

**THE FOURTH AGE:
SHADOW WARS**

BOOK 2

CONSPIRACY

BY

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All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblances to any persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

Dedication

To my loving wife, Minh Ha, who made this possible, and my brother James, the first to believe.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE ODD COUPLE

Thick mist blew upon the northeast breeze, winding and curling as dusk arrived upon the sodden grasslands of eastern Eldora. Five horses slowly emerged from the fog. One of them, a roan, bore two figures upon its bare back. The first was a tall Elf, his long, dark hair tied into a single tight queue that fell over his left shoulder. His dark traveling cloak was sodden with rain. Bright eyes in a pale face flickered back and forth through the gathering gloom, searching for the telltale motion of enemies amidst the damp grasses and low shrubs. But there was nothing. Birds, rabbits, even insects were absent. But for the low, mournful sound of the wind over the plains, he and his companion were alone. The Elf's perfect posture revealed no sign of fatigue or discomfort. He might have been riding in a forest glade on the first warm, dry day of spring rather than in a miserable savannah where bits of mud kicked up from his horse steadily spattered him with malodorous fragments.

The Elf's companion, who rode behind him, arms loosely looped about his waist, was nearly as wide as he was tall. Thick, woolly brown hair ran from his head into a large, thick beard that surrounded the dour face of a Dwarf. A big, straight nose jutted from a strong face in which prominent brown eyebrows gave way to a slightly sloped forehead. The Dwarf's stern face, strong in character, was set now in a resigned grimace of discomfort as he steadily sniffed the oncoming breeze, searching for any scents of creatures hiding in the thick blanket of gray vapor. Smelling nothing unusual, the Dwarf shook his head disdainfully. *'Not even an enemy to distract me from this bleak landscape,'* he thought. *'This is truly misery curdled.'*

It was two days since the Dwarf, whose name was Bruno, had met with Golbur, his lord, in an inn called the Fast Flow on the Isle of Innis Mallow. The inn was a place where traders of all races met freely and spoke with one another. Elves and Dwarves would not draw undue attention here.

Bruno had walked upstairs into a room where Golbur was seated in front of a crude table, pouring over maps. The Dwarf lord gestured for Bruno to sit in another chair in front of the table. Taking a seat, Bruno wondered why he had been summoned here. His questions were soon answered.

'I have a scouting mission for you,' said Golbur, 'one that requires you to go with an Elf and take him into the mines of Nerea. From there, you will have sealed orders as to your next step. If you refuse, you can return home to Edelhohle and no one will think the lesser of you. If you go on the mission, I will extend your time mining in the Fire Opal caves, regardless of your success or failure, by one month. Your time may be extended further depending upon how successful you are in this mission.' Golbur then proceeded to outline the mission briefly, ignoring the growing expression of disbelief on Bruno's face.

Bruno had dreamed of a year at Edelhohle, as all Dwarves did, but only those fortunate enough to rise to the notice of their Lords earned a year working in that small but fabulously wealthy mine. Edelhohle contained the only source of the fabulous Fire Opals: soft, beautiful stones that needed no polishing or cutting, perfect in every way in their luster and color. Bruno

certainly wanted more time to mine these stones, but this mission Golbur had thrust upon him seemed doomed to failure from the start.

'Golbur, you can't seriously be asking me to take an Elf to the mines of Nerea, much less into them. He will be shot on sight, as I well might be!'

'No, he will not. There has been an unwritten but nonetheless actual ceasefire for years. Neither race will shoot or harm the other even if they trespass, unless they act in a violent manner. The presence of an Elf in your company will not be liked, but it will be tolerated—provided the Elf doesn't do anything stupid.'

'How difficult will it be for some fanatic adept of Parsifal to concoct a story that this Elf reached for his bow and they acted in self defense?'

'Here is your answer,' Golbur said, handing Bruno a scroll.

Unrolling it, Bruno saw an official request from Golbur to Tillo IV to receive the Elf in Bruno's company as a diplomat and extend him the full courtesy of the Dwarves. Among the Dwarves, official requests from one sovereign lord to another were not lightly countermanded or ignored. While the priests of Parsifal might still slay the Elf, they would risk the displeasure of Tillo and Golbur by doing so. As powerful as they were, they would think twice about incurring the enmity of Dwarf lords.

Retrieving the scroll, Golbur sealed it, imprinting his mark upon the molten wax.

'Fine,' Bruno said meanwhile. 'So I have to take an Elf to Nerea. Can I at least ask why?'

'No, you may not. You will have sealed orders that are not to be opened until after you are a day's ride from the river. This will ensure the secrecy of your mission. Well, do you accept or refuse?'

Thinking for a moment, Bruno asked, 'I accept, but I am afraid that while your scroll will protect me once we are in Nerea, those mad priests might find us and attack us both before we can be admitted to Nerea.'

'This will protect you,' Golbur said, producing a small metal case from his cloak. 'Turn around so that I may fasten this upon your neck.'

'What is it?' asked Bruno.

'A Circlet of Truth.'

Bruno was stunned. Such circlets were incredibly rare, and their use required ancient magical spells known only to a handful of Dwarves. He looked on in awe at the Circlet as Golbur opened the case. It was a close-fitting solid choke-style necklace comprised of two Platina semicircles that pivoted under a central chamber holding ground Fire Opals that glowed softly and permanently. Any Dwarf wearing a Circlet was protected utterly under Dwarven law, and their veracity in all matters held to be beyond reproach.

Lifting the Circlet from the case, Golbur fastened it around Bruno's neck, muttering words in archaic Dwarvish incomprehensible to Bruno. He felt a brief but searing pain as the necklace ends joined together.

'You will leave on the morrow after meeting with your traveling companion,' said Golbur. 'Good night and good travels.'

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Sitting on the horse with the Elf, Bruno recalled his first meeting with him the day before, when they had met at the Fast Flow. Bruno had politely introduced himself. 'How are you, my good Elf? Bruno, son of Burkhard, at your service.'

'Lithir, son of Londir of the Great Forest; I am well, and you?'

Bruno replied, 'I am well.' He did not know what else to say, as he could not talk about the secret mission in public. An awkward silence ensued for the next half hour, and it was with relief that Bruno was able to take his leave of Lithir and return to his room above the bar, waiting for nightfall.

That night, Bruno and Lithir were taken by boat by masked and cloaked boatmen from Innis Mallow. They assembled on the north bank of the Aphon, and Bruno looked at the five spare horses uneasily, knowing that there would be little time for walking on this journey.

'My good Elf, have we been provided any decent food and drink?' he asked Lithir.

'That should not be your primary concern, but we have rations enough to see us through our mission,' Lithir replied. 'I am sure we will find enough water along the way.'

Sighing at what promised to be a miserable boring journey until they reached Nerea, Golbur was helped up to sit behind Lithir on the horse with no saddle, clutching at the waist of his companion.

'*Not even time to pack decent food or ale,*' Bruno thought disapprovingly, and his stomach rumbled in agreement

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Returning to the present, Bruno said to his Elven companion, 'Lithir, can't I walk for a while? We Dwarves are not meant to ride upon horseback. I prefer my feet.'

Responding in a dry, ethereal voice, Lithir said, 'Bruno, my companion, if your legs were not so short, you would be welcome to walk. But if we want to complete our mission prior to winter, you must ride.'

Muttering in his own language, Bruno complained without true spirit. After all, when Lord Golbur had picked him for this mission, he had informed him that there would be horseback riding involved. Like all Dwarves, Bruno found the beasts both distasteful and fearsome, for he had no idea how to ride one and had to cling to Lithir to keep from falling.

Now, sitting on the wet back of a disgruntled horse, Bruno had no desire to try and speak with Lithir again until they made camp that night. As night began to fall, the mist turned into a steady, chill rain that slowly intensified until all the land was obscured about them. '*Not that there was much to see by day,*' thought Bruno. '*Just river on the right and scrub forest on the left.*'

Sniffing the air, he smelled the soggy landscape and, faintly, distant scents of deer, rabbits, and birds. Most Dwarves were born with an ordinary sense of smell, which rapidly deteriorated as the fumes of metal working, forges, and dust particles filled their noses. But once in a while, a Dwarf was born with the ability to sniff out hidden pockets of gas: a most acute ability, as the gasses were nearly odorless. Where and how this sense came about was still a mystery to the

Dwarves, but those children born with a “Deep Nose” were cherished and protected until they reached adulthood. Then they were routinely sent into the newest mining spaces to track down the deadly gasses before they could accumulate.

Bruno had been born with this ability, but also with a gift for languages and a desire to see other lands. These qualities, so rare among Dwarves, had resulted in his transfer out of the mines, into a five-year assignment with the Fellow Travelers, the Dwarven messenger corps. Once outside the mines, Bruno had found that he could sense many more things than deadly mine gasses. Animals were readily identifiable to his “Deep Nose,” as were Elves and Men. Bruno soon learned to identify many individuals by subtle distinctions of scent alone, so that he could pick them out at a distance, even in darkness and before they uttered a word.

Tonight, the second night of the mission, Bruno hoped his nose would give him some warning if there was anyone close to their path. Sniffing again, he tried to ignore the smell of his Elven companion, a thin, sharp body odor so different from the musky odor of Dwarves. Instead, he concentrated on smelling the vegetation, marshy ground, and the faint acrid tang of wood smoke accompanied by a whiff of cooking odors he judged to be about two miles distant.

Turning his focus away from his nose and back to his thoughts, he wondered again about the mission. Instead of using the great east road on the south shore of the river, they were riding across the vast scrub-lands between Eldora and Kozak.

Just before full dark, Bruno insisted that they dismount and make camp for the evening, as he was tired and hungry. Saying nothing, Lithir simply stopped their horse near a small freshet that ran down to the Aphon. Lithir tended to the horses, placing them on long pickets, as Bruno built a fire to heat dried rations and dry their wet clothes.

Sitting on a cloth folding stool, Lithir offered to share the Elven cakes he had packed in his own personal kit. Grunting, Bruno thanked him, accepting the cakes and offered some of the dried meat strips that Dwarves took on long journeys.

Smiling, Lithir declined and said, 'There are some fresh fruits, cheeses, and Elven bread in the gray canvas bag with the red straps. I think there is even some Dwarven ale on the horse with the blue baggage stripes.'

Startled for a moment, Bruno replied, 'You would have let me eat dried meat all the way to Nerea, wouldn't you, if you could have gotten away with it? Why did you insist that we eat only a wafer for lunch, and in the saddle to boot?'

Lithir replied, 'Because we didn't have time to stop and have a proper lunch. If it weren't for the fact that the horses and you need rest; I would have pressed on for several more days before I would be forced to rest.'

'How does that explain the bad food, stale water, and silence I received all afternoon? Tell me that, you poor excuse for an immortal,' growled Bruno.

'Poor excuse for an immortal, am I?' replied a bemused Lithir. 'Well, perhaps I am, but at least, O bearded one, I can see over the foliage without hopping up and down like a child.'

Lithir had caught Bruno doing that earlier in the day when they had dismounted for a few moments to relieve themselves.

Feeling a black mood about to come upon him, Bruno reached for his axe. But then he was struck by the thought that he must have made a comical sight at that, and, despite his sense of dignity—and unlike most of his fellow Dwarves—he was not so stiff-necked that he couldn't laugh at himself when warranted.

'Well and fairly struck, my lofty companion,' Bruno said with a chuckle. 'That makes one I owe you—and a Dwarf always pays his debts . . . with interest.'

'I am pleased to hear it,' said Lithir, raising one elegant eyebrow. 'Truly you are greatly in my debt. Few others of my kind would have agreed to this mission, much less to take a surly Dwarf along as companion.'

'Surly, am I?' said Bruno, feeling his temper rising. 'Perhaps I am, but at least I have red blood and not milk in my veins!'

'If I were you,' replied Lithir, 'I should be more worried about what you have in your hair.'

'My . . . ow!' Bruno raised a hand to his thick, tangled hair and exclaimed as a tiny bird zipped off into the night, bearing in its beak a clutch of newly plucked hair. 'Will you at least tell me what you know of our mission?'

'Certainly, do you know the route we will take to Nerea?'

'No.'

'We will ride through these mostly empty grasslands until we are past the trading center of Nexus, where the Iron River joins the Aphon. There we will need to build a raft to cross the river, and then we will proceed along the south bank of the river to the Thumb, a sheer mountain peak that hems in the Aphon's south bank with steep cliffs, creating nearly impassable terrain. We will then travel up the valley formed by the Border stream separating the North Forest on the north bank from unclaimed land on the south side. My general instructions are to keep us as far from other peoples as possible, until we reach Nerea, so that rumor of our mission does not arrive in our realms before we do. This is as much a surprise inspection by my King as a fact-finding journey. He wants to see the status of the North Forest without disguise or pretense. Ferox has prevented Elves from the Great Forest from freely accessing his realm for the past fifty years. This attack in Eldora has given Albericus enough authority from the Elven Council to override Ferox' ancient individual rights to control access to his realm.

'Albericus has asked that you accompany me into the Northern Forest as an informal diplomat so that the Elves of the North Forest can see Dwarves as they really are, rather than the vicious monsters portrayed by our rumors and legends for more than a century. As I am the first Elf to visit your mines, and you are the first Dwarf to enter the North Forest, we will each have a unique perspective of the other's world.

'After we journey to your mines and the North Forest, we will ride back toward Eldora openly, arriving at Nexus, where we will gather tidings from all the traders who travel through there. We will then take ship back down the river to Eldora and wait for instructions on Innis Mallow, and each of us will report our findings to our respective lords. My specific orders are sealed, and I was asked to wait until tonight to open them. How about you, my good Dwarf? What are your orders?'

'All I was told was that we were on a scouting mission and that I was to take you into Nerea. Speaking of sealed orders, I have mine here. Let us see what they say, and then we can answer each other's questions.'

Cracking the wax seals on their scrolls, the two companions read through their orders and, after a few moments, looked at each other expectantly. Bruno saw that Lithir had his typical serene look on his face and knew that he, Bruno, would have to go first.

'It seems there are several reasons for this mission,' he said. 'The first is to establish trade of Dwarf goods back and forth through the North Forest. Right now, to circumvent your forest we must take our goods on a journey of nearly two months, when a journey through the forest would take less than a week. This triples our costs, and some perishable items such as fresh meat and cheese will not survive the journey. Golbur hopes that a trade treaty can be negotiated between our peoples. What do you think?'

'Before I answer that question, let me ask one. How do I know that I will be admitted to Nerea, much less survive long enough to discuss trade?'

'I bear a scroll from Golbur giving you temporary ambassador status to Nerea, which will protect you in our mines. We Dwarves would not risk open war with the Elves by slaying an ambassador.'

'Well at least it's something,' muttered Lithir. Glancing back at his own scroll, Lithir said, 'King Albericus also wants trade to begin through the North Forest. We will allow you to take boats and guards through the forest, provided you accept an Elven escort on each trade mission. According to the scroll, I am now the official Envoy to Nerea and I have authority to negotiate a trade agreement. However, final approval of the agreement will depend upon Albericus and the Elven Council. Will those terms be acceptable to you Dwarves?'

'They should be, but what guarantees do I have that I will get in and out of your forest alive?' asked Bruno suspiciously.

'Albericus has given you temporary ambassador status as well, in this scroll. We can either trust one another or give up on our mission now and report failure back to our lords. I am not certain about you, but failing without trying is not something my king would take kindly to.'

'Golbur would be most displeased,' agreed Bruno in a low grumble. 'Continue, please.'

'Albericus directs me to look into any connections we find related to the attack on Prince Alfrahil. It seems that Elven weapons and one of our camouflage cloaks were found near one of the ambushes, and this has Albericus deeply concerned,' said Lithir with disbelief in his voice.

'Golbur says here that Dwarf weapons and unique tools were found at the ambush scene as well, and I am to investigate how and why these weapons were made available to the assassins. I can't believe that any Dwarves were foolish enough to aid in the attacks on the prince,' said Bruno. 'Clearly, there is much for us to investigate; hopefully we can find out who is responsible for these atrocities.'

Yes,' agreed Lithir. 'Does Golbur say anything else in his scroll?'

'After the Fire Demon was destroyed by your Water Spirit, a great stone cap was left in place, only breakable by the Hammer of the Dwarves.'

'What is the Hammer of the Dwarves?'

'It is the most powerful relic of Dwarven Magic, a solid Platina hammer that can shatter anything.'

'What does that have to do with us Elves?'

'According to our history, when King Gneiss journeyed to Nerea to break the cap, he asked an Elf lord to accompany him to honor the Elven sacrifice of your Water Spirit. When the Hammer was used by King Gneiss, there was a great explosion, and the only person rumored to have gotten out alive was your Elf Lord. The Hammer was lost after the cap was broken, and Golbur is anxious to find it again.'

'Why?'

'The hammer was the unifying symbol of the Dwarf kingdoms. According to ancient custom, only a Dwarf who possesses the Hammer can unite the five independent Dwarven realms, giving one voice and purpose to our race. Since the Hammer was lost, there has been no High King of the Dwarves, and Golbur clearly hopes I will bring back information to find the Hammer.'

'Does Golbur then hope to find the Hammer and become king?'

'I have no idea, but he is young and ambitious. Even if he is not King, I suspect he would like to determine who is king. Do you have any information about this Elf Lord?'

'Not really, there is a rumor that such a lord went to Nerea from the North Forest, but that is all I know. Once we get to the Forest, we may learn more. You say that your Hammer can destroy anything?'

'According to legend yes, what of it?'

'When Magnar attacked our realm in the Great Forest, his magic created a cover of stones sealing off our Great Elf well. Your Hammer just might break through the rocks and allow us access to our Well again.'

'Why not use the blasting fire of Men?'

'According to Men, they no longer have any available. At any rate, legends say that the Blasting Fire was difficult to control. We want to open the well, not destroy it.'

'It seems that we both have an interest in finding the Hammer. We now have two reasons to cooperate with each other.'

'Indeed' said Lithir. 'Actually, according to Albericus' scroll, there is another area where we need your help. We are losing our fight with the Creepers.'

'What are the Creepers?'

'After Magnar attacked us and sealed off the Great Well, Albericus and his wizards tried to open another Great Well, but they failed, creating instead a dark spring that gave birth to terrible insects. These insects possess a shell impervious to Elf weapons and are slowly consuming the forest and all life around the dark spring. As they breed, they construct thick-walled narrow tunnels of some unknown material that is impervious to fire. We have a few ancient Dwarf axes that can kill these creatures, but the weapons are too few and the Creepers too many. Besides, Elves do not enjoy tight enclosed places to battle the Creepers. Will you help us?'

Thinking for a moment, Bruno glanced down at Golbur's scroll again and said, 'Without committing my lord, I believe that so long as our soldiers are paid for their efforts, we should be able to come to your aid. In exchange, would your King agree to send Elven healers to our Dwarf realms to teach us your medical secrets? There are many diseases that affect Dwarves that we cannot heal on our own.'

'I don't see why that would be a problem, so long as the healers were protected from harm and compensated for their efforts. Albericus needs Dwarven help in one last task: clearing the ruins of Tarin Nazar.'

'Tarin Nazar?'

'An ancient fortress of the Elves taken by Magnar early in his conquest; none of the Elven defenders were ever seen again. Since Magnar's fall, the ruins are being excavated, but we Elves are not skilled with stone work and do not wish to descend into the depths of the fortress, where the Elves were allegedly tortured to death. There are reports of Elven ghosts wandering the deepest pits.'

'Well, I do not believe in ghosts. I have no doubt our engineers would enjoy a new challenge, but what do you offer in exchange?'

Glancing back at the scroll, Lithir said, 'I do not have anything else specific to offer. Perhaps when we get to Nerea, we will find something that you need from us.'

'Perhaps,' said Bruno. 'I am encouraged that there are many areas where we can help one another. Wait a moment! You are not keeping information from me, are you? That 'secret superior' attitude you Elves often portray can be a burden to bear.'

'No more than that 'rock of the earth' mentality you Dwarves pretend to have when Elves are around,' replied Lithir. 'And to answer your question: no, I do not know anything more than I have already told you.'

Pondering this for a moment, Bruno said, 'Very well, let us have some ale, if your stomach can take it, and try to forget this infernal rain.'

Smiling, Lithir accepted a glass of the rich brew, and gradually, as they drank, the unlikely companions began to relax in each other's presence. Bruno asked, 'Not to be too nosey, Lithir, but why did you join this mission? There is no guarantee that we will succeed, or even survive.'

Lithir paused for several moments, but the ale loosened his tongue on a very private matter. 'Originally my family lived in the North Forest,' he said. 'My father was a minor noble, a March Warden. He owned a small portion of the forest near the borders. During the Great War, Ferox sent a small brigade of Elves from the North Forest to fight Magnar, and he "volunteered" my father for this assignment. When my father was killed, Ferox stripped me of my father's title and seized our land and home to give to a distant cousin of his. My family and I have been refugees in the Great Forest ever since. If I am successful on this mission, King Albericus has promised to restore my father's title to me and grant me one hundred acres in the Great Forest. This is my only chance to regain what Ferox took from me. Failure is not an option. I would rather die trying than go home in shame. How about you, Bruno? What would make a Dwarf like you volunteer to share a horse with a stiff-necked Elf like me?'

'Golbur has promised to extend my year in Edelhohle by one month just for going on this mission, with the possibility of more time if I am successful. I could not pass up that opportunity to gain more Fire Opals.'

'Those incredibly expensive Gemstones?'

'Yes, but they are unlike ordinary gemstones, such as diamonds. Fire Opals generate light instead of merely reflecting it, producing ever-changing patterns from deep within themselves. The stones are warm to the touch and, according to our ancient belief, are living representatives of the subterranean fires beneath Nostraterra. The stones possess remarkable properties. Any Dwarf rich enough to wear a Fire Opal lives decades longer than the average Dwarf; the bigger the stone, the longer the life extension. Fire Opals must be separated from one another by several feet or for reasons unknown to us Dwarves their light goes out forever and they are useless.

'Moreover, the stones speed the healing process of a bearer remarkably, preventing common illnesses and imbuing a vigorous health. If you dissolve an opal in a secret elixir and then drink it, it will extend your life by at least a decade and increase your virility so that you can father more than the typical one or two children born to a Dwarf couple.'

'They sound wondrous indeed. But why is your time in the mines limited in the first place?'

The mines are very small, chalky veins of sandstone that undulate through solid granite, with the stones randomly dispersed inside. There is only room for one Dwarf per shaft. Only Dwarves rewarded by their lord even have a chance to mine there, and the Opals are incredibly valuable. Making things more difficult, once you are allowed to mine the stones, they are very fragile, softer than the surrounding matrix, so you might only excavate a foot of material on a given day with nothing to show for it. There is no guarantee of success. You might mine for a whole year and find nothing, or get lucky and find half a dozen opals. During the first six months of my year I found three opals, one large enough to be worn on a necklace against my skin and two others small enough to consume. I don't want a family yet, so I sold the smaller opals for a tremendous profit on the market, while wearing the larger stone. Any chance to extend my time there is worth the risk.'

'It is good to see that we can both profit from this trip if we are lucky. Your ale has made me quite sleepy, and I will say good night, Bruno.'

'Good night to you, Lithir.'