PRAISE FOR MICHAEL’S WRITING

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

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

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

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

“The Rose and the Thorn is full of mystery, adventure, betrayal and just plain awesome.”
— Fantasy Faction on The Rose and the Thorn

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

THE FIRST EMPIRE
Rhune • Dherr • Rhist • Fhrey • Phyre (coming summer 2016)

THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS
Theft of Swords (contains The Crown Conspiracy and Avempartha)
Rise of Empire (contains Nyphron Rising and The Emerald Storm)
Heir of Novron (contains Wintertide and Perceppliquix)

THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES
The Crown Tower
The Rose and the Thorn
The Death of Dulghast

STANDALONE NOVELS
Hollow World

ANTHOLOGIES
Unfettered: The Jester (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
Blackguards: Professional Integrity (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
Unbound: The Game (Fantasy: Contemporary)
The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria (Dystopian Science Fiction)
Triumph over Tragedy: Traditions (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)
The Fantasy Faction Anthology: Autumn Mists (Fantasy: Contemporary)
Help Fund My Robot Army: Be Careful What You Wish For (Fantasy)
“Professional Integrity” is set in the world of my Riyria Revelations, which centers around two rogues, Royce Melborn (a cynical thief/assassin) and Hadrian Blackwater (a more idealistic ex-mercenary). No prior knowledge of the Riyria books is required to enjoy this story to its fullest. This team makes a living taking “jobs” for various nobles. Usually that means stealing something, but when a young heiress asks them to steal her…well that’s a first for the pair. The name of the person being Tuckerized in this short couldn’t have been a better choice. While I’m playing it coy as to avoid spoilers, I think you’ll come to understand why it fits this particular story so well.
PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

“Say that again,” Hadrian said.

“I want you to kidnap me.” Red-headed, freckled, with deep green eyes as fresh as the leaves of trees after a hard rain, the young woman sat, or more accurately perched, on a stool. Holding a purse on her lap, she was all smiles.

Royce, who had been watching the passing carriages, chose that moment to shut the tea shop’s door. He also closed the adjoining room’s partition, sealing the three of them in a world of doilies, crumb cakes, tiny cups, and parasol stands.

“We’re thieves,” Royce told her in a quiet voice. “We don’t kidnap.”

“It’s the same thing, really,” the young woman insisted, maintaining her blinding grin.

“Really—it isn’t,” Royce said.

“No, seriously. You’re just stealing, you know…a person—me.”

“Fine,” Royce said. “Consider yourself stolen.”

“No, not now. You have to kidnap me tomorrow night.”

“Why?” Hadrian asked, leaning forward carefully.

He sat across from the young woman—who’d said her name was Kristin Lamb—at a little table with an untouched teapot and three cups. He was certain a good bump would send the whole thing over. The entire room was like that, filled with glass and porcelain.

“Because that’s when he’s coming, and he needs to think I’ve been abducted.”

“Who’s he?”
The woman’s bright grin stretched to a full-on beam. Kristin looked up and then closed her eyes, lost in a moment of memory or dream. “Just the most wonderful man on the face of Elan—the Viscount Ianto Don Speakman.”

“And why do you want him to think you’ve been kidnapped?”

Kristin’s eyes popped open, and she shifted in her seat. “Is it really necessary for you to know?”

“No, it’s not, because we don’t kidnap heiresses,” Royce jumped in. He was hovering halfway between the table and the door to the street. “Now if you know a neighbor you don’t like who has a jeweled tiara she keeps in a dresser drawer, we can do business, otherwise—”

“Yes, it’s necessary,” Hadrian said, and turned to face her more directly, the scabbard of his bastard sword dragging across the rug.

“Well, you see, we’re going to be married.”

“Okay, so why do you want your fiancè to think you’ve been kidnapped?”

“Well…” Kristin’s fingers played self-consciously with the heart-shaped silver locket hanging from a chain around her neck, her face blushing. “He’s not exactly my fiancè.”

“How much not your fiancè is he?”

She looked away, her sunbeam smile growing cloudy. “He doesn’t know I exist.” Her white-gloved hands came up to cover embarrassment.

“Not going to make much of an impression on him if you disappear then, is it?” Royce took advantage of the woman’s covered face to glare at Hadrian and jerked his head toward the exit.

Royce wasn’t the sociable sort. Most of their jobs were set up through a liaison which avoided this shortcoming, but after their last arranged venture, which resulted in the two being trapped in the roots of a mountain by a long dead dwarven jester, Royce had insisted on handling this meeting personally.
“No, it will!” Kristin’s head popped out of her hands. “When he’s heard I’ve been taken, he’ll rush to my rescue. And tomorrow will be perfect. Ianto and Parson Engels come every month. They spend their nights drinking with my father until they all pass out.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely sounds like the most wonderful man in Elan.” Royce moved behind Kristin and, with an earnest expression, pointed at the door.

“Oh he’s not a drunkard. He’s a man of honor and only partakes to please my father. He’s much too polite to say no.”

“Luckily we don’t suffer from the same malady. Hadrian? Shall we? No need to keep wasting this lady’s time and we really—”

“I’ll pay fifteen sovereign tenents.” Kristin pried the mouth of her purse open. The coins poured onto the delicate table with a clatter. One rolled off, hit the floor, and spiraled around before ramming into Royce’s foot. “See!”

Royce plucked the coin with a look of amazement. “You brought the money with you?”

“Ah-huh.” Kristin nodded, making her ponytail bounce. “I thought you might not believe me.”

“Oh, trust me, I don’t believe you.”

“What?” She patted a gloved hand on the pile she’d just poured. “This is real coin.”

“I know—I’m not referring to the money,” Royce said. “I honestly can’t believe you made it this far.”

“Oh.” She threw a dismissive hand at him and smirked. “Well, I only live a few miles outside of Medford.” Kristin pointed toward the window, which framed their view of the crowded plaza of Gentry Square where scores of nobles strolled in the midday sun. “I could have walked. Really I could have, but these are new shoes…” She stomped a dainty foot on the rug, making a muffled thump. “And Daddy is always saying the horses need exercise.”
“I meant in life,” Royce said. “I can’t believe you’ve lived this long. You’re what? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? By now I would have bet gold you’d have drowned by looking up in a rainstorm.”

Kristin’s eyes widened. “Don’t you dare insult me!” She squared her shoulders and straightened the sleeves of her gown. “You make it sound like I’m an old hag. I’m only twenty-two!”

Royce looked at Hadrian and rolled his eyes. Turning back to Kristin, he made a ridiculous bow. “Oh—well, my apologies.”

Kristin’s face became a beacon of hope as she leaned forward. “So you’ll do it?”

“No!” Royce’s tone echoed with finality.

“But Royce—” Hadrian started.

“Listen,” Royce stopped him. “Aside from the fact that we don’t kidnap—or even pretend to—tomorrow is a full moon, which adds additional risk to an already stupid idea.”

Hadrian ignored him and leaned toward Kristin, careful not to put his weight on the table. **If I get out of here without breaking something it will be a miracle.** “Let me get this straight. You’re willing to pay fifteen tenents just in the hope your disappearance will be noticed by this Ianto fellow?”

The woman wiggled her eyebrows. “Clever, right?”

“No if clever means the same in your world as it does in ours,” Royce said.

“My father will panic when I disappear. And Ianto—being the daring, brave, and wonderful man he is—will offer to find me. And when he does, I’ll throw my arms around his neck and thank him with kisses. Oh—he’ll notice me.”

“And then you two will live happily ever after, I suppose?” Royce stared at the woman, his disgust replaced by pity. Hadrian had seen the same expression after his partner’s bay mare broke her leg stepping in a woodchuck hole.

“Absolutely.” Kristin bounced once more in her chair.
Hadrian picked up the woman’s empty purse and began putting the coins back. “Listen, I’m sorry, but I have to agree with Royce. You don’t need us. Save your money. If you really think your disappearance will work, just sneak out and pretend you were kidnapped.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he locks me in.”

“Who does?”

“My father.”

“So? Climb out a window.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re bedroom doesn’t have a window?”

“He doesn’t lock me in my bedroom.”

“Where does he lock you?”

“In a steel box…in the basement.”

Hadrian stopped gathering up the coins, opened his mouth, and then closed it. He glanced at Royce, who failed to offer any help, but appeared genuinely interested in the conversation for the first time. “Your father…wait…” Hadrian forgot himself and leaned on the table with his elbow, causing the thing to tilt and creak or possibly crack; he wasn’t sure which. Jerking his elbow nearly took out the porcelain teapot. He watched to make certain the table wouldn’t collapse, composed himself, clasped his hands, and leaned toward her again. “Why in Maribor’s name would your father lock you in a box?”

Kristin shrugged, making the lace of her dress dance.

“Have you asked?”

She looked at Hadrian with a smirk.

“So what did he say?”

“He just says it’s for my own safety and won’t say anything else.”

“And your mother? What does she say? Why does she go along with this?”
“My mother died when I was five, and I’m certain that’s part of it. After what happened to her, he’s overprotective.”

“What happened to your mother?”

Kristin focused on the teacups. “We were attacked by wolves just a few miles from home. She was killed. He’s always saying he won’t let it happen again.”

“So he locks you in a steel box every night?”

“No. Just when Ianto and the parson visit, which, of course, is why Ianto hasn’t noticed me.”

“Yeah.” Royce nodded his head. “I can see that being a problem.”

“Exactly,” Kristin nodded along with him. “So all you have to do is come in after they’ve passed out, go downstairs, and steal me. You can leave a note telling them where to leave some ransom money…you can keep that too, by the way. Then just tie me to a tree or something and send another note saying where they can find me.”

“You know, that really doesn’t sound too hard,” Hadrian said.

“Don’t encourage her.” Royce pushed away from the chair.

“Royce, the poor woman is being locked in a box whenever suitors visit, I think maybe she could use a little help, don’t you?”

“Oh, she needs help all right, but we’re not in the helping business.”

Hadrian pointed at the purse. “But she’s also paying fifteen gold tenents. You like gold tenents.”

The door to the tea shop opened, ringing a small bell, and a splash of sunlight hit the floor as three elderly ladies entered while closing their parasols. They were warmly greeted by the owners who rushed out of the side office—a husband and wife, Hadrian guessed; he wasn’t sure. He and Royce had been working out of Medford for years, but this was the first time they’d set foot inside the tea shop. Most of their meetings were conducted in the far less affluent Rose and the Thorn Tavern. That wasn’t possible this time. Kristin couldn’t be expected to go to the Lower Quarter, much less Wayward Street. It’s likely she didn’t even know such places existed.
The three ladies glanced suspiciously in their direction. Two surly looking men with a young, well-to-do woman trapped between them raised suspicion. Especially Royce. His all-enveloping cloak and piercing glare screamed malevolence. He was the sort of man mothers described to keep children from wandering. And Hadrian wasn’t much better. Dressed in worn leather and totting three swords along with a three-day-old beard, he made the perfect accomplice. In most places they frequented, their don’t-bother-us appearance was a good thing—not so much in a gentry tea shop. At least the money had been put away.

Hadrian lowered his voice. “Come on, Royce, it’s an easy job. I’ve seen you do more on a dull night just for kicks.”

“So you’ll do it?” Kristin asked, that brilliant smile back again, all hope and butterflies.

Hadrian looked at Royce.

Royce glanced at the elderly women as they took seats across the room. He sighed, threw up his hands in resignation, then turned away.

“It doesn’t look like it,” Hadrian explained, “but that’s a yes.”

“Can I just leave the money with you, then?” Kristin asked.

Royce turned back and loomed over the little table and the young woman. “I was going to insist on that, even if we didn’t take the job.” This whispered statement was delivered with all the sinister foreboding known to make grown men shiver.

“Oh good!” Kristin jumped up, clapping her hands—her smile wider than ever. “And you’ll be there tomorrow night? Ridgewood Manor, about half a mile past the mill with the waterwheel.”

Hadrian glanced over at the trio of ladies openly watching. “We’d be happy to accept your invitation.”
Ridgewood Manor and the surrounding estate was a plot of land provided to the Port Minister as part of his compensation by King Amrath, ruler of Melengar. At one time it may have been grand, but the place was showing its age and wasn’t much to look at, at least from the outside. Two stories of mismatched stone, moss, and ivy, Hadrian might have mistaken it for a rustic inn or a once-fine tavern that had fallen on hard times. Three dormers jutting out of the gabled roof suggested a third story, and the two chimneys spouting on either side hinted at the owner’s indulgence for comfort. But the soot-stained manor wore an abandoned expression, a lonely melancholy reflected in the many unadorned windows that peered out on an empty countryside and an encroaching forest.

Royce and Hadrian had found the Lamb estate right where Kristin said it would be, some five miles southeast of Medford, just past the waterwheel of Abner’s gristmill. The house was nestled so far back from the King’s Road that a sign was needed. The simple plank, cut into the shape of an arrow and mounted on a listing post, was weathered to the point of uselessness. Following the arrow’s suggestion, they walked up a dirt road that faded into a two-track path as it wandered through a dense forest. After what Hadrian guessed to be a quarter mile, they found a clearing with a lonesome duck pond where a forgotten rowboat rotted. Beyond it stood the moss blanketed wall, the wrought iron gate, and the manor.

“What kind of person locks their daughter in a box?” Hadrian asked, staring at the house.

Royce settled in behind a thick patch of blackberry bushes near the eaves of the forest. The summer wind was somewhere else that evening, and nothing moved except the occasional flight of birds and a pair of mallards dunking their heads in the leaf-strewn
pond. The sun was still high enough so that shade was welcomed, but the shadow of the manor was long enough to reach the rotting rowboat.

“People do strange things. For instance—you took this job.”

“I didn’t hear you say ‘No.’”

Royce knelt down, peering through the leaves, his sight methodically panning the grounds. “Actually I did. You just weren’t listening. You were swayed because she’s cute.”

“She is cute. People like cute things: puppies, kittens, babies—not you, of course, but most people. The fact that you hate puppies is really disturbing, by the way.”

Royce showed no sign of listening.

“If you really didn’t want to do this, we wouldn’t be here,” Hadrian said. “In fact, we could have just kept her money. Not like there was anything she could have done about it. So if it was such a stupid idea, why are we here?”

“Professional integrity.”

Hadrian laughed.

“Quiet,” Royce scolded, his head turning, eyes darting around.

Hadrian covered his mouth, the laughter reduced to airy snorts.

Royce scowled.

“Do you even know what the word integrity means?”

Royce sighed and shifted a foot to get a better look at the yard near the gate.

“No seriously,” Hadrian said. “Why are we here?”

Royce shrugged. “Curiosity.”

“So you want to know why he locks her in a box too?”

“That…and other things.”

“Oh? Ooh.”

Royce looked over. “What?”

“This isn’t about the woman at all. This is about her father.”
Royce pointed up at the house. “Lord Darren Lamb all but killed Medford’s underground trade when Amrath appointed him Port Minister. For more than a year, nothing moved in or out of the city.”

“Nothing illegal, you mean.” Hadrian struggled to find a safe place to sit among the thorny tendrils of the dense thicket, then he removed his left boot. While the trip from Medford was a generally pleasant walk along country lanes, somewhere near the gristmill Hadrian had discovered a pebble near his heel.

“Right—and he actually enforced the king’s tariffs.”

“The man was clearly insane.”

Royce smirked. “The point is he successfully corked the flow of contraband for the first year after his appointment, and then everything went back to business as usual. You don’t find that interesting?”

“You heard Kristin. The man’s wife died—and not from some fever. Think about it—wolves. That kind of thing can mess some people up. Do you really think he was concentrating on his work after that?” He paused holding his boot absently and looked once more toward the house. “I didn’t even think there were wolves around here anymore.”

“Maybe it wasn’t wolves.”

Hadrian turned the boot upside-down and began shaking it. “What do you mean?”

“Any man who shuts off the flow of contraband is going to have a lot of nasty enemies.”

“You know, not everything is a conspiracy.”

Royce turned and looked squarely at him. “And the steel box?”

Hadrian looked up. “Okay, you’ve got me there. But as you said, people do strange things. Maybe Kristin is right. Her father could just be overly protective.”

“Overly protective fathers threaten suitors with a thumbscrew by saying it won’t be used on their thumbs. They don’t lock their daughter in a steel box.” Royce pulled
back a branch to give them both a clear view of the front gate. “I think something else is going on in that house after dark.”

“Like what?”

Royce smiled. “That’s why we’re here.”

As the sun was about to set, a carriage carrying two men rolled past Royce and Hadrian. It entered the gate and the door to the house opened before it came to a stop.

A richly dressed man rushed out. “Finally!” His voice carried easily across the duck pond to the blackberry thicket. “I thought you might not be coming.”

Two men stepped out. “Sorry. Too many last minute things. Lost track of the time,” said the larger man.

“Well, I had Leta save dinner for you.”

“Kristin?”

“She’s safe. I locked her in for the night a few minutes ago. I don’t take chances anymore.”

They went inside. The door closed with a distant clap, and as Royce and Hadrian waited in the forest, the sky darkened and night fell.

There were times Hadrian wondered if Royce was actually a cat that some mischievous witch had turned into a man and then lost track of. The similarities were too numerous to be coincidental. An irritatingly-superior aloof nature, fastidiousness, a habit of roaming at night, and his general propensity for solitude were all evidence. But it was when he was hunting, as he was that night, that Hadrian really saw the cat in Royce. The man could sit perfectly still, eyes wide, for hours. He even breathed differently, as if smelling his prey.
Hadrian crawled from the brambles and walked beneath the eaves for a time before finally just lying on the lawn and staring up at the stars. He used to gaze at the night sky often as a kid. Having grown up in a tiny manorial village there wasn’t much else to do at night—and it appeared there still wasn’t. These stars were different than the ones he had grown up with. The manor was too. Difficult to form a precise thought, the place had a lonely, sad feeling. It was impossible to imagine someone as alive as Kristin living there.

Hadrian fell asleep, and when he woke a full moon was in the sky. He crept back to Royce who remained just as he’d left him—a cat on the hunt.

“Have a nice nap?” Royce asked.
“How long was I sleeping?”
“Few hours.”
“Anything happen?”
His answer was a howl that rang through the night.
“Was that a…?”
“A wolf,” Royce said.
“But we’re only five miles outside of Medford.”
Royce shrugged.
“First time you heard it?”
Royce shook his head. “Off and on for a while now.”
“Getting closer or farther away?”
Royce peered thoughtfully toward the house. “Neither.”
While Hadrian was pondering this, Royce stood up. “Getting late. Time to steal an heiress.”

The wall around the manor was only four feet, and they hopped it, landing in a small front-yard garden. Despite the season, no flowers bloomed. The hedges were ragged and grew over the stone walk. The bird bath was dry, filled with only old leaves and a water stain. Royce peered in the dark windows, then looked up toward the roof.
“Just wait here,” Royce said as he moved to the corner of the house and began climbing the irregular edge stones. Designed as a pretty border, they made an excellent ladder for the likes of Royce. Hadrian waited among the overgrown beds and empty planters watching the ghostly form of his partner creep along the roof to one of the dormers where he slipped inside an open window.

Another canine howled, closer this time but muffled—*behind the house perhaps?* The night had turned chilly, the ground wet. Morning would be coming soon, and Hadrian wondered—if only for a moment—if Royce had let him sleep out of kindness. He still made the mistake of thinking of Royce as a normal person, at least what Hadrian thought of as normal. The two had debated the nature of what *normal* was on far too many nights. Royce won those arguments because he had a way with logic which eluded Hadrian, unless Hadrian was drinking. At those times, at least in his own mind, Hadrian declared himself the victor. Royce hadn’t been giving Hadrian his rest out of kindness; he was waiting for the right time. This was the witching hour, the small of the morning when the living left the world to ghosts, goblins, and thieves. Everyone inside would be asleep.

The front door opened and a shadow waved him to enter.

“Three of them asleep in the big room.” Royce pointed into the darkness.

“Drunk, I think. Stairs are this way. Stay close. Be quiet.”

*Oowwwww.*

The wolf howled again—much louder.

Hadrian stopped Royce by grabbing his arm. “That’s—it’s…”

“In the house—yeah.”

“Can’t be a wolf then. Has to be a dog.”

Royce only shrugged. “Heiress,” he said, and led the way down a hall into the kitchen. Walls of stone with an obstacle course of pots and pans on the floor and dangling from overhead beams, it smelled of smoke and grease. Royce led Hadrian to a set of stairs beside a barrel and a pile of wood. Down they went, leaving most of the light behind. Only a single shaft bled down the steps to a cellar filled with racks of wine. In the
center of the basement floor, Hadrian could barely make out a trapdoor with a metal ring and a big brass padlock, holding it fast.

“Kristin?” Hadrian called softly.

Oonnnnwwoo.

The thieves stared at the metal door, then at each other.

The trapdoor had a jailer-style peek window that Royce slid back.

All Hadrian saw was a pair of vicious eyes and bright canine teeth that caught the light as a wolf snarled and snapped.

They both stepped back in shock as the caged animal growled and yipped louder than before. Hadrian heard the sound of feet rushing across the floor above them.

“Damn it!” Royce said, pulling his dagger from beneath his cloak. “Let’s get out of here.” He moved toward the stairs.

Hadrian took one last look at the wolf. It lunged at the opening, a long snout punching through the hole. When it drew back, the light glinted on a silver chain and heart-shaped locket around the animal’s neck.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my house?” Lord Darren Lamb was short, plump, in his late forties, and still in possession of his own hair. He stood just outside the kitchen, blocking their path with a spear and struggling to wipe his eyes clear of sleep.

With him were two others. A thin fellow with a burning candelabra in one hand and a long dagger in the other. He dressed in the black and scarlet robes of a Nyphron priest. The other was a tall man with a bald head and goatee, wearing a stiff-collared doublet and holding a saber.

“Nobody and, oddly enough, absolutely nothing,” Royce replied. His voice was cool, relaxed, but the cat was crouched, claws out, fur high.
Hadrian moved to his side where he stared at his lordship and the spear. The blade was bright silver.

“Nothing?” Lord Darren said incredulously. “What are your names? Why are you here?”

“Misunderstanding,” Royce said. “And if you’ll move aside, we’ll be leaving.”

“I don’t think so,” the tall man with the saber growled. “You’re a pair of thieves, come to steal from his lordship.”

“King Amrath will take your hands for this,” the thin priest with the bouquet of candles said.

“Is that true?” Lord Darren asked Royce.

“Which part?” Royce asked.

“Are you thieves who’ve come to steal from me?”

Royce rocked his head from side to side. “Sort of—but as you can see, we didn’t. Changed our minds.”

“I’m Lord Darren, Port Minister of Medford, and officer of the king’s justice. Do you know that?”

“Actually, yes.”

“I have the power to execute you right here.”

Royce smiled. “You can try. Wouldn’t advise it.”

“Your lordship.” The saber-bearing, bald man raised his weapon. “Do I have your permission to—”

“Your daughter is a werewolf?” Hadrian asked.

Everyone looked at him—even Royce.

Lord Darren’s eyes grew wide, and he stepped back as if Hadrian had threatened him, but while he carried three swords, he hadn’t drawn any of them.

His lordship shot a nervous look at the priest. “You swore—”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” the priest replied quickly. He had a sharp whine to his voice. His lordship turned to the bald man.
“Don’t look at me.” The tall man lowered his blade to a less awkward position, but still kept the tip pointed at Royce.
“So she is a werewolf,” Hadrian concluded.
“You’re not serious,” Royce said.
“You saw what was in the box.”
“I saw a wolf.”
“That wolf is wearing a heart-shaped silver locket around its neck.”
“Drop your weapons,” Lord Darren declared in a commanding, although less confident tone.
Royce looked puzzled. “Why?”
“The two of you are under arrest for attempted burglary.”
“No, I meant why should we put our weapons down?”
“Put them down or we’ll make you drop them,” the tall man said, and raised his blade once more.
“Don’t do that,” Hadrian said quickly, and laid a restraining hand on Royce’s shoulder, drawing him back. “Threats just make him grouchy. But I’ll tell you what—how about we all put the blades away and discuss the situation in a friendly manner. What do you say?”
“I say we’ve already talked too much.” The tall man took a step forward.

Hadrian saw the attack coming, read his feet and shift of weight. The bald man knew how to use a blade. He had experience but no talent. Hadrian, having positioned himself in front of Royce, became the default target. Stepping close, Hadrian ignored the sword and blocked the man’s arm. He caught him by the wrist, twisted, took the weapon away, and shoved him to the floor. Then Hadrian turned on the priest who shuffled deftly forward with his dagger ready to stab. He stopped as Hadrian pointed the saber at him.

“Drop it,” Hadrian ordered.

The priest hesitated.
“Drop it or you’ll be the one to lose a hand.” Hadrian was lying. He wouldn’t cut off a man’s hand when he only had a dagger any more than he’d hit a woman brandishing a shovel. The priest didn’t know that, and years spent with Royce had taught Hadrian intimidation was a useful tool in saving lives. This wasn’t the lesson Royce intended him to learn, but Royce wasn’t the best teacher.

The priest dropped the dagger.

“Your lordship…you don’t look like much of an expert with a spear,” Hadrian said. “What do you say we just talk?”

Lord Darren set the spear on the floor and took a step back.

The bald man was on his feet again and Hadrian tossed the saber back to him. He caught it as shock washed over his face.

“I hate when you do that,” Royce said.

“Who else knows?” Lord Darren asked Royce and Hadrian. “How many people have you told?”

They had moved to the drawing room, where his lordship placed the spear above the fireplace and invited Royce and Hadrian to join him at a small mahogany table dressed with a dark wine bottle surrounded by cut-crystal glasses. On the walls were paintings of people and landscapes; the most prominent hung opposite the windows and depicted a beautiful woman wearing a silver heart-shaped locket.

Hadrian shrugged. “We didn’t even know until five minutes ago.”

“Technically we still don’t know,” Royce said. “And we don’t need to know. Our business here is done.”

“What business is that?” the priest asked.
“What part of our business don’t you understand?” Royce responded with his usual quiet voice and fixed stare that caused the man to lean back in his chair.

“If you’re still curious”—Hadrian looked at Royce—“why not just ask them?”

“Ask us what?” The bald man looked awkward on the couch, his hands gripping the cushions. Hadrian recognized that uncomfortable pose from when he was sitting in the tea shop.

“How about we begin with why there is a wolf in that box?”

There was a silence, then Lord Darren stood up and walked to the fireplace. “My wife was killed. I was staying in town to inspect the docks, and I sent her and Kristin home in a carriage driven by a man named Roy—Roy Westin. Good man, I thought.”

“You really couldn’t know,” the priest said, leaning forward with sad understanding eyes.

“Turns out Roy Westin had a secret.”

“His name wasn’t Roy Westin,” the bald man took over. Hadrian realized he had a slight accent—southern in nature, but he couldn’t pinpoint it. “His real name was DerVoy Brickle. Comes from my homeland—a place of jungles and wild things, overrun with black magic and curses. Brickle had one of these curses. Every full moon he changed into a monstrous wolf driven by bloodlust to kill. I tracked him many miles until he got on a ship bound for Vernes.”

“You’re from Calis, then?” Hadrian asked.

The bald man nodded. “I’m the Viscount Ianto Don Speakman of Tel Dar. Brickle was part of a pack of cursed men who roamed the forests and hills near my estate. They killed many of my people, and I’ve made it my life’s work to see this curse ended. I hunted and killed each of them, but Brickle slipped away. I ran into difficulty catching his trail in Vernes. By that time, he was already in Medford and working as a carriage driver. I arrived too late to save his lordship’s wife. The night he drove her and the child home there was a full moon.”
“They were coming through the forest.” Lord Darren pointed out the windows.
“When Roy changed. It sent the horses into a panic, and the carriage crashed. The beast tore my wife apart and turned on Kristin just as Ianto arrived. He used that spear”—he pointed to the silver weapon mounted over the mantle—“and killed it. But the damage had already been done. My beautiful wife was dead, and the wolf had bitten Kristin.”

Lord Darren got up and poured himself a glass of wine, then paused, looked at the two of them and sighed. “Would you care for a glass?”

“Gracious for a man to entertain thieves,” Royce said.

“I have a cellar full of this stuff, left by the previous owner. And I find it less humiliating to offer rather than have it taken.”

“We really weren’t here to steal from you,” Hadrian said.

Royce waited until Lord Darren drank, then poured himself a small glass.

“Just visiting without an invitation, then?” his lordship asked. “In the middle of the night after slipping in—where?” He looked around. “A window? The garden door?”

“So how did he get involved in all this?” Royce pointed at the priest.

Ianto said, “When I saw the girl had been bitten and the wolf I had just killed turn back into a man, I tried to speak to Lord Darren, but in his grief he wouldn’t see me. So I sought out Parson Engels to arrange a meeting. We sat in this very room, and I explained his daughter might have the same curse.”

“I have seen such things before in the service of the church,” Engels added. “The viscount wanted the girl killed, but I begged him to stay his hand. She was an innocent, and certainly Novron wouldn’t want to take the life of one of his own who was cursed through no fault of her own. I convinced Ianto if appropriate precautions could be made the child could live.”

“When they told me of Claire’s death, and what would happen to Kristin, I didn’t believe them. Who would accept such a tale?” Lord Darren was still holding his glass, staring off toward the fireplace. “The viscount gave me the spear and insisted I lock Kristin up the night of the next full moon. I thought they were crazy, but the parson
insisted. If I didn’t do as he said, he would have no choice but to tell the bishop of Medford, who would go to the king. They agreed to stay silent only if I could prevent her from harming anyone else.”

“And on the next full moon?” Hadrian asked.

Lord Darren nodded, then swallowed the last of his wine. “I planned to lock Kristin’s bedroom door, but they insisted on a more secure place. Leta, my housekeeper, told us about a steel safe in the basement that the previous Port Minister, Lord Griswold, had installed to keep his valuables in.” Lord Darren poured himself another glass.

Royce hadn’t tasted his drink yet. He was still swirling the wine, watching it spin inside the glass.

Lord Darren noticed and smirked. “It’s not poisoned, and it’s good wine. Don’t know where Griswold got it. No labels on any of the bottles.” His lordship took another swallow, then retreated to the hearth and leaned on the mantle before continuing. “Poor Kristin. She had no idea why I was locking her in that dreadful place. Thankfully she was only five. We made a game of it, but later that night when I heard the howling…” He took another swallow of wine, a big one. His eyes staring off unfocused. “When we drew back the plate she had changed. My darling daughter had turned into a vicious, snarling, fanged beast. Only then did I believe.”

“So you two come here every full moon?” Hadrian asked Engels.

The parson nodded. “It’s necessary to contain Uberlin’s minion, and I couldn’t live with myself if she escaped in that dreadful form and killed, or worse, passed the curse to others. It was either this or destroy the child.”

“What do you do all night?” Hadrian asked.

Lord Darren pointed at the bottle on the table. “We drink. I do at least. Have to once she starts howling.”

“So, you know all about us,” Ianto said. “Now what about you? Who are you, and why are you here?”

Royce finally tasted the wine. “Just visiting.”
“I think I know who you are,” the parson said. “Two men, one big with three swords, one little dressed in a dark hood.”

“I’m not *that* little,” Royce protested with a dash of menace.

“You’re Riyria.”

“Riyria?” Ianto asked, and Lord Darren’s expression showed the viscount had only barely beaten him to the question.

“A pair of thieves that work in Medford,” Engels explained. “Contract workers. Only do special jobs—that’s how they co-exist with the local thieves’ guild, the Crimson Hand.”

Royce smiled at him. “Amazingly well informed for a clergyman. Tell me *Pastor* Engels, what are the twelve tenents of the Nyphron Church?”

“I wouldn’t waste my time ministering to the likes of you two.”

“But you do know them?”

“Of course.”

Royce continued to smile until Engels poured himself a glass of wine.

“The sun!” Lord Darren crossed the room and threw back the curtains, revealing the morning light. He took a step toward the kitchen, then turned. “You have to promise me not to breathe a word of this to my daughter. She doesn’t know, and I don’t want her to—not yet. One day she’ll have to learn the truth, but I want her to have a few more years of innocence, a few more years of happiness. Promise me.”

“You have my word,” Hadrian said.

Lord Darren looked at Royce.

“Oh, yes. You have mine too.”

The Port Minister rushed out of the room.

“Your lordship!” Engels shouted after him, glanced at Ianto, and sighed.

Hadrian looked to Royce who remained relaxed in his chair taking another sip of wine. The man appeared all too comfortable for one who, moments before, had been eager to leave.
When Lord Darren returned, he had a drowsy Kristin at his side. The woman was yawning and running fingers through her hair. She wore a simple white nightgown with a burgundy robe tied at the waist with a gold cord. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of Royce and Hadrian.

Lord Darren led her toward the stairs to the second story when Kristin stopped and addressed the pair, “You were supposed to kidnap me!”

This caught everyone’s attention.

Lord Darren hesitated, confused. “You know these men?”

“I hired them to abduct me.”

“To what?”

The woman stood rigid, arms straight, hands in fists, her lips rolled up in a painful frown. “Why didn’t you steal me? I paid you!” She looked at Ianto. “This is sooo embarrassing! You two are absolutely lousy thieves!”

“You paid them?” Lord Darren was still trying to understand.

“We couldn’t kidnap you,” Hadrian said.

“Why not?” Kristin’s voice was near screech level.

“Because, apparently, you’re a werewolf,” Royce said.

Kristin blinked. “What? I’m a what?”

“Werewolf. You turn into a vicious wolf every full moon. That’s why your father locks you in the box.”

“You gave me your word!” his lordship shouted.

“And you actually believed me.” Royce shook his head. “I can’t believe the king appointed you to enforce his tax and tariff laws. It’s little wonder the black market is thriving.”

“I’m not a werewolf!” Kristin said.

Hadrian offered his most sympathetic smile. “I’m afraid you are. You still wore your locket.”
Kristin touched the necklace. “And…” The woman’s eyes darted back in forth in thought. “And was this wolf wearing this nightgown as well? This robe?”

Hadrian glanced at Royce. Both shook their heads.

“Because this is what I woke up in. Do my clothes magically disappear and reappear as well?”

This caught even Lord Darren by surprise and he looked to Ianto. “How does that work?”

“I hunt werewolves, I’m not an expert in their enchantments.”

Eyes shifted toward Engels, who waved his hands before his face. “Look, that doesn’t matter. We’ve all seen her change.”

“Have you?” Royce asked. He looked at Lord Darren. “Have you actually witnessed your daughter change into a wolf?”

He shook his head. “No—and I would never want to.”

“I’m not a werewolf!” the woman repeated, then stared at Ianto. “All this time—all these years—you’ve been coming here because…because…”

“He wanted to kill you,” Royce told her. “But as long as your father stays here, looking over you, Ianto won’t go to the king and demand your execution or just stab you with that pretty silver spear. Still want to marry him?”

“I wish I was a wolf,” Kristin said. “I wish I was a wolf right now!”

“So each full moon, while you sleep in a steel box, he’s here having a party.”

Royce raised his glass.

“We aren’t having a party,” Lord Darren said through clenched teeth.

“No. More of a small social gathering, I suppose. But you do enjoy a very fine wine.”

“I drink to cope with the fact my daughter is howling through a steel grate! I drink to fall asleep before I go mad. I don’t care about the quality of the wine.”

“Pity, this is Montemorcy, one of the finest wines in the world.”
Lord Darren looked puzzled. “Can’t be. Montemorcey is banned in Melengar by the king’s edict.”

“And yet you have one of the largest collections I’ve ever seen. You are an excellent Port Minister, aren’t you?”

Lord Darren glanced at the bottle on the table.

“Trust me,” Hadrian said. “If it wasn’t Montemorcey, he would have spit it out. That’s the only thing I’ve ever seen him drink.”

Lord Darren continued to look at the bottle.

“Can we get back to the werewolf thing?” the woman asked.

“I’m sorry, Kristin,” her father said. “But it’s true. I wanted to spare you that horror until you were a little older, but…well now you know.”

“It’s not true!” She stood glaring at him defiantly as tears filled her eyes. “It’s not!”

Lord Darren reached out to hold her, but Kristin recoiled. She looked at Engels and Ianto and drew away from them as well. Finally she faced Hadrian. “I brought you here. You work for me. Tell the truth!”

“There was a wolf in the box you spoke of, and it was wearing your necklace.” He pointed at the silver locket. “Were you bitten by the wolf that killed your mother?”

The woman began to sob. Lord Darren put his arms around his daughter, and this time she let him hug her.

A tall slender woman in a servant’s gown appeared from the corridor. Her hair was pulled back, showing threads of gray. She held out her hands. “There now, come child. Let’s get you washed up and dressed.”

“Thank you, Leta,” Lord Darren said, releasing Kristin.

Hadrian felt awful as he watched the once hopeful woman shuffle out, head bowed. “Isn’t there anything that can be done? A cure of some sort?”

“His lordship has investigated everything possible,” Engels said. “Nothing short of death will free her.”
Lord Darren faced Royce and Hadrian. “As my daughter admits to hiring you to break into my house, and since you made no attempt to steal anything—other than her—I can find no cause to arrest either of you. I don’t think there’s a law against paying someone to kidnap yourself…so you’re free to leave.”

Royce raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“My lord,” Engels protested. “If they talk—if the king learns—your daughter will be executed.”

“First,” Royce said, “I’m not the sort to talk.”

Engels frowned. “You’ve proved your word means nothing.”

“I’m not giving my word. Don’t even know what that stupid saying means. Just pointing out I’m naturally quiet. Second, what’s you’re alternative? Want Hadrian to take your weapons away again?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lord Darren declared. “Now that Kristin knows, I’ll go to the king and explain the whole thing. I—I just can’t keep living like this, and what happens to Kristin when I die? Now that she knows, we’ll face this together. One more night in the box, then my daughter and I will throw ourselves on the mercy of his majesty. Maybe he can help us out of this nightmare.” He looked at Royce and Hadrian once more. “I can’t say I’m pleased you came, but perhaps it was for the best.”

On the road heading back toward Medford, Royce and Hadrian stopped at the Gilded Lilly public house where they shared lamb stew, heavy bread, and some light ale for Hadrian. Royce, who normally didn’t linger, showed no desire to hurry, and they enjoyed a rare leisurely afternoon on the open porch overlooking the King’s Road.

“We aren’t going back to Medford, are we?” Hadrian asked when Royce ordered a third round of drinks.
“You can if you like.”

“And what will you be doing?”

Royce grinned.

“You’re going back? Why?”

“Professional integrity.”

“You keep saying that. You’re starting to scare me.”

Royce put his feet up on one of the empty chairs at their little table. All the furniture at the Lilly was old-fashioned rustic—sturdy, the sort Hadrian could trust.

“You can say I’m still curious.” Royce stripped a splinter from the table and used it to clean his teeth of lamb.

“About what?”

“For one thing”—he used the splinter to point at the sky—“there aren’t twelve tenants of the Nyphron Church.”

“There aren’t? How many are there?”

Royce looked at him shocked. “How should I know? I just picked a number at random. Either I’m incredibly lucky or Engels is lying. And he knows too much about the underbelly of Medford to be alive, much less a minister of the church. He works for the Hand.”

Hadrian wasn’t surprised. While servants of the church usually made him uneasy, as if he were guilty of something, Engels had a comfortable brown-bread-and-beer way about him. “So, I guess you’d be interested to know Engels isn’t the only one being dishonest. Ianto isn’t a viscount of Tel Dar, either.”

Royce shifted his shoulders to look at him, displaying raised eyebrows. “What makes you say that?”

“Tel Dar is a little Tenkin village on the eaves of the Gur Em. They don’t have viscounts there, just a chief and a warlord. But if they did have a viscount his title would be Pansoh. I suspect the closest old Ianto has been to Calis is Wesbaden or possibly Dagastan.” Hadrian took a swallow of his ale. “That saber he was swinging is a seadog
cleaver, and I suspect you’ll find a dirk tucked in his belt somewhere. Real popular among sailors of the southern seas.”

“Something is definitely going on,” Royce said. “That something involves the Hand and crates of Montemorcey wine. And since knowledge is power, I want to know what.”

“And how do you plan to find out?”

“By doing what our client asked us to. We’re going to steal Lord Darren Lamb’s daughter.”

“Royce.” Hadrian paused, holding his mug halfway to his mouth. “There’s another full moon tonight, and the woman has a habit of turning into a killer wolf after sunset. I’m thinking this might be a bad idea.”

“It was your poor judgment to take this job in the first place. Now it’s my turn.”

The two slipped in right after dark, and knowing exactly where to go, they crept through the house with ease. Hadrian imagined Royce wanted to reach Kristin before the moon rose—before the change. Why, he wasn’t sure. He doubted even Royce knew. Maybe he just wanted to witness the transformation. Royce wasn’t one to believe in anything he didn’t see, smell, and touch.

The Ridgewood Manor’s kitchen still smelled of pork, and Hadrian guessed there was one less pig running around the estate that evening. Lord Darren had likely held a farewell feast. No sense saving anything, his rainy day had come. He would abide by Amrath’s judgment, and it wouldn’t be good for him or his daughter.

Just as the previous night, Hadrian dodged pots, pans, and kettles as he followed Royce down the stairs.
“Kristin?” Hadrian called out softly as they touched down on the cellar’s bricks. The basement was dark except for the single shaft of weak light spilling down the stairs. He took a step around the wine racks when Royce’s hand stopped him.

“The box is open.”

Hadrian peered through the gloom and spotted the open top. Set in the floor, it appeared as a huge drain with its lid flipped back on metal hinges.

“Why is it open?” he whispered. “Is she in there?”

Together they crept closer. Hadrian couldn’t see anything but darkness.

“Empty,” Royce said.

“Maybe they didn’t put her in tonight, or maybe they’re about to.”

Something caught Royce’s eye, and he knelt down near the wall and picked it up.

“Interesting.”

“I can’t see. What is it?”

“The lock for the box and a cup.”

Hadrian heard Royce sniff.

“Wine?”

“Milk.”

“Milk?”

“They put Kristin in the box, but someone intentionally failed to lock it.”

“But then where—” Hadrian looked back up at the stairs, at the brightening shaft of pale light—the light of a rising moon. He took the steps two at a time.

“What are you going to do?” Royce called after him.

“Going after her. Isn’t that why we came?”

Hadrian could see better once he surfaced in the kitchen, where windows cast elongated squares. Better wasn’t good; better wasn’t even mediocre. Too many shadows and dark places surrounded him. Unlike Royce, Hadrian always fumbled his way in the dark. As he moved into the corridor, things only got worse, even darker. Every doorway,
every niche was capable of concealing a lurking beast. He tried to remember what he saw their first night.

_A black wolf? A gray wolf? Too bad it hadn’t been white._

As he moved even deeper into darkness, he touched his swords. He had three: a hand-and-a-half on his right hip, a short on his left. Fast and agile, they were what he used most often when fighting men. He didn’t have experience fighting wolves. Maybe the big two-handed spadone on his back would work best. Using the flange, he could wield it like a spear. A spear would be a fine weapon against a wolf. Against a werewolf, a _silver_ spear would be even better. He headed toward the drawing room…and the mantle.

_I’m not going to kill her. She’s just a young woman. A young woman with two inch fangs and four sets of claws._

Hadrian spotted candlelight up and to his right. A moment later, from the same direction, he heard a growl, a snap, claws on wood, and the cry of a man.

_Damn it!_  

Hadrian ran into the drawing room where Lord Darren and Pastor Engels shuffled backward in horror as a large black wolf attacked Ianto. Before Hadrian was fully in the room, the animal had pinned the bald man to the floor. In a burst of blood that sprayed the little table and the cut-crystal glasses, the wolf ripped his throat out.

Ianto had been on the far side of the room. The wolf had passed by the others to attack him.

_He wanted to kill you… Still want to marry him?_  

Hadrian guessed this was her answer.

“Kristin! No!” Lord Darren shouted at her.

With blood dripping from her jaws, the wolf turned, crouched with raised fur and flattened ears, and crept toward him, growling.
Hadrian rushed in, but the wolf took no notice, eyes fixed on her prey. Engels had his dagger out, backing away. Lord Darren gave a glance toward the mantle. He’d never reach it.

“Kristin!” Hadrian shouted and waved a hand, but the wolf had no interest.

“Dear Maribor, Kristin, no—don’t,” her father begged.

Engels made the first move. He bolted for the front door.

The wolf gave a yip, claws raked the polished wood floor, and a hundred pounds of animal slammed into the parson.

Lord Darren saw his chance, and running to the mantle, he ripped down the spear. Hadrian charged the wolf, whose teeth were buried in Engel’s shoulder, jerking him wildly.

“No!” Hadrian cried as the screaming pastor lashed out with his dagger and stabbed the wolf in her side.

Kristin let the man’s shoulder go and bit into his throat. Just like Ianto, Pastor Engels died in a burst of blood.

“Stay back!” Lord Darren shouted, coming forward with the spear in both hands. “Your blades are useless against her. Only silver can kill a werewolf.”

Hadrian knew this to be true. He had spent years in the jungles of Calis and had heard many tales of werewolves and other far worse creatures. And yet…the wolf was bleeding badly from the dagger still jammed in her ribs. She was also wavering. Kristin continued to growl, but her haunches collapsed. The snarl faded from her lips, and a tongue began to hang as she struggled to breathe.

Lord Darren came to Hadrian’s side and together they watched as the wolf lay down in a growing pool of blood. The growl became a whimper.

“Kristin.” Lord Darren put down the spear, and he, too, lowered himself to a squat. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

The wolf laid its head on the floor and the animal’s breathing grew shallower.

“My beautiful girl. I’m so, so sorry.”
The wolf’s eyes closed and Lord Darren crept forward placing a hand on her head. Her eyes opened, a weak flutter. The pupils focused on his lordship, and Hadrian thought he saw appreciation there. Lord Darren continued to stroke the wolf’s fur long after it stopped breathing.

Hadrian picked up the silver spear, then sat down at the little table and poured himself a glass of wine, taking the only glass which wasn’t covered in Ianto’s blood. Normally he didn’t care for wine, but he would have swallowed turpentine if it was the only thing available.

“Why’d you do it?” Lord Darren asked Hadrian, still petting the dead wolf.
“Why’d you come back? Why’d you let her out?”
“Let her out? We didn’t let her out. We came back because we realized Engels and Ianto were lying about who they were.”
“Lying?”
“You didn’t know, then?”
“Know what?”
Hadrian glanced at Ianto’s body sprawled on the floor. “I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”
Lord Darren wiped his cheeks. “She was such a good girl. Such a very good girl.”
Royce entered from the same corridor Hadrian had and paused to look at the bodies.
“Where have you been?” Hadrian asked.
“Exploring.”
“Exploring? While I was hunting a werewolf in the dark? Didn’t you think I could use your help?”
Royce looked once more at the bodies. “You did fine.”
“You call this fine? Engels and Ianto were torn to pieces, and Lord Darren’s daughter is dead.”
Royce paused in thought. “Maybe, but I doubt it—wouldn’t make sense if she was.”

This caught Lord Darren’s attention and the man looked over skeptically. “What are you talking about?”

“Royce,” Hadrian said in exasperation. He pointed at the dead wolf. “She’s right there.”

The thief glanced at the animal. “That’s a wolf.”

“I know, but it’s also Kristin.”

“No, that’s just a wolf. If that was a werewolf, wouldn’t we be seeing a dead woman right now? Or was Ianto lying about that as well?”

Hadrian was stunned. “No… he was right, at least that’s what’s supposed to happen. When a werewolf dies, the body reverts to its original form.”

“What are you saying?” Lord Darren asked, rising to his feet.

“I’m saying we could sit around here and chat, or we can go find your daughter. I’ll assume you prefer the latter.”

Lord Darren led them to the barn and Hadrian was impressed his lordship knew how to saddle a horse. That was good, it would save time.

“Where are we going? Where is Kristin?” the lord asked while tightening the saddle’s strap.

“Don’t know exactly, but I don’t think she’s gotten too far. Not in her condition.”

“Condition? What condition?”

“Drugged, I imagine. I found footprints and drag marks.” Royce jerked his head to the right. “See anything missing?”

Lord Darren looked over. “My carriage!”
“And your housekeeper. I’m guessing Leta always helped tuck Kristin in on those full-moon nights. Gave her some warm milk to help her sleep, perhaps?”

“She put something in the milk?”

“That’d be my guess.”

“But why?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. All I can tell you right now is they’re gone, and the box in the basement isn’t Lord Griswold’s secret safe. I know a few things about safes, and no fool puts a safe in plain sight. They’re always hidden by drapes or under floorboards. That one has a false back, behind which is a tunnel that leads outside. That’s a pretty poor design for a safe, don’t you think?”

“A smugglers hole?” Lord Darren asked.

“Now you’re starting to catch on. How do you think all that wine got into the cellar? I think Lord Griswold would object to smugglers making deliveries to his front door. Can’t blame him, given he was Port Minister and all.”

“And that’s not all I found. There’s a cage on wheels that can butt up against that false back. Along with discarded bones and hay. Your daughter isn’t a werewolf. Someone just wanted you to think she was. Tonight the cage was left open. I imagine the smells from the kitchen led it upstairs and then…well you and Hadrian saw the rest.”

“But why would someone let the beast out? And what about Kristin?”

“I believe we’ll discover all that once we find the carriage.”

The three men raced beneath the full moon. They found the two track road and followed it southeast as it cut an overgrown trail through dense brush and deep woods. Intermittent shadows of tree trunks and pale light flickered past, disorienting Hadrian as he lay low across the horse’s back and let the chill wind blow over him. They stopped at
mud puddles where Royce dismounted to examine ruts. Then off they flew again with Hadrian trusting to Royce and the horse he rode, whose name he didn’t even know. He kept his mind focused on Kristin, the woman with the beaming smile who wanted to be kidnapped and finally got her wish.

The sky was lightening with the dawn when at last the carriage came into view. Stuck in a mud puddle, Kristin was out in front pulling the horse forward while Leta struggled to push the carriage from behind, legs covered in mud. She let out a startled cry as they rode up and stood wide-eyed, staring into the face of Lord Darren.

“Daddy!” Kristin let go of the bridle and sprinted across the puddle to her father. “Daddy! You’re alive! You’re alive!”

Lord Darren leapt down from his saddle and threw his arms around his daughter, spinning the young woman so her feet whirled behind her. “Of course I am—and so are you. So are you!” He was half weeping, half laughing as he clutched Kristin to his cheek and kissed her hair.

Leta started to inch to the side, glancing at the trees.

Royce slipped off his horse, and looking dead at her, shook his head.

“What were you doing?” the lordship asked his daughter. “We thought you were kidnapped. Why were you helping? Where were you going?”

“Leta told me you were dead, that I’d killed you. All of you.” Kristin wiped her tears. “When I woke up, I begged her to take me back…to see you. But she said there was nothing to be done. If I returned, I would be killed. Leta was taking me to Aunt Edna’s. She’s going to keep me from hurting anyone else. She promised to lock me up on full moons.”

“Clever.” Royce nodded, then turned to Leta. “You served Lord Griswold, didn’t you?”

She didn’t answer until he took a step closer and let a hand slip inside his cloak, then she nodded. “Been housekeeper at Ridgewood for decades.”
“You knew he was taking bribes from the smugglers, so he gave you a cut to keep you quiet. Is that right?”

“We had a nice thing going until he came.” Leta turned toward Lord Darren.

“You shut everything down right tight you did.”

“So, you came up with a plan,” Royce said.

“Wasn’t me. Shawn got the idea of kidnapping her ladyship and Kristin. They planned on taking ’em to Shawn’s boat. They’d keep ’em there and force his lordship to resume the same deal they had with Griswold.”

“Shawn is Ianto’s real name?” Hadrian asked.

Leta nodded. “He’s captain of the Medusa, used to be Griswold’s best shipper.”

“And Engels?”

She hesitated.

Royce took another step. “He’s dead. So is Shawn. That part of your plan worked. So who was he?”

She hesitated only a moment more, then shrugged. “Clyde Davis. Dock chief for the Crimson Hand.”

Royce looked at Hadrian. “Told you.” Then he asked Leta, “But something went wrong, didn’t it?”

“When Shawn and his men chased the lady’s carriage, Roy whipped the horse and made a run for it. Killed himself when the carriage flipped. Her ladyship was busted up bad too. There was no saving her. But she told Kristin to run, and she did, right into the forest. Clyde and Shawn had to borrow Blake Everett’s hounds to find her. Mean dogs they are. One bit the girl.”

“So why didn’t Shawn just take Kristin and run?” Royce asked.

“Might have been better if he did. But two people were dead, and one was the Port Minister’s wife. No getting around that. There was going to be a crackdown and business would suffer. The king would have the high constable poking around. It would be a big mess.”
“And how did the whole werewolf thing come about?”

“That was Shawn’s idea too. Little girl thought Everett’s hounds were wolves. So Shawn tells her that’s exactly what they were—said the beasts killed her mother, but he saved her. Then he got to thinking about stories he’d heard in Calis, and since the girl had been bitten…”

“And how do you fit in?” Royce stared at Leta.

She took a step back. “I didn’t do much. Griswold had a smugglers’ hole Lord Darren didn’t know about. Shawn had his men take the Medusa up north to catch a wolf, a big one. It was my job to drag Kristin out and get the wolf in. Just needed a little food to lure it. After a while, it was sort of trained, although Shawn used to beat it to keep the animal vicious. Then just before dawn, I’d put Kristin back. Was easy when she was little—a lot harder as she and I got older.”

“But why?” Lord Darren asked. “Why do all this?”

“Best time to navigate the Galewyr is when there’s a full moon,” Royce said. “And if you can be sure the Port Minister will be home looking after his ‘poor daughter’ you can move a lot of black market goods.”

Leta nodded. “Shawn would unload his ship at Roe and send his long boats up the river to Medford. Clyde bribed the port watch and his crew off-loaded right at the dock. Two nights of work was all that was needed to clear Shawn’s hold. Then they’d have a month to trade before the next shipment.”

“So why did you let the wolf out?” Lord Darren asked.

“Because you were going to go to the king,” Royce said.

Leta looked at them both. “Shawn and Clyde could just disappear, but me? Where would I go? How would I make money? How could I survive?”

“You were going to keep Kristin thinking she was a monster and feed off her like a leech?” Lord Darren glared at the housekeeper.

“She was all I had!” Leta cried. “I—I was desperate, don’t you see?”
Lord Darren shook his head in disgust. He took several breaths to calm down, then focused on Hadrian and Royce. “And how about you two? Why’d you come back?”

Hadrian stared at his partner, mirroring his lordship’s quizzical look.

“Professional integrity,” Royce said.

Hadrian rolled his eyes.

Royce glared at him. “It’s true. I knew someone was deceiving me, maybe using me. Thought it might have been your daughter, could have been part of a group. Maybe the Hand trying something. Easy mistake to make, the way she tried to hire us with such a sickly-sweet, wide-eyed, wholesome act. I was positive it was a swindle or game of some sort. No one is that cute.” He shook his head and turned to Kristin. “I was wrong. You’re just a freak of nature.”

Kristin smiled back. “Better than being a werewolf.”

“True.” Royce nodded. “Anyway, I don’t like being used. I go to great lengths to make certain those who try regret it. It would hurt business if I let something like that slip. So I needed to know what was really going on and, if possible, make certain those responsible never did it again.”

Lord Darren nodded. “Well, thank you—both of you.” He was still holding his daughter like he was terrified of ever letting go. “But—well, who are you? Who are you really?”

Royce smiled. “Riyria.”

“Riyria? I don’t understand?”

“Why would you? It’s elvish for two.”