

## Chapter 2

### Meetings

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

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

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Hadrian also noted a bundle beneath the table on which he rested one boot at all times.

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

“Care for some company?” he asked.

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

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

“In that case, please sit down.”

Hadrian took the seat and waited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Please, listen. I have asked around. Those who know the pulse of this city tell me there is a pair of independent professionals who take on such jobs if the price is right. How they manage to work with impunity outside of the organized guilds is a matter of speculation, but the fact

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remains that they do. This is a testament to their reputation, is it not? If you know these men, the members of this Riyria, I beg you, implore them to assist me.”

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

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

“Have you heard of Count Pickering?”

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

“You’re unusually well informed.”

“Part of the job,” Hadrian admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah...but I have made it easier,” DeWitt told him. “The count, like me, is staying with the king for the negotiations. His quarters are very near my duke’s room. Earlier this evening, I slipped into his room and took his sword. There were so many people around I panicked and dropped it in the first open room I found. It must be removed from the castle before he notices it is missing since a search will surely find it.”

“So, where is it now?”

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

“Then why don’t *you* do it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Guild. Hadrian was a warrior, a soldier who preferred his battles to be fair and in the daylight.

Hadrian was never completely comfortable with most of the tasks they did for nobles. They wanted to embarrass a rival, to hurt an ex-lover, or to increase their standing in the strange and twisted world of high-stakes politics. The gentry hired them because they possessed fortunes and could afford to pay for their games. To them, that is what life was—one big chess match with real knights, kings, and pawns. There was no good or evil, no right or wrong. It was all just politics. A game within a game with its own set of rules and no values. Their squabbles however, did provide a fertile field for them to harvest profits. Not only were the nobles rich and petty, they were also dim-witted. How else could Royce and Hadrian receive payment from the Earl of Chadwick to intercept letters Alenda Lanaklin sent to Degan Gaunt only to turn around and double their profit by stealing them back? They simply asked Albert to contact Alenda with the news Ballentyne had her letters and an offer to help her get them back. Their business was profitable, but ugly. Just another game he played in a world where heroes were legends and honor was a myth.

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

“Sure,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He was sweating."

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

"Pickering will kill him—you know it. And he's not the first."

"He won't be the last either."

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

Royce chuckled. "So, now it's a public service?"

"And there is the two hundred gold tenents," Hadrian added. "That's more money than we've made all year. Cold weather is coming, and with that coin, we could sit out the winter."

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

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

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

Hadrian saw his opening and pressed his advantage. "You remember how cold it was on top of that tower. Just think how cold it will be in a few months. You can spend the winter safe and warm, eating

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richly and drinking your favorite wine. Then of course,” Hadrian leaned closer, “there’s the snow. You know how you hate the snow.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I always am.”

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