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Theft of swords pdf free

Chapter 1 Of the Stolen Letters Hadrian could see a little in the darkness, but he could hear them —crackling twigs, crushing leaves and brushes of grass. There was more than one, more than three, and they were closing. We have arrows aimed at your back, and we'll throw you in the saddles if you try to escape. The speaker was still in the dark manes of the forest, just a non-public movement among the bare branches. We're just going to lighten your load a little bit. No one needs to get hurt. Do what I say and you'll keep your lives. Don't — and we'll take them too. Hadrian felt his belly sink, knowing it was his fault. He took a look at Royce, who was sitting next to him on his filthy grey mare with his hood up, his face hidden. His friend's head was bowed and slightly shaken. Hadrian didn't need to see his expression to know what it looked like. I'm sorry, he offered. Royce didn't say anything, and he kept shook his head. Before them stood a wall of freshly cut brush that blocked their path. Behind lay a long lunar corridor of an empty road. Fog was gathering in the ins and gullies, and somewhere an unseen stream poured over the rocks. They were deep in the woods on the old south road, engulfed in a long tunnel of oaks and ash whose slender branches reached across the road, shipping and clapping in the cold autumn wind. Almost a day's drive from any city, Hadrian couldn't remember passing as much as a country house in hours. They were alone, in the middle of nowhere—a place where people never found bodies. The sympathy of the leaves grew louder until the thieves stepped into the narrow belt of the moonlight. Hadrian counted four men with unshaven faces and swords drawn. They wore rough clothes, leather and wool, stained, worn and dirty. With them was a girl wearing a bow, arrow carved and directed. She was dressed like the others in pants and boots, her hair tangled. Each one was covered in mud, ground dirt, as if a whole pile was sleeping in a dirty den. They don't look like they got a lot of money, said a man with a straight nose. An inch or two taller than Hadrian, he was the largest of the party, a stockbrood with a thick neck and big hands. His lower lip seemed divided around the same time his nose was broken. But they have bags of equipment, the girl said. Her voice surprised him. She was young and , despite the filth, sweet and almost childish, but her tone was aggressive, even mean. Look at all the things they're wearing. What about all the rope? Hadrian wasn't sure if he asked him or his fellow man. Anyway, he didn't say yes. He thought about ingesting a joke, but she didn't seem like the kind of guy who could charm with a compliment and a smile. On top of that, she was pointing an arrow at him and it looked like her arm was glowing. I'm saying that the big sword the guy has on his back, he said flat-nosed. It looks good about my size. I'll take two that he wears. This came from a scar that divided his face at a slight angle, crossing the bridge of his nose high enough to save his eye. The girl pointed her arrow point at Royce. I want the cloak of the little one. I'd look good in such a pretty black hood. With deep-seeded eyes and sunny skin, the man closest to Hadrian seemed the oldest. He took a step closer and grabbed Hadrian's horse for the cut. Be really careful now. We've killed a lot of people on this road. Stupid people who didn't listen. You don't want to be stupid, do you? Hadrian shook his head, all right. Now throw away their weapons, the thief said. And then it comes down. What do you say, Royce? Hadrian asked. We're giving them a little money so no one gets hurt. Royce looked. Two eyes sticking out of the hood with the sleet. I'm just saying, we don't want any trouble, am I right? You don't want my opinion. Royce said. So you're going to be stubborn. Silence. Hadrian shook his head and sighed. Why do you have to make it hard? They're probably not bad people—just the poor. You know, taking what they need to buy a loaf of bread to feed their family. Can you blame them for that? Winter is coming and times are tough. He nodded in the direction of the thief. Right? I don't have a family, he answered with a straight nose. I spend most of my money on booze. You're not helping, Hadrian said. I'm not trying. Either you two do as you're told, or we gut you right here. He emphasized this by pulling a long dagger out of his waistband and scraping loudly on the blade of his sword. A cold wind howled through the trees, rocking branches and stripping more leaves. Red and gold leaves flew, swirling in circles, empowered by gusts along a narrow road. Somewhere in the dark, an owl hooted. Look, how about we give you half our money? My half. That way, this won't be a total loss to you. We're not looking for half, said the man holding his caddie. We want everything, all the way to these horses. Now wait a second. Our horses? Taking a little money is fine, but horse thieving? If you get caught, you'll hang yourself. And you know we're going to report this in the first town we come to. You're from the north, aren't you? Yes, he left Medford yesterday. The man holding the horse nodded, and Hadrian noticed a small red tattoo on his neck. See, that's your problem. His face softened to a sympathetic look on his face that seemed threatening to his intimacy. You're probably on your way to Colnora — a nice town. Lots of shops. Lots of fancy rich people. There's a lot of trading going on down there, and we've got a lot of people on this road carrying all sorts of stuff to sell them fancy people. But I guess you haven't been south before, have you? Up in Melengar. King Amrath is struggling to get soldiers to patrol the roads. But here in Warric, things are done a little differently. A flat nose came close, lying his split lip as he studied spadone the sword on his back. Are you saying stealing is legal? No, but King Ethelred lives in Aquesta and it's awfully far from here. What about the Earl of Chadwick? Doesn't he run these lands in the king's name? Archie Ballentyne? The mention of his name brought derision from other thieves. Archie doesn't care what happens to ordinary people. He's too busy dialing what he's going to wear. The man grinning, showing yellow teeth growing at strange angles. So throw away their swords now and get down. After that, you can walk to Ballentyne Castle, knock on old Archie's door and see what he does. Another round of laughter. Now, unless you think this is the perfect place to die—you will do what I say. You were right, Royce, said Hadrian in resigning. He uncassed the cloak and laid it over the back of his saddle. We should have left the road, but honesty—I mean, we're in the middle of nowhere. What were the odds? Judging by the fact that we're being robbed—pretty good, I think. Somehow ironically — Rytira was robbed. Almost funny even. It's not funny. Did you tell Rytira? asked the man holding Hadrian's horse. Hadrian nodded and took off his gloves, tucking them into his waistband. The man let his horse go and took a step. What's going on, Will? She asked the girl. What is Rytira? There's a couple of guys in Melengar named that. He looked at the others and lowered his voice a little. I have connections that way, remember? They say two guys called Rytira work from Medford and I was told to keep my distance if I ever ran into them. So what do you think, Will? He asked scar-face. I think maybe we should clean the brush and let them go for a ride. What? Why? There are five of us and only two of us, flat nose pointed out. But they're Rytira. So what? Now, my associates in the north—they are not stupid, and they have told everyone never to touch these two. And my associates aren't exactly sstumpy types. If they say we're avoiding them, there's a good reason. The flat nose looked at them again with a critical eye. Okay, but how do you know these two are them? You're just going to tell them the word for it? He's going to nod to Hadrian. Look at the swords he carries. The man who wears it may not know how to use it, maybe not. A man wears two—he probably doesn't know anything about swords, but he wants you to think he does. But a man who carries three swords—that's a big weight. No one's going to drag that much steel around unless they make a living using them. Hadrian pulled two swords from his sides in one elegant motion. He turned one around, letting him spin in the palm of his hand once. You need to get a new grip on this one. It's starting to break again. He looked at Will. Are we going to keep doing this? I believe you should have robbed us. The thieves fired uncertain glances at each other. Wants? She asked the girl. She still kept her bow tense, but she seemed less confident. clean their brush out of the way and let them pass, Will said. You sure? Hadrian asked. This nice man with a busted nose seems to have his heart ready for the sword. That's fine, he said flat-nosed, looking at Hadrian's blades as the moonlight glistened in mirror steel. Well, if you're sure. All five nodded, and Hadrian stunned the weapon. Will planted his sword in the ground and waved to the others as he rushed to clear a barricade of branches blocking the roadway. You know, you're doing all this wrong, Royce told them. The thieves stopped and looked up, worried. Royce shook his head. Not cleaning the brush—robbery. You picked a nice place. I'll give you that. But you should have pushed us from both sides. And, William, that's William, isn't? Hadrian asked. The man winked and nodded. Yes, William, most people are right-handed, so those who come close should get closer to the left. It would put us at a disadvantage, swinging across our bodies towards you. Those with bows should be on our right. And why just one bow? Royce asked. She could only hit one of us. It could not be done. Hadrian said. Did you notice how long she held the bent bow? Either it's incredibly strong — which I doubt — or it's a greenwood homemade arch with barely enough power to throw an arrow a few feet. Her cut was just for the show. I doubt she ever launched an arrow. So am I, the girl said. I'm a good shot. Hadrian shook his head at her with a smile. You had your index finger on the top of the shaft, darling. If you'd got rid of it, the feathers on the arrow would have brushed your finger and the shot would have gone anywhere but where you wanted it. Royce nodded. Invest in crossbows. Next time stay hidden and just put a few screws in the chest of each of your targets. All this talk is stupid. Royce! Hadrian admeaned. What? You're always saying I should be nicer to people. I'm trying to be helpful. Don't listen to him. If you want advice, try to create a better barricade. yes, throw a tree across the road next time, Royce said. Shinging his hand towards the branches, he added: This is just pathetic. And cover your faces for Maribor. Warric is not such a great kingdom and people might remember you. Of course Ballentyne's not likely to follow you down for a few petty highway robberies, but you're going to walk into a tavern one day and get knifed in the back. Royce turned to William. You were in The Purple Hand, weren't you? Will looked amazed. Nobody said anything about it. He stopped pulling on the branch he was working on. It shouldn't have. The hand requires all members of the guild to get that stupid tattoo on their necks. Royce turned to Hadrian. It should make them tough, but all it really does is make it easier for them to identify them as thieves for the rest of their lives. Painting a red hand on everyone is pretty stupid when you think about it. That tattoo should be. be a hand? Hadrian asked. I thought it was a little red chicken. But now that you mention it, the hand makes more sense. Royce looked back on Will and tilted his head to one side. Does he kind of look like a chicken? Will tightened his palm over his neck. After the last brush was cleaned, William asked, Who are you really? What exactly is Rytira? My hand never told me. They just said to be clear. We're nobody special, Hadrian replied. Only a few passengers enjoy a ride on a cold autumn night. But seriously, Royce said. You have to listen to us if you're going to keep doing this. At the end of the day, we'll take your advice. What advice? Royce gently hit the horse and moved forward again on the road. We'll visit the Earl of Chadwick, but don't worry - we won't mention you. In his hands, Archibald Ballentyne held the world, appropriately contained in fifteen stolen letters. Each parchment was written with meticulous attention in a fine, elegant script. He could have told the writer that he believed the words were profound and that their meaning conveyed a beautiful truth. Archibald found the writing impulsive, but agreed with the author that they had value beyond measure. He took a sip of brandy, closed his eyes and smiled. In other 2007, The New Reluctantly Archibald opened his eyes and snorted at his master. What is that, Bruce? The Marquis has arrived, sir. Archibald's smile is back. He carefully reconnected the letters, tied them into a pile with a blue ribbon and returned them to his safe. He closed the heavy iron door, locked the lock in place and tested the seal with two sharp tools on the unyielding screw. Then he headed downstairs to greet his guest. When Archibald reached the foibe, he spied on Victor Lanakin waiting in the faint. He paused for a moment and watched the old man walk back and forth. Impressive oversized screws secured the door on their hinges, but there was no visible latch or button. On both sides stood two large well-armored guards wearing halberds. In Archibald's driveway, one fell three times. A tiny viewing window opened, and moments later, the hall echoed with the sharp sound of a bolt crackling back. As the door opened, metal screams screamed with deafening noise. Victor's hands moved to defend his ears. From Mar! That one of your servants is striving for it! Never, Archibald replied. This is the entrance to the Grey Tower—my private study. This is my safe haven and I want to hear this door open from anywhere in the castle, which behind the door, Bruce greeted with a deep and state port. Holding a lamp in front of him, he escorted the men down a wide spiral staircase. Halfway to the tower, Victor's pace slowed and his breathing seemed strenuous. Archibald paused to make himself at home. I have to apologize for the long climb. I really don't notice it anymore. I must have climbed the stairs a thousand times. When my father was count, this was one place I could be alone. No one has ever bothered to take the time or effort to get to the top. While it may not reach the magnificent height of the Crown Tower in Evanon, it is the tallest tower in my castle. Don't some people just come to see the view? Victor speculated. The Count laughed. You'd think so, but this tower doesn't have windows, which makes it the perfect location for my private study. I added a door to protect the things I hold dear. Reaching the top of the stairs, they came across another door. Archibald took the big key out of his pocket, unlocked it and gestured for the Marquis to come in. Bruce resumed his normal position outside the study and closed the door. The room was large and circular with a spacious ceiling. Furniture was scarce: a large disheveled table, two toasty chairs near a small fireplace and a gentle table between them. The fire burned in a hearth behind a simple brass screen, illuminating most of the study. The candles, which omnified the walls, provided light to the remaining areas and filled the chamber with a pleasant, enigmatic aroma of honey and saffron. Archibald smiled when he noticed Victor watching a cluttered table packed with various scrolls and maps. Don't worry, sir. I hid all the really incriminating plans for world domination before your visit. Please sit down. Archibald indicated a pair of chairs near the hearth. Take a break from your long journey while I pour us a drink. The older man grumbled and grumbled: Enough touring and formalities. Now that we're here, let's get on with it. Explain what this is all about. Archibald ignored the Marquis's tone. He could afford to be merciful now that he'd said his reward. He waited until the Marquis took his place. Are you aware, aren't you, that I have shown interest in your daughter Alenda? Archibald asked, walking to the table to pour two glasses of brandy. Yes, she mentioned it to me. Did she mention why she deduces my advances? She doesn't like you. He barely knows me, Archibald shot back with his finger raised. Archie, is that why you asked me here? Marquis, I'd appreciate it if you'd refer to me by your proper name. It's inappropriate to call me that, since my father's dead, and now I have a title. In any case, your question has an impact on the subject. As you know, I'm the 12th Earl of Chadwick. Granted, it's not a huge estate, and Ballentyne is not the most influential family, but I'm not without merit. I control five villages and twelve hamlets, as well as strategic Senon Uplands. I Command more than sixty professional men in arms, and twenty knights are true to me—including Sir Enden and Sir Breckton, perhaps the two greatest knights alive. Chadwick's export of wool and leather is the envy of all Warric. There is even talk of the Summerslue Games taking place here — on the very lawn you crosscressed to enter my castle. Yes, Archie—I mean, Archibald—I am aware of Chadwick's status in the world. I don't need a lesson in commerce from you. Are you also aware that King Ethelred's nephew has dined here on a number of occasions? Or that the Duke and Duchess of Rochelle are having dinner with me at Winterdice this year? Archibald, this is pretty tedious. What exactly is your point? Archibald was in awe of Marquis's lack of awe. Carrying glasses of brandy, he handed one to Victor and took the remaining place. He paused for a moment to drink alcohol. My point is this. Given my position, my status and my promising future, there's no point in Alenda rejecting me. Of course, it's not because of my looks. I'm young, I'm hot, and I only wear the finest imported fashion made from the most expensive silks to be found. Her other suitors are old, fat or bald — in a few cases all three. Perhaps appearance and wealth are not her only concern. Victor replied. Women don't always think about politics and power. Alenda is the kind of girl who follows her heart. But she will also follow her father's wishes. Am I right? I don't understand your meaning. If you told her to marry me, you'd marry me. You could order it for her. So that's why you forced me to come here? I'm sorry, Archibald, but you wasted your time and mine. I have no intention of forcing her to marry anyone, and I have no intention of forcing her to marry you. She'd hate me for the rest of my life. I care more about my daughter's feelings than the political implications of her marriage. I happen to be nursing Alenda. I happen to be your son. She is my greatest joy. Archibald took another sip of brandy and considered Victor's remarks. He decided to approach the subject from a different direction. What if it was for her own good? Save her from a certain catastrophe. You warned me of the danger of you touching me here. Are you finally ready to explain, or do you prefer to see if this old man can still wield the blade? Archibald disregarded what he knew was an unassailable threat. When Alenda repeatedly refused my advances, I concluded that something must be wrong. There was no logic to her deductions. I have connections and my star rises. That's when I discovered the real reason for your daughter's rejection—she's already in a relationship with someone else. Alenda's having an affair, a secret affair. I find that hard to believe, Victor declared. She didn't mention anyone to me. If someone caught her eye, she'd tell me. No wonder she kept his identity from you. He's ashamed. She knows their relationship will bring shame on your family. The man he entertains is ordinary, without a drop of noble blood in the veins. Lie! I assure you, I didn't. I'm afraid the problem goes beyond that. His name is Degan Gaunt. You've heard of him, haven't you? He's pretty famous. He's the leader of the nationalist movement from Delgos. You know he stirred up all kinds of emotions in the South with his fellow commoners. They are all intoxicated by the idea of butchering the nobility and establishing self-government. He and your daughter are meeting in Windermere near the monastery. They meet when you're away and occupied by matters of state. That's funny. My daughter never would—don't you have a son here? Archibald made inquiries. In the abbey, I think. He's a monk, isn't he? Victor nodded. My third son, Myron. Maybe he was helping them. I've made enquiries, and your son seems to be a very intelligent guy. Maybe he's making connections for his beloved sister and carrying their correspondence. This looks really bad, Victor. Here you are, the Marquis of the staunch imperialist king, and your daughter is involved in the revolutionary and meets him in the royal kingdom of Melengar while your son sets the whole thing up. A lot of people might assume it's a family conspiracy. What would King Ethelred say if he knew? We both know you're loyal, but others may have doubts. While I realize this is nothing more than the wrong affection of an innocent girl, her squads could destroy your family's honor. You're crazy, Victor shot back. Myron went to theeabney when he was barely four. Alenda never even spoke to him. This whole fabrication is an obvious attempt to pressure Alenda into marrying you and I know why. You don't care about her. You want her dowry. The Rilan Valley. That piece of land borders on yours and that's what you really want. Well, it's also an opportunity to elevate your position by marrying into a family that's above yours both socially and politically. You're pathetic. Pathetic, am I? Archibald lowered the glass and produced a key on the silver chain from his shirt. He got up and crossed the room to a tapestry depicting a Calian prince on horseback abducting a beautiful nobleman. He pulled it back, discovering a hidden safe. Inserting the key, he opened a small metal door. I have a bunch of letters written in your precious daughter's hand proving what I was saying. They speak of her infinite love for a hideous revolutionary peasant. How did you get these letters? I stole them. When I was trying to determine who my opponent was, I watched her. She sent letters leading to the abbey and I arranged to intercept them. From the safe, Archibald brought out a bunch of parchment and dropped them on Victor's lap. There! he declared it triumphant. Read what your daughter is up to and decide for yourself whether she would be better off or not me instead. Archibald returned to his seat and raised his brandy glass victoriously. He won. To avoid political ruin, Victor Lanakin, the great Marquis of Glouston, would order his daughter to marry him. He had no choice. If news of that reached Ethelred, it was even possible for Victor to face treason charges. Imperialist kings demand that their nobles reflect their political views and devotion to the church. While Archibald suspected Victor was actually a royalist or nationalist sympathizer, any appearance of impropriety would be reason enough for their king to express his displeasure. At the very least, Victor faced a mutilation of embarrassment from which the Lanakin House may never recover. The only sensible path for the Marquis was to agree to a marriage. Finally, Archibald would have a border area, and perhaps eventually he would control the entire country of the march. With Chadwick in his right hand and Glouston on the left, he would have the power at court to rival that of the Duke of Rochelle. Looking down at the old, gray-gray man in his fine traveling clothes, Archibald almost pitied him. Once upon a time, the Marquis enjoyed a reputation for wit and courage. That's the difference that came with his title. The Marquis was not only noble, nor was he an ordinary sheriff of the land, like the count or count. Victor was responsible for guarding the king's borders. It was a serious duty, requiring a capable leader, always a vigilant man tested in battle. However, times have changed, and peaceful neighbours have now bordered Warric, so the grand guard has become complacent, and his strength has been panicked by the lack of use. As Victor opened the letters, Archibald reflected on his future. The Marquis was right. He was after the country that came with his daughter. Still, Alenda was attractive, and the thought of forcing her to bed was more than a little appealing. Archibald, is this a joke? Victor questioned. Amazed by his thoughts, Archibald put down his drink, what you mean? These parchments are empty. What are you blind? They are — Archibald stopped when he saw the blank pages in the Marquis' hand. He grabbed a handful of letters and tore them apart, only to find more empty parchments. This is impossible! Maybe they were written in vanishing ink? Victor laughed. no... I don't get it... They're not even the same parchments! He checked the safe again, but found it empty. His confusion turned to panic and he tore the door apart, anxiously calling out to Bruce. Master in arms swooped in, his sword ready. What happened to the letters I had in this safe?

Archibald yelled at the soldier. I do not know, my lord, Bruce replied. He stunned his weapon and stood for attention in front of the Count. What do you mean, you don't know? Did you leave your post at all tonight? No, sir, of course not. Did anyone, anyone at all, enter my studio during my No, my lord, that's impossible. You hold the only key. So where in Maribor's name are those letters? I put them there myself. I was reading them when the Marquis arrived. I was only gone for a few minutes. How could they disappear like that? Archibald's mind raced. He held them in his hands just moments ago. He locked them in a safe. He was convinced of that fact. Where did they go? Victor squeezed the glass and stood. If you don't mind, Archie, I'm leaving now. This has been a huge waste of my time. Victor, wait. Don't go. The letters are real. I assure you I had them! But of course you are, Archie. Next time you plan to blackmail me, I suggest you give you a better bluff. He crossed the room, went through the door and disappeared down the stairs. You better think about what I said, Victor, archibald yelled after him. I'll find those letters. I will! I'll bring them to Aquesta! I'll present them at court! What do you want me to do, master? Bruce asked. Just wait, fool. I need to think about it. Archibald ran with shivering fingers through his hair as he started working around the room. He carefully suspected the letters. They were indeed a different degree of parchment than those he had read so many times before. Despite his certainty that he had put the letters in the safe, he began pulling out drawers and rifling through parchments on his desk. Archibald poured himself another drink and crossed the room. Tearing the screen off the fireplace, he examined the ashes with poker to look for any signs of parchment. In frustration, Archibald threw empty letters into the fire. He squeezed a drink in a long swallow and collapsed into one of the chairs. They were just here, Archibald said, confused. Slowly, a solution began to form in his mind. Bruce, the letters must have been stolen. The thief couldn't have gotten far. I want you to search the whole castle. Seal every exit. Don't let anyone out. Neither the staff nor any of the guards – no one leaves. Search everything! Immediately, my lord, Bruce replied, then paused. What about the Marquis, master? Should I stop him, too? Of course not, idiot, he doesn't have letters. Archibald stared at the fire, listening to Bruce's footsteps fade as he ran down the steps of the tower. Sam, all he had was the sound of a crackling flame and a hundred unanswered questions. He cut his brain, but he couldn't determine exactly how the thief did it. Your lordship? The warden's timid voice awakened him from his thoughts. Archibald flashed into a man who poked his head through an open door, causing the warden to take a further breath before speaking. Master, I hate to disturb you, but there seems to be a problem in the yard that requires your attention. What's the problem? Archibald growled. Well, master, I haven't really been informed of the details, but it has to do with the Marquis, I was sent to request your presence – respectfully requested, that is. Archibald went down the stairs, wondering if maybe the old man fell dead on his doorstep, which wouldn't be such a terrible thing. When he reached the courtyard, he found the Marquis alive but with an ethous temperament. There you are, Ballentyne! What have you done with my carriage? You're not going to be able to do that Bruce approached Archibald and sidelined him. Your Lordship, he whispered in the count's e-uh. Looks like the Marquis' carriage and horses are missing, sir. Archibald held his finger in the direction of the Marquis. In a raised voice, he replied, I'll be with you in a moment, Victor. Then he drew attention to Bruce and whispered, Did you say you were missing? How is that possible? I don't know exactly, sir, but you see, the gate manager reports that the Marquis and his driver, i.e. two people he thought were already through the front door. Suddenly he feels quite ill, Archibald turns back to address the marquis of red face. It's Marquis.

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