

VOLUME FOUR OF THE  
RIYRIA CHRONICLES

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF  
**WINTER'S  
DAUGHTER**



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN



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## CHAPTER TWO

# THE RETURN OF VIRGIL PUCK

Royce *knew* what was coming.

Hadrian had glanced back at their prisoner more than a dozen times, even though nothing had changed. Virgil Puck continued to walk behind Royce and Hadrian's horses, still tethered with one end of a rope tied tightly around his wrists and the other end fastened to the horn of Hadrian's saddle. Nevertheless, the interval between the glimpses shortened, and the length of each look grew at a measurable rate. If Royce had a means of calculating time in small increments, he thought it possible to determine the exact moment when—

“What if he's telling the truth?” Hadrian asked.

Royce frowned, feeling cheated. He expected it would've taken longer. Hadrian hadn't changed as much as Royce had hoped. “He's not.”

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“But it sounds like he might be.”

“Yes, I am,” Puck said, his voice rising above the shuffle of his own feet—the walk of the reluctant.

“He’s no different from anyone accused of a crime. Everyone proclaims their innocence.” Royce didn’t bother looking back. Everything he needed to know was revealed through the tautness of the rope. From it, he could tell Puck was still tethered; beyond that, Royce didn’t care.

The three made leisurely progress along the rural portion of the King’s Road, just north of the city of Medford. The day was warm, and while most of that year’s snow had finally melted, runoff was still making its way to lakes and rivers. All around, Royce could hear the trickle of water. Each season had its own distinct sounds: the drone of insects in summer, the honk of geese in autumn, the wind in winter. In spring, it was birdsong and running water.

“He’s no criminal, not a murderer or even a thief. I mean, technically, he’s accused of giving rather than taking.”

Royce raised a brow. “Lord Hildebrandt would disagree. Virtue and chastity, these are the things that have been taken from his daughter.”

“Oh please!” Puck erupted. “Don’t be ridiculous. Have either of you seen Lady Hildebrandt? She didn’t receive the name *Bliss* from her lovers, I can assure you of that. She’s forty-three going on eighty-nine, with the face of a savagely carved jack-o’-lantern and the figure of a two-ball snowman. And don’t get me started on her acidic personality and that grotesque cackle of a laugh. I’m absolutely positive she retains her virtue the same way a bruised and rotting melon avoids being eaten.

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No one who has actually met Bliss Hildebrandt of Sansbury could possibly imagine crawling into bed with her. I'd personally rather curl up with a diseased monkfish. *Maybe* if there had been a knife at my throat, I might . . .”

His pause caused Royce to look back.

Virgil Puck's misshapen nose was off center and sported a bulbous tip like the knob on the end of a walking stick. Beyond that, the man was tall, thin, and endowed with long, curly blond hair, the sort to evoke sighs from women of every rank and class. He wore only a heavy tunic, breeches, and boots. The tunic was covered in vertical white-and-blue stripes, and the boots were yellow as a canary's breast. Hadrian was right about one thing. Virgil didn't have the look of a normal run-of-the-mill criminal.

*But criminal is such a relative term, and what is normal, anyway?*

Puck looked at the ground, shaking his head with a grimace. “No, no, I can truthfully say not even that would be enough. I'm telling you for the third time, you have the wrong man. The true culprit must be either deaf and blind or depraved to the point of utter insanity.”

Hadrian turned around, shifting the tip of the sword strapped to his back and resting a hand on the rump of his mount. “Are you noble?”

“If you mean, do I have highborn blood in my veins, the answer is no. Why do you ask?”

“The way you talk is . . . clever . . . complicated. You use odd words like *culprit* and *depraved*.”

“That's because I'm a poet,” Puck declared with dramatic flair. He tried to follow the remark with a sweeping bow, but there wasn't enough slack in the rope to execute it successfully.

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“I make my living going from great house to great house entertaining my hosts with songs and stories. Tales of woo and woe. From the epic love affair of Persephone and Novron to the tragic courtship of Lady Masquerade and Sir Whimsy. I make them laugh; I make them cry; I inspire, educate, and—”

“Seduce?” Royce provided. “Women have a weakness for poets. Did you beguile Bliss Hildebrandt with words?”

Puck expressed his indignation by stopping, and he was jerked forward by Hadrian’s horse. “You aren’t listening. I didn’t seduce her. I wouldn’t do that for all the gold in Avryn. I’d rather fornicate with a rabid ferret. I’m telling you, when we get back to Sansbury, you’ll see her and understand. And I hope she gives you both hugs and wet kisses for your efforts. Then you’ll realize the true depths of your mistake. She’s like an ugly old hound that still thinks it’s a puppy, even while drooling those long elastic strands of goo. And when she opens her mouth to thank you, you’ll see her tongue, an organ that’s far too long for any reasonable living thing.”

“Lady Hildebrandt is with child,” Royce said. “Had to happen somehow.”

Puck smirked. “I’ve seen baby porcupines, too—don’t know how that happens, either.”

“He just sounds so . . .” Hadrian struggled. “You know, sincere.”

“By all the gods! That’s because I’m telling the truth!” Puck shouted to the sky. “The two of you are . . . you’re . . . what exactly? I have no idea. Sheriffs? Bounty hunters? No matter, whatever your profession, you must do this often, right? You’ve surely captured dozens of suspected wrongdoers and brought



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them to justice. You must know what nefarious men are like. How they act. When you dragged me out of that tavern in East March, did I act guilty? I'm assuming most criminals run, isn't that so? Did I? Did I resist at all? No, I didn't. What did I do instead?"

"You called for a sheriff," Hadrian replied, and glanced at Royce with a tiny nod of acknowledgment.

"Yes! Yes! I did that because I thought you were accosting me. Only thugs would drag a person out of a public house and tie him up. And if a sheriff had heard, it would be the two of you on the end of a rope—and a shorter one than this, I suspect."

Hadrian shifted his sight between Puck and Royce with a ruminating expression.

"Doesn't matter," Royce interjected, attempting to preempt the thought forming in his partner's head.

"But if he's innocent, should we really be turning him over to Lord Hildebrandt? If he's convicted, he won't have the shield of noble blood. The baron will kill him."

"Doesn't matter."

"It certainly matters to me," Virgil chimed in.

"Why? Why doesn't it matter?" Hadrian asked.

"All I care about is the eight gold Hildebrandt is paying us."

"That's cold, Royce," Hadrian said.

"No, that's life. Don't complain to me. Take it up with Maribor, or the universe, or nature. The same rules that starve a sparrow in winter will see Puck hang for a crime . . . even if he didn't commit it. But that's not our problem. We don't have anything to do with that."

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“Excuse me?” Puck spoke up. “I feel obligated to point out that it’s *you* who tied this rope to my wrists, and it’s *you* who is dragging me incessantly toward a fate I don’t deserve. It’s *your* horse, not Maribor’s, not the universe’s, not nature’s, and it certainly has nothing to do with any ruddy, bloody sparrow!”

“Eight gold tenents.” Royce looked hard at Hadrian. “Say those three words out loud. Repeat them over and over until it drowns out the little ferret bugger behind us.”

Hadrian didn’t look convinced.

“Okay, how’s this. Remember that we promised . . . we gave our *word* to Lord Hildebrandt that we would fetch Puck and bring him back.” Royce struggled to get the words out with a straight face.

When Hadrian replied with a solemn nod, Royce had to bite the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. The two had been together for three years, two working officially as the rogues-for-hire enterprise called Riyria—and still Hadrian thought a promise was something that must be kept. Hadrian was young, in his early twenties, but the man had been to war more than once, and it baffled Royce how he could remain so unworldly.

Puck focused his attention on Royce. “So, that’s all my life is worth? Just a few gold coins? What if I offer you more than Lord Hildebrandt is willing to pay? Would that balance the scales in your maladjusted world, a place where you claim to play no part even though you hold the leash?”

Royce frowned. “You don’t have that kind of money. If you did, we would’ve reached a deal back in East March.”

“I could get it.”

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“No, you can’t. You’re a poet. Poets make little money, and they certainly don’t save for a rainy day. You throw your coin away on ridiculous things—your clothes, for example.”

“True enough, but I wasn’t talking about *my* money,” Puck said. “While I swear I never touched Bliss, I have dallied with a few ladies in my time. Some of them are quite fond of me. I’m sure Lady Martel would pay ten to save my life.”

“Lady Martel? Are you referring to Lord Hemley’s wife?” Royce asked.

“The very same.”

Royce smirked. “I doubt your prowess between the sheets could possibly be worth ten gold.”

“You misunderstand me. My relationship with Martel Hemley isn’t like that. I mean, I *could* have slept with her. She’s no great looker, either, but at least she’s intellectually stimulating, and she finds me equally so. I’m sure ten gold would seem like a small price to ensure our continued conversations. Our kinship is based on a mutual love of the written word. Why, just last summer I spent a whole night, in her bedroom no less, doing nothing but drinking and exploring her library.”

“Is that a euphemism, or are you *actually* talking about books?” Royce asked.

“Oh, so you’ve heard of them! Yes, books. The woman has a wide range of interests and has a little library right off her private chambers. She has copies of the *Song of Beringer* and *The Pilgrim’s Tales*, which is impressive but not atypical. The most interesting thing on her shelves is a bizarre little diary.”

Royce reined his horse to a stop and pivoted in the saddle. “She showed you her diary?”

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Puck looked up, concerned. Royce hadn't intended to be threatening, but it was an attribute difficult to control.

"Well, yes, but it wasn't *her* diary. The memoir belonged to a fellow named Falkirk de something, who had excellent penmanship and an archaic writing style. Lady Martel mentioned she stole it, although I doubt that. I mean, who ever heard of a noble thief? She was fairly drunk at the time, so I didn't take what she said seriously."

"Did she mention where she met this Falkirk guy?" Royce asked.

"Oh no, she didn't get it from him. Lady Martel obtained the diary from a monk she'd been having a tryst with. One night while he slept, she came upon the diary and took it because she wanted to learn about his true feelings toward her. Wasn't until later that she realized it was the writings of this Falkirk fellow. She tried to return it, but the monk had disappeared before she could. She never saw him again."

"You said the style was archaic. So, you read it?"

Puck nodded. "Tried to. To be honest, it bored me. Why are you so interested?"

When Royce didn't answer, Hadrian said, "We do odd jobs for people. One was getting that diary from Lady Martel. After we did, she claimed it hadn't been taken. Things like that needle Royce; he sees conspiracies and nefarious intent wherever he looks."

Royce focused on Virgil. "What can—"

The sound of horses drew Royce's attention. Eight men rode toward them, white tabards covering chainmail shirts, swords clapping thighs. They slowed upon approach but showed no

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signs of aggression. Royce and company had passed, or been passed, by a dozen groups of travelers that morning: farmers, tradesmen, merchants. These were the first with swords, and the tabards looked official. Usually, a patrol like this signaled trouble, but for once Royce and Hadrian weren't breaking any law. They were acting in service of a respected baron of Melengar. And yet Royce still tensed.

"Pardon our intrusion," the lead rider said, bringing his mount to a stop. The man's helm was off, only a single day's growth of beard on his face, and he was smiling. Royce didn't know what to make of him. The rider continued, "Might I ask your names and inquire as to why you are dragging this man along the King's Road?"

Royce hesitated for a dozen reasons, not one of which he could pin down as good or even sensible. He just didn't like being stopped. He liked answering questions even less.

In that momentary vacuum, his partner jumped in. "My name is Hadrian. How are you?"

"I'm great," the man replied. "What's this fella's name?" He pointed at the prisoner.

"My name is Virgil."

"Is it?" The rider nodded and climbed down off his mount to face Puck. "Got a last name?"

"Puck. Perhaps you gentlemen can offer me some assistance. These two fellows seem to be under a misconception. They accuse me of taking advantage of Lady Bliss Hildebrandt—which I *absolutely did not do*. I've been wrongfully charged. If you could—"

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Without warning, the tabard-clad man pulled out his dagger and stabbed Puck in the chest. Virgil didn't even have time to cry out before falling to the ground.

Royce and Hadrian drew back, their horses shuffling and nickering. They each pulled weapons. Hadrian produced his bastard sword, and Royce freed his white dagger, Alverstone. The shift in Hadrian's horse dragged Puck's bleeding body away from his attacker, leaving a bloody trail. The man who'd stabbed Virgil showed no signs of concern. He merely took out a handkerchief and wiped the mess of blood off himself and his blade.

Virgil gasped, gurgled, and convulsed for only a few seconds. The poet was dead the moment the blade hit his heart, but it took a little time for the message to reach all quarters of his twitching body.

Royce and Hadrian waited, but none of the others so much as touched their weapons. The man who had killed Puck put his dagger away and climbed back up on his horse.

"Why did you do that?" Hadrian demanded, holding his sword at the ready.

"King's orders," the killer replied matter-of-factly. He wore an amused smile as he noticed Hadrian's sword. "Nothing to do with either of you."

Hadrian shot a look at Royce, and then he looked back at the patrol. "King Amrath ordered the death of Virgil Puck?"

The man looked down at the sad crumpled body on the side of the road still tethered to Hadrian's saddle. He shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" Then he kicked his horse and the entire troop rode away.

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Royce and Hadrian arrived back on Wayward Street just before dark.

They would have returned sooner, but Hadrian had insisted on arranging for Puck's burial. Royce, who had littered and in some cases *decorated* many a landscape with corpses, had difficulty following the logic. Puck wasn't their mess to clean up. His body—once it had been disconnected from Hadrian's horse—was nature's problem. They had nothing to do with his death, so why waste time, let alone money, to dispose of the remains? But Hadrian and logic weren't always on a first-name basis, or perhaps it was more accurate to say that Hadrian had his own *version* of logic. Royce didn't understand it, and after three years, he'd given up trying.

Wayward Street was still a muddy mire festooned with a dozen stagnant pools and scarred with the deep tracks from wagon wheels. A filthy patch of stubborn gray snow remained clutched in the shadowy armpit between the tanner's shop and The Rose and the Thorn tavern. But the roofs were clear, and like a spring flower, Medford House blossomed with fresh blue paint. The last rays of sunlight illuminated the front porch of the grand house of prostitution, which was looking more like a luxurious inn as of late.

“Not much on patience, is she?” Hadrian said. “Thought she was going to wait for warmer weather.”

The front door opened, and Gwen DeLancy stepped onto the porch. She was wearing her blue dress, and the color very nearly matched the paint on the house. Royce guessed that was the point. He'd always liked that dress, and the color had

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nothing to do with it. Gwen smiled and extended her arms in proud presentation. “Well? What do you think? They just started today. Didn’t get too far, just this one wall, but isn’t the color wonderful?”

“It’s blue,” Hadrian said. “Wouldn’t a different color be better for business? Shouldn’t it be pink or something?”

“Of course it’s blue!” she scolded. “Medford House was always going to be blue. Just took me a while to raise the funds.”

Hadrian nodded. “Looks expensive.”

The two climbed down. They didn’t bother tying up their horses. The animals knew the routine and patiently waited to be unloaded.

“It *is* expensive.” Gwen pulled her arms in tight and half spun to admire the place she’d built. The skirt of her dress flared with the movement and her shoulders squeezed close to her neck, battling the chilly breeze. She was barefoot, one leg bent, her weight on the other, a hip tilted.

Royce stared and cursed time for insisting on moving.

“Royce?” Hadrian said.

“What?”

“Your pack.”

“What about it?”

“You set it down in the mud. It’s getting filthy.”

Royce looked around. His bag had somehow found its way into the slurry that was known to be a mixture of manure and sludge. “Gah!” he uttered his disgust, grabbing it and hoisting it to the steps. “How did that get there?” He glared at Hadrian accusingly.



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“Don’t look at me. That was all your doing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would I do that?”

“I was thinking the same thing. Kinda why I mentioned it.”

Royce scowled at the pack as if it were somehow responsible.

“Maybe you were distracted by how beautiful the new color is,” Gwen said, turning back. Her skirt did that flaring thing again. The sunlight caught her face and highlighted eyes outlined in dark paint. Her lips glistened, pulled up in a modest smile.

Hadrian snorted. “Yeah, that must have been it.” He placed his own saddlebags on the porch steps and took Royce’s reins. “Go on in. I’ll take the horses over.”

Gwen shook her head. “Don’t bother. I’ll have Dixon take care of them. Albert’s waiting inside.”

“Is he?” Hadrian exchanged a look of confusion with Royce.

Gwen nodded. “He’s all smiles. Says you got paid.”

“Paid? For what?” Royce asked.

Gwen shrugged, rolling mostly bare shoulders, making Royce want to ask *For what?* again. “The job you just finished, I would expect.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Royce turned to Hadrian. “Does that make sense to you?”

“Maybe you should talk to Albert,” Gwen coaxed.

Hadrian started up the steps, but Royce didn’t move. Days had passed since he’d seen Gwen, and he just wanted to look at *her*—to *be* with her. Such behavior wasn’t normal, not like him at all. Royce felt awkward and uncomfortable. Gwen, it seemed, was a much better thief. She’d managed to steal an entire person; She’d pinched his old self, stealing it away like a poorly guarded

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purse. When she was around, everything was different. Mostly, it was confusing, both exciting and peaceful, which left Royce pondering the change. Was he better off or crippled? Had he lost his way or found a better one?

“You should go inside,” Gwen said. “It’s getting cold out here, and Albert probably wants to talk to both of you.”



Eight. Eight gold tenents. Royce eyed the pale yellow disks with the embossed image of Amrath, or maybe it was the king’s father. Apparently, the two looked similar, or perhaps they didn’t and the kingdom’s treasurer got lazy and had the minter make only slight modifications to the previous molds. Didn’t matter. The fact remained that they were genuine, and there were eight. Royce, Hadrian, and Albert were in the Dark Room, a moniker bestowed due to its lack of windows as well as the shady business conducted there. Albert had dumped the coins on the table, then sat back in the chair nearest the fireplace to put his stocking feet up on the hearth. He had a self-satisfied smile on his face.

“I don’t understand,” Royce said.

“No mystery; we got paid.” Albert gestured at the money with an overly dramatic flourish. The viscount had lost everything except his title before becoming Royce and Hadrian’s liaison to the nobility. He retained a lofty air and that easygoing attitude that comes from living without fear of any natural predator.

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Hadrian set his bags down and took a seat by the fire. “We didn’t finish the job. Didn’t even get Puck back to Sansbury. A troop of men killed him on the King’s Road.”

Albert swished his lips back and forth in momentary thought, then waved his hands dismissively. “Clearly Lord Hildebrandt was pleased with how things turned out. Likely he planned to execute the poor fellow as it was. You merely saved him the effort.”

Hadrian dragged over a chair and sat down beside Albert and the table of coins. He plucked one up, turning it over in his fingers. “How could he have . . .” He looked at Royce. “He can’t possibly know Virgil is dead.”

“Of course he can.” Albert sat forward, an annoyed scowl forming on his face, as if the objections were a condemnation of his efforts. He fluffed the lace cuffs of his ruffled sleeves like a preening peacock. “The men who killed him probably worked for Hildebrandt. They must have ridden back, reported the deed done, and—”

“Puck died just north of here, not far from where the South Road splits from the King’s Road. That’s twenty-five miles from Sansbury.” Royce, who had remained standing, shook his head. “Someone would have had to ride amazingly fast to reach there by now. And then it would take time for them to . . . Albert, when were you paid?”

“Early this morning.”

Royce and Hadrian looked to each other for answers but found only reflected confusion.

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"This morning?" Hadrian said. "Puck was *alive* this morning. We were all enjoying a pleasant little walk from East March."

Albert's brows rose as the truth finally dawned. "Well, that . . . that is quite odd, isn't it?"

"Who paid you, Albert?" Royce asked.

The viscount sat up, pulled his feet back under him, and straightened his vest by tugging on the bottom. "Lady Constance. We had a meeting this morning at Tilden's Tea Room in Gentry Square. Wonderful little place right next to the bakery, so they get—"

"Constance?" Royce said the word aloud. Something clicked, and he felt the way a hound might when taking a second sniff at a footprint. "I've heard that name before."

Hadrian nodded. "Me, too. Albert's mentioned her a few times."

"Of course I have. I get most of our jobs through Lady Constance. She makes social butterflies look like shut-in moths. The woman knows everyone, and everyone knows her. She's native to Warric, has connections in Maranon, but prefers the parties here in Melengar."

"Wasn't she the one who hired us for the Hemley job? The one with Lady Martel's diary?" Royce asked.

Albert nodded.

"But she wasn't procuring the diary for herself, right?"

"I believe that's so. Just as I represent you, Lady Constance acts as a liaison for her people . . . er, clients . . . um, friends . . . however you want to refer to them. She's never said anything, but I assume she adds a surcharge and pays us the difference. She has to make a living somehow."

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“Isn’t she a noble?”

“Yeah, well, given the straits you found me in, you should know that not all nobles are rich. She was married to Baron Linder of Maranon. Why, I don’t think even she could say. He had no lands, wasn’t wealthy, and not even particularly attractive.”

“*Wasn’t*? Is he dead?”

“Yes, in addition to his other shortcomings, he apparently lacked skill with a lance; he was killed by Sir Gilbert of Lyle in a Wintertide joust just six months after they married. How she manages to maintain such a lavish lifestyle is a mystery to everyone at court and a topic of much speculation.” He paused in thought. “I wonder what rumors circulate about me.” He waved the question away. “Anyhoo, I’m guessing she’s made herself as useful to her acquaintances as I’ve been to you.”

“You never asked her about it?”

Albert looked shocked and insulted at the same time. “Oh, dear Maribor, no! And she has never asked me about my affairs. We have a perfectly wonderful lack of curiosity about each other, which makes working together not only possible but delightful as well.”

“You slept with her,” Hadrian said, his tone neither critical nor approving. He was merely stating a conclusion.

Albert let slip a mischievous grin. “Along with our lack of curiosity, we share an obvious absence of morals and a mutual aversion to cumbersome attachments. But filling that void is a healthy appetite for lust. It’s a wonderful arrangement, two peas in a pod are we.”

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Royce, whose tiring hand reminded him that he was still holding his pack, looked around for a place to set it down. Mindful that the bottom was still wet with muck, he placed it on the hearth near the crackling fire. “So, you have no idea who actually hired us to steal that diary?”

“Nope, can’t say that I do.”

“And Virgil Puck?”

“Well, that’s a different matter, now isn’t it? Of course it was Lord Hildebrandt; otherwise it would be terribly awkward when you arrived with him and . . .” Albert’s eyes shifted as he fit the puzzle pieces together.

Albert was a fine intermediary. He’d a handsome face that polished up well, and he knew all the finer points of etiquette required to sail the dangerous waters of the Avryn aristocracy. He was competent and well spoken but suffered the illness of all nobles, a dulling of the senses due to privilege. Pets suffered from the same disorder. Having grown up in a household, a dog couldn’t be expected to live in the wild, any more than a cow or chicken. Domesticated creatures lacked basic situational awareness, that fearful ever-present state of expected catastrophe that kept the less pampered alive. Watching Albert, Royce saw him questioning his foundations and knew what was running through his head: *No . . . that sort of thing happens to other people, not me.*

“So, Puck was telling the truth. He didn’t have anything to do with Bliss Hildebrandt. Guess I’m a better judge of people than you on this one.” Hadrian beamed a smile, which didn’t last

## THE RETURN OF VIRGIL PUCK

long. Royce guessed it faded just as soon as his partner realized he had helped kill an innocent man.

Royce knew better. Puck wasn't innocent; no one was. He'd done something to someone, and the only thing Royce wanted to know was whether that something was going to rub off on him.

"So, who killed Virgil and why?" Hadrian asked.

"Won't ever find out," Royce replied. "It's a double blind. Quadruple if you add in Albert and Constance. We apprehended the poet under trumped-up allegations, nothing dire enough to arouse suspicion—even from someone like me. Then, a second group was hired to do the killing, and probably they were told an entirely different story. All of which makes it incredibly difficult to trace the responsible party or determine the actual motive."

"Well, not to be insensitive to Mister Puck and his demise, but"—Albert looked over at the coins—"I'm in dire need of a new doublet and breeches. It's important to keep up appearances you know, and—"

"Go ahead." Royce nodded. "Take a tenent, but the new outfit will have to wait. We still need to pay Gwen for the use of the room and catch up on our late stable fees."

"Well then, we're in luck because I already have another job lined up."

"Not through Lady Constance, I hope. I'd prefer something a little more straightforward. A job where I know what I'm getting into *before* I step in."

"Ah—no, this one didn't come from Constance, but it's . . ." Albert paused. "Unusual."

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WINTER'S DAUGHTER

Royce folded his arms. He'd had his fill of unusual. "How so?"

"Well, normally I have to poke around and look for work, but this fellow came to me, or rather he came looking for you." Albert looked pointedly at Royce.

"Me?" This *unusual* was sounding worse by the second.

Albert nodded. "He's staying in the Gentry Quarter. Wouldn't give me a name or even tell me what it was about. He said he'd know when you returned, and he'd stop by then."

"He would know?"

Albert nodded. "That's what he said."

"Well, doesn't that just make me feel all warm and cozy. Did he mention how he knew I was living in Melengar, or how he knew me, period?"

"Nope, only said he was up from Colnora and was looking for . . ." Albert paused to think. "It was a strange name, one that made me think of a cleaning service. He didn't mention Riyria, but when I did, he recognized the word. Hmm, I wish I could remember what it was." Albert furrowed his brow further in concentration.

"Don't worry about it," Royce told him and wished he could take the same advice, but he knew all too well that the stranger from Colnora had called him Duster.





## CHAPTER THREE

# THE WHISKEY BARON

**I**t took only a few hours for the mystery man to show up at The Rose and the Thorn. They had time for baths and a hot meal. Hadrian was able to down two tankards of beer, but Royce wanted to stay clearheaded. Normally he unwound after a job with a glass or two of Montemorcey, and he was annoyed that the wine would have to wait. Albert had Gwen seat the potential client in the Diamond Room, which had been kept empty of other patrons to give them privacy.

He sat in the back, an elderly man with gray hair and a face as salty and rugged as a seaside cliff. He wasn't tall; if he stood, Royce suspected they might be the same height. He was, however, big. More than stocky, and even larger than portly, the man eclipsed the chair in which he sat and strained the seams of his traveling clothes. The tunic he wore had double stitching and metal studs, which decorated the floral designs across his

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WINTER'S DAUGHTER

chest. A heavy cloak lay tossed over the back of the chair beside him. Made of a thick two-ply wool, the wrap looked new. He had gloves, too, expensive calfskin. They rested on the table near the cloak. Each had the same floral design as his tunic. *A matched set*, Royce thought.

The visitor watched Royce and Hadrian enter as if studying them for later recall. He didn't bother getting up or offer to shake hands. He patiently waited as Royce and Hadrian took their seats on the stools opposite him, not saying a word.

He focused on Royce. "Is it you? Are you Dust—"

Royce cut him off with a raised hand. "I don't use that name anymore."

The man nodded. "Fair enough. What *should* I call you, then?"

"Royce will do, and the big fella is Hadrian."

Each gave a nod of acknowledgment.

"Who are you?" Royce asked.

"I'm a man who lived in Colnora during the Year of Fear."

Royce let his hand slip off the table. Beside him, Hadrian placed both feet flat on the floor to either side of his stool. The old man didn't appear formidable in any sense, but the look in his eyes was unmistakable: revenge. He wanted it, and he'd come to get it.

"Name's Gabriel Winter."

Royce knew the name but had yet to make the connection. And as far as he could recall, he'd never tangled with anyone named Winter.

"You terrorized Colnora. The entire city was paralyzed from the horror you wrought. Pushcart people, street sweepers, shop

## THE WHISKEY BARON

owners, business barons, everyone right up to the magistrate was terrified. Even brave Count Simon fled to Aquesta that summer. That did a lot for morale, I can tell you.” The fat of the man’s neck quivered as he spoke, but his eyes never wavered, and his voice remained steady and calm. Both hands stayed in plain sight, ten pudgy fingers, palms on the table beside the empty gloves and half-melted candle. Nothing else lay between Royce and Winter but the tabletop.

No cup or mug—he hadn’t ordered a drink.

The Diamond Room was quiet. Not part of the original inn, the room had been recently built to accommodate the tavern’s growing popularity. The addition filled the oblong space between The Rose and the Thorn and Medford House and gave the place its diamond shape. The only sounds came from two barmaids cleaning mugs in the other room.

“What do you want?” Royce asked as his fingers entered the front fold of his cloak and slipped around the handle of Alverstone.

“I want to hire you.”

It shouldn’t have surprised Royce. Albert had described the man as a potential client. But so much about the meeting was worrisome. “Hire me?”

“Yes,” the man replied with curt candor, a hint of a smile on his lips, as if he knew a secret or the punch line to a joke that had yet to be revealed.

“To do what?”

“Exactly what you did in Colnora. Only this time I want you to make the city of Rochelle bleed.”

Hadrian shifted in his seat, his feet coming off poised footings. “Why?”

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WINTER'S DAUGHTER

The man pushed back from the table, folding his arms across his chest as if contemplating what to say next, or maybe just working himself up to say it. Some things didn't come easy. Royce understood that well enough, and from the miserable expression on the man's face, he guessed that whatever he was about to say, this might be the first time he'd put it into words.

"My wife died ten years ago. Just been me and my daughter since then. Good girl, my Genny, faithful, loyal, a hard worker, quick as a whip, and tough as leather. We did well together, the two of us. She got me through the tough times, and there were plenty of those. But less than four months back she went off with a nobleman from Rochelle. Fella named Leo Hargrave."

Hadrian leaned forward. "Leopold Hargrave?"

"That's him."

Royce raised a questioning brow at Hadrian.

"He's the *Duke* of Rochelle. It's in Alburn, southeast of here. I was in King Reinhold's army down that way before I shipped off to Calis."

"Reinhold is dead," Winter said.

"The king of Alburn has died?"

"Him and his whole family. Bishop Tynewell is going to crown a new king come the Spring Festival. Genny wrote me all about it. She wrote me three days a week ever since the wedding, then nothing." The man frowned, his sight falling to the surface of the table where he scraped at a worn spot with his thumbnail, trying to tear back a splinter.

Royce nodded. "So, what? You think she's dead?"

"I know she is."

"Because she's late in sending letters?" Hadrian said. "The woman just got married; she's in a new city, a very different city,

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and she's a duchess now. Might be a tad busy. Or maybe she sent letters and the courier was lost in the snows. It's not spring yet, and those mountain passes can be treacherous. You're jumping to conclusions."

Gabriel Winter looked into Hadrian's eyes. "I did receive a letter, but not from my Genny. Hargrave wrote to say she's disappeared."

"Oh, well, disappeared is . . . it's not good, but it doesn't mean she's dead."

"Yes, it does." His stare was cold and harder than granite. "I told her what would happen. She just wouldn't listen. The only reason Hargrave married Genny was for her dowry. He doesn't love her. Never did. But Genny, she loves him, see. From the top of her head to the tip of her toes she does. Don't know why. She's always been so sensible in the past, and this Hargrave . . . well, the man is noble, that should have told her everything right there. I tried to stop her, but how could I? He's all she ever wanted. That's what she told me. My Genny, she's not what you would call pretty. Even as wealthy as we are, no one ever came knocking on her door. She was getting up there in age, will be thirty-three in the fall, and, well, when the duke asked for her hand it was like offering the gift of flight to a chicken. She couldn't see past the dream. Hargrave killed her all right, him and his ilk. That was his plan from the start. I saw it in the man's eyes. He was using her." Gabriel turned to Royce. "I'd go there myself, but—" He spread his arms. "I'm old and fat, and never was that good with a knife. What could I do to avenge my darling daughter? Nothing. As a father, I'm incapable of doing the deed myself, but as a businessman"—he pointed at Royce—"I have the means to pay others to be my hands."

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WINTER'S DAUGHTER

*Businessman!* That clicked the tumbler, and Royce finally knew who he was talking to, and how the man knew where to find him. “Winter’s Whiskey.”

“That’s me.”

It was Hadrian’s turn to raise a questioning brow.

Royce clarified, “One of the business barons of Colnora, the ones who actually run the city. Nobles appointed by the king of Warric are supposed to administrate, but they rule like a barnacle commands a ship. The real control resides in the hands of the magnates who live in the Hill District: men like the DeLurs, the Bocants, and Gabriel Winter, purveyor of fine liquors and quality spirits.”

“My neighbor is Cosmos DeLur. He was kind enough to provide me with your change of address.”

“I guessed as much.”

“My money has bought me all manner of comforts, but right now the only thing I want is revenge.”

“Have you tried contacting the duke?” Hadrian asked.

“Of course I have.”

“What did he say?”

“His *scribe* wrote that Hargrave was ‘investigating the matter.’ *Investigating the matter!* Oh, I’m sure he’s looking real hard, given he’s the one who killed her!”

“You know that for a fact?” Hadrian stared in shock.

“I know it as well as you’re sitting here. I told Genny he only wanted her money. Guess he didn’t need my girl once his debts were paid. No reason to keep her. Nobles aren’t like you and me. No loyalty, no civility. They behave all righteous and proper, but it’s just an act.”

## THE WHISKEY BARON

Gabriel turned to Royce. “Will you make them suffer the way you did in Colnora?”

“Expensive,” Royce said.

“You know who I am. What street I live on. I can afford it, and I want blood. I’ll give you fifty gold for your time and another twenty-five for every life you take, double if they suffer.”

Hadrian dragged a hand down his face. “All this talk of blood and bodies; she could still be alive.” Gabriel started to speak, and Hadrian put a hand up to stop him. “Granted, it doesn’t look good, and it does sound like something bad has happened to her, but she might not be *dead*. Could be she’s locked up somewhere. Killing a duchess is dangerous, even if she’s new to the family.”

Gabriel thought about this for a moment. “Fine. I’ll pay one hundred and fifty yellow stamped with Ethelred’s ugly head if you find, rescue, and bring Genny back alive. But if she’s dead, my original offer stands.”

“Depending on the extent of involvement, this job might prove costly, even for you.”

Gabriel Winter’s rage returned. He made fists on the table. “I have a lot of money, but only one daughter. And if she’s gone, what need have I for gold?” He wiped his eyes. “Make that goddamn duke and all those working for him bleed. Turn the Roche River red for me, for me and my Genny.”

I hope you have enjoyed this sneak-peek of the latest Royce and Hadrian adventure. Due to a non-compete clause in my current Legends of the First Empire contract, the book won't be released to the retail chains until June 2018. Direct-to-consumer purchases, however, are permissible now, and books will be shipped in December (around the 8th for physical copies and ebook versions will be emailed on December 5th (to correspond with the audio book release). If you would like to order a copy, [here is a link to my store](#). Not only can you get your physical books signed and dedicated, but an additional 30% - 55% of your purchase will stay with me rather than going to the middlemen. Also, if you would like to be notified of future releases, beta reading opportunities, Kickstarters, or promotional sales, you can [sign up for my mail list](#). Emails are very infrequent and you can unsubscribe whenever you wish.

Thanks for reading and for supporting me and my writing. Your contributions make it possible for me to write fulltime, a dream I never thought would be possible.



A DAUGHTER VANISHES.  
TWO ROGUES ARE PAID A FORTUNE TO FIND HER.  
IT WASN'T ENOUGH.

When Gabriel Winter's daughter mysteriously disappears and is presumed dead, the wealthy whiskey baron seeks revenge. Having lived in Colnora during the infamous Year of Fear, he hires the one man he knows can deliver a bloody retribution—the notorious Duster.

Ride with Royce and Hadrian as the cynical ex-assassin and idealistic ex-mercenary travel to a mysterious old-world city filled with nobles claiming descent from imperial aristocracy. Riyria's job appears easy: discover what happened to the missing duchess and, if she lives, bring her home . . . if not, punish those responsible. But nothing is simple in the crowded, narrow, mist-filled streets of Rochelle, where more than one ancient legend lurks.



"Riyria has everything you could possibly wish for: the characters are some of the best I've ever encountered in fantasy literature, the writing is top notch, and the plotting is so tight you'd be hard-pressed to find a mouse hole in it." — B&N Sci-fi & Fantasy Blog

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