twigs absently left behind by the street sweepers. Still there were those who were interested even in piles of trash.

The first thing she saw when her eyes could focus was the dark haggard face and gaping mouth of a man crouching over her. She squealed and tried to crawl away. A hand grabbed her by the hair. Strong arms forced her down, pinning her wrists to her sides.

She felt his hot breath on her face and it smelled of liquor and smoke. He tore the tiny purse from her fingers and pulled it from around her neck.

“No!” She cried wrenching a hand free and reaching out for it. “I need that.”

“So do I,” the man cackled slapping her hand aside. Feeling the weight of coins in the bag, he smiled and stuffed the small pouch in his breast pocket.

“No.” she protested.

He lay on her pinning her to the ground, and let his fingers run down her face, along her lips, and stopped at her neck. Slowly they circled it and he gave a little squeeze. She gasped, struggling to breathe. He pressed his lips hard against hers, so hard she could tell he was missing teeth. His cheeks were rough and the stubble of his unshaven whiskers scratched her cheeks.

“Shush,” he whispered. “Were only get’n started. You need ta save your strength.” He lifted off, pushing himself up to his knees and reached for the buttons of his britches.

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She struggled, clawing at him, kicking. He pinned her arms under his knees and her feet found only air. She screamed. The man replied by slapping her hard across the face. The shock left her stunned, staring blindly while he returned to work on his buttons. The pain did not hit her yet, not fully. It was there welling up, hot as a fire on her cheek. Through watering eyes, she saw him on top of her as if viewing the scene from a distance. There was no sound, or rather a single sound, a dull hum. She saw his cracked, peeling lips moving, his throat muscles shifting, long gangly chords, but never heard the words. She freed one arm—saw it moving, struggling to avoid capture, being grabbed and stuffed back down out of sight once more.

Behind him, she could see two more figures approaching. Somewhere inside her, a thread of hope remained and she managed a weak whisper, “Help me.”

The foremost man pulled a massive sword from where it had rested on his back and holding it by the blade, swung the pommel. The man astride her fell, and lay sprawled across the gutter.

The man with the sword knelt down beside her. He was merely an outline against the charcoal sky, a phantom in the dark.

“May I be of assistance milady,” she heard his voice—a nice voice. His hand found hers and he pulled her to her feet.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Hadrian Blackwater.”

She stared at him. “Really?” She managed to say refusing to let go of his hands. Before she realized it, she began to cry.

“What’d you do to her?” the other man asked coming up behind them.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Are you squeezing her hand too hard? Let her go.”

## Avempartha

"I'm not holding her. She's holding onto me."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." she repeated her voice quivering. "I just never thought I would ever find you."

"Oh, Okay. Well, you did." He smiled at her. "And this fellow here is Royce Melborn."

She gasped and threw her arms around the smaller man's neck hugging him tight crying even harder. Royce stood awkwardly stiff, until Hadrian peeled her off.

"So I get the impression you're glad to see us, that's good," Hadrian told her. "Now who are you?"

"I'm Thrace Wood of Dahlgren Village." She was smiling unable to help herself. "I have been looking for you for a very long time."

She staggered.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm a little dizzy."

"When was the last time you had anything to eat?"

Thrace stood thinking, her eyes shifting back and forth trying to remember.

"Never mind," Hadrian turned to Royce, "This was your city once, any ideas where we can get help for a young woman in the middle of the night?"

"It's a shame we aren't in Medford," he said, "Gwen would be great for this sort of thing."

"Well, isn't there a brothel here? It is the trade capital of the world. Don't tell me they don't sell *that*."

"Yeah, there's one on South Street, a nice one too."

"Okay, Thrace, is it? Come with us, we'll see if we can get you cleaned up and perhaps a bit of food in you."

## Avempartha

“Wait!” She shouted suddenly and knelt down near the unconscious man in the gutter. She pulled her purse from his pocket and tied it around her neck once more.

“Is he dead?” She asked.

“Doubt it. I didn’t hit him that hard.”

She felt light-headed and darkness appeared at the edges of her vision. She hovered a moment like a drunk, then began to sway and finally collapsed. She woke only briefly as she felt arms gently lifting her.

Through a dull buzz she heard the sound of a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she heard one of them say.

“This is the first time I suspect anyone has ever visited a whore house and brought their own woman.”