

Book Club Kit
for
Beyond the Crescent Sky
The Balkan Legends Book Two
by
A. L. Sowards

Beyond the Crescent Sky

The Balkan Legends Book Two

Book Club Kit



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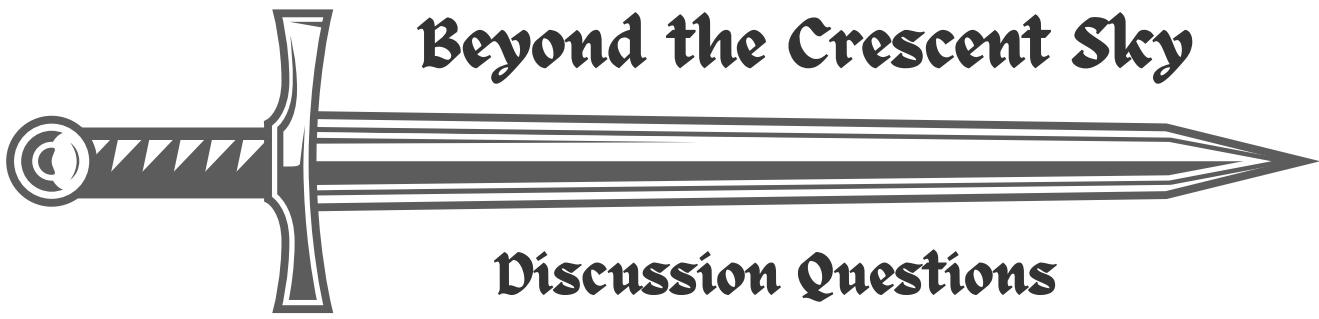
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Beyond the Crescent Sky

Discussion Questions

1. For much of the story, the Serbs are vassals to the Ottoman Empire. Their duties include military service, financial tribute, and requests for hostages. Which element of vassalage would you most want to end were you in a similar situation?
2. Though they have much in common, the Serbs and the Greeks clash in a skirmish that harms both sides. Discuss the reasons both sides fight. Do you think Iskandar's lies would have been as effective on Konstantin and his men as they were on the Greeks? Why or why not?
3. How does the label of "enemy" affect how those in the kastron treat Ivan and how he sees them? Can you find examples in the news or in your community of instances where labels play a large role in how people are treated?
4. During the course of the book, Ivan's relationships with several Greek characters change. Discuss how and why his relationships with Helena, Matthias, Demetrios, and Gregoras shift over the course of the novel.
5. Discuss Helena's work as a midwife. Have you ever assisted anyone with a birth? Were there any times in the book that you disagreed with her medical choices? Times where you became more grateful for modern medical knowledge and procedures?
6. In *Beyond the Crescent Sky*, how do Ivan and Helena balance expectations, roles, and personal desires? In your own life, how do you balance expectations, roles, and personal desires?



7. Helena tells Ivan: “God sees farther than we do. Perhaps, in time, you will see His purpose even in this.” Later in the book, Danilo gives Ivan nearly the same advice. Can you see this idea play out in *Beyond the Crescent Sky*? Have you found this to be true in your own life?

8. Discuss Ivan’s level of confidence as the book progresses. How does he feel about himself and his role at the beginning of the story? During his time in the Greek kastron? As he prepares for a military campaign as a župan? At the book’s ending?

9. Discuss Helena’s largest sacrifice for her people. What does it cost her? Would choice would you have made in her circumstances?

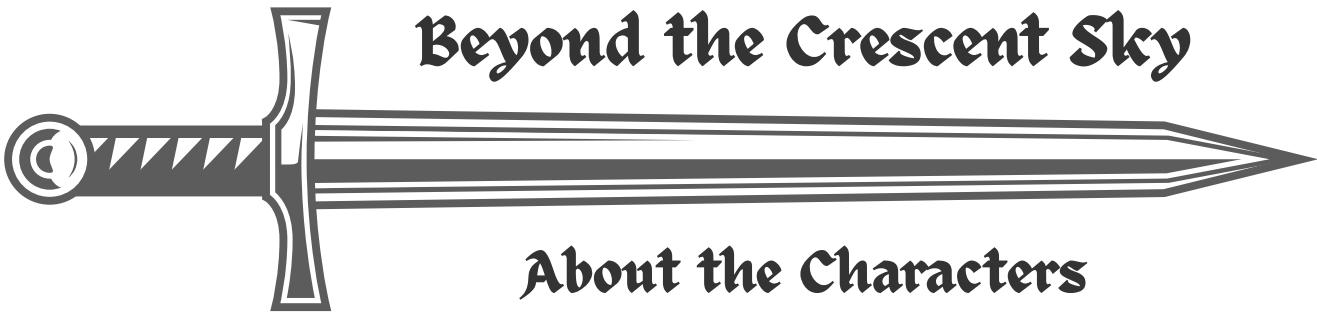
10. Discuss the relationship between Ivan and Konstantin, and then between Ivan and Danilo. What are they willing to sacrifice for each other? Did any of the advice Konstantin or Danilo give Ivan ring true to you? Examples might include:

From Konstantin: “The future is yours to create. You’ve never been ordinary, and now, my brother, it is time to be great. Take Fate and make it your servant.”

From Danilo: “Do not let this setback—no matter how devastating—become your Achilles’ heel. You’re stronger than that. . . . Be the leader I have always known you could become.”

11. Would you have shown mercy to Iskandar at the book’s end? Why or why not?

12. How will you try to take Fate, make it your servant, and create your own future?



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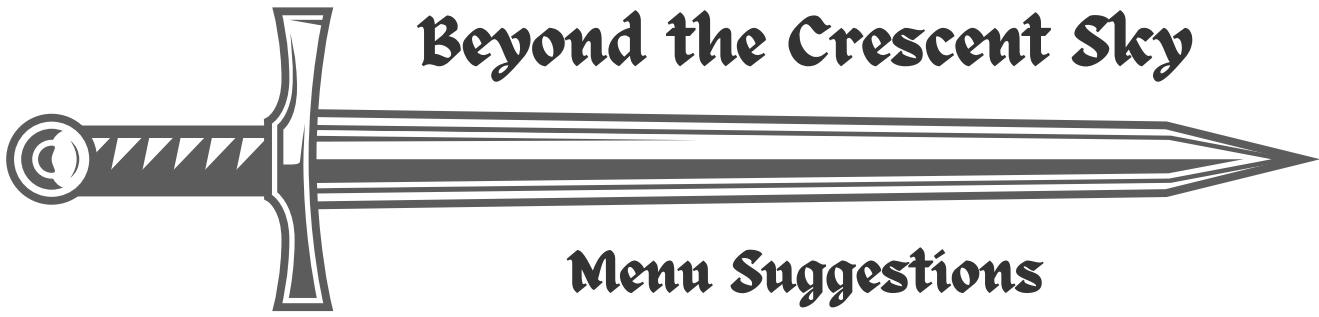
About the Characters

Ivan

Ivan Miroslavević is a Serbian noble. He is the second son of the late Župan of Rivak, and younger brother of the current župan. He is destined to inherit his maternal grandfather's lands in Sivi Gora, and since he was a boy, he has spent his summers in Sivi Gora and his winters in Rivak. His best friend is his cousin, Danilo. Ivan may be among the most stubborn people on earth, but he needed that stubbornness as a child to survive a series of illnesses and become a competent warrior despite his frequent health setbacks. He is deeply loyal to his people and their traditions, and he feels his duty to be a leader and a protector.

Helena

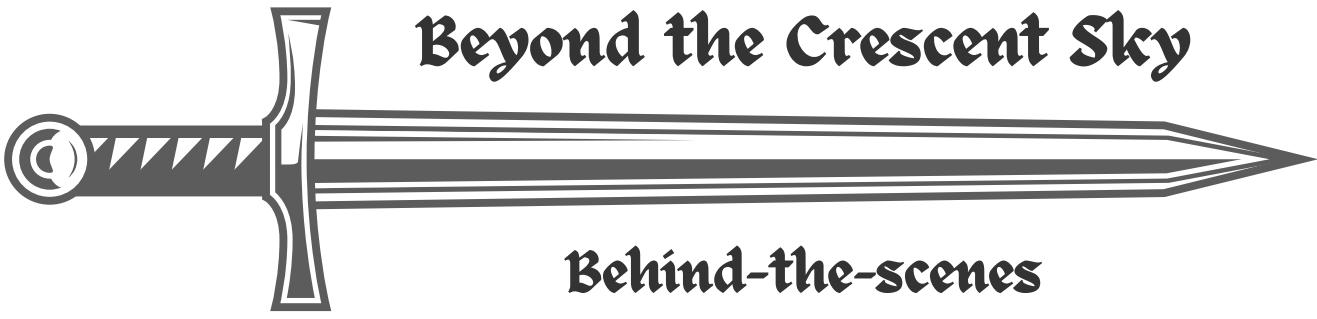
Helena is a Greek woman living in the kastron of a Byzantine pronoia. After losing her mother during the birth of a younger sibling, Helena sets a goal of becoming a midwife. Her studies are cut short when the midwife she apprentices under dies, but she continues to do the best she can for all who need her assistance. That includes, when needed, wounded warriors and wounded enemies captured in battle. She is a nurturer and a healer, and willing to sacrifice for others. She and her sister are orphans, and their family, though once noble, has fallen on hard times, but her sister is married to a member of the leading family in Byzia, giving her moderate status.



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Menu Suggestions

- While most books clubs wouldn't find porridge or gruel appealing, you could try yogurt (or ice cream) that you sweeten with a variety of toppings. Honey, raisins, and nuts would all be highly appropriate, historically, but anything that tastes good will do.
- Fresh bread dipped in olive oil or a mix of oil, vinegar, and spices.
- In honor of the picnic Helena arranges for Ivan on his family's Slava day, you could eat foods commonly eaten on a picnic.
- Any traditional Serbian, Greek, or Turkish food.

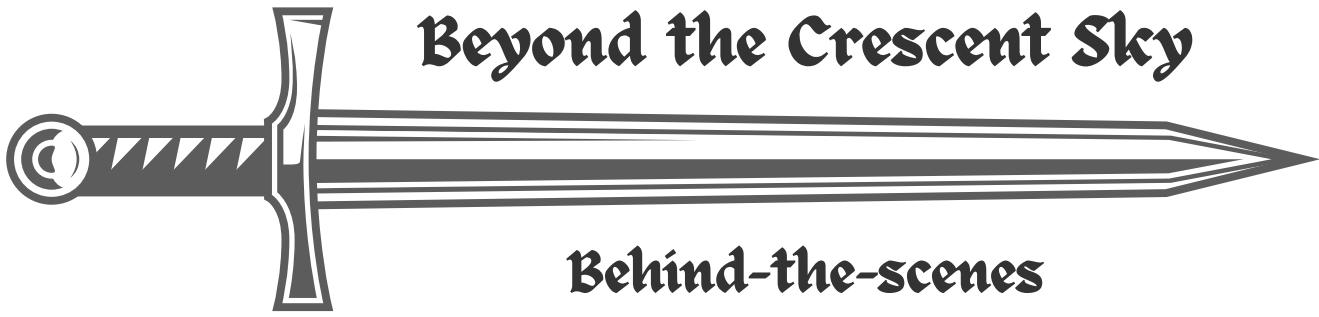


When you look at the publication order, this is my fifth medieval story to be released. Yet it's the first one I wrote.

The idea for this book started when I was doing research in preparation for writing the book that would be called *Deadly Alliance*. That book was set partially in Yugoslavia. At the time, I didn't have a research budget for books, and I hadn't yet discovered inter-library loan. So I went to the local library and checked out everything they had on Yugoslav history. Even though I was looking for information on the Second World War, some of the history books covered huge swaths of time, including the medieval Serbian Empire, and I found that history fascinating. Definitely something that would make an interesting story, someday.

I continued to work on my first set of WWII books. Being a new author with a lot to learn, that first book faced many rejections. In 2009, assuming nothing would come from that first novel, I switched focus and started writing my first medieval book. Ivan and Helena had different names at that time, but Ivan was still incredibly stubborn, he still wanted to escape his captivity more than anything, and he still ultimately stayed because a kind healer made him promise he wouldn't leave. And the sultan still loomed in the background as one of the antagonists. I didn't finish my first draft of the book before my twins were born and that first WWII novel found a publishing home. Once again, I switched focus.

Five WWII novels and one WWI novel later, I was excited to dive back into that manuscript. I incorporated better history, cut or revised pieces of that early version, and completed a manuscript I was incredibly proud of with the hopes that it would be my 2018 release. Alas, the book was too long and the setting made it too much of



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Behind-the-scenes

a marketing risk. Ivan and Helena's story (as well as an early draft of Danilo and Maja's story) once more were placed on hold.

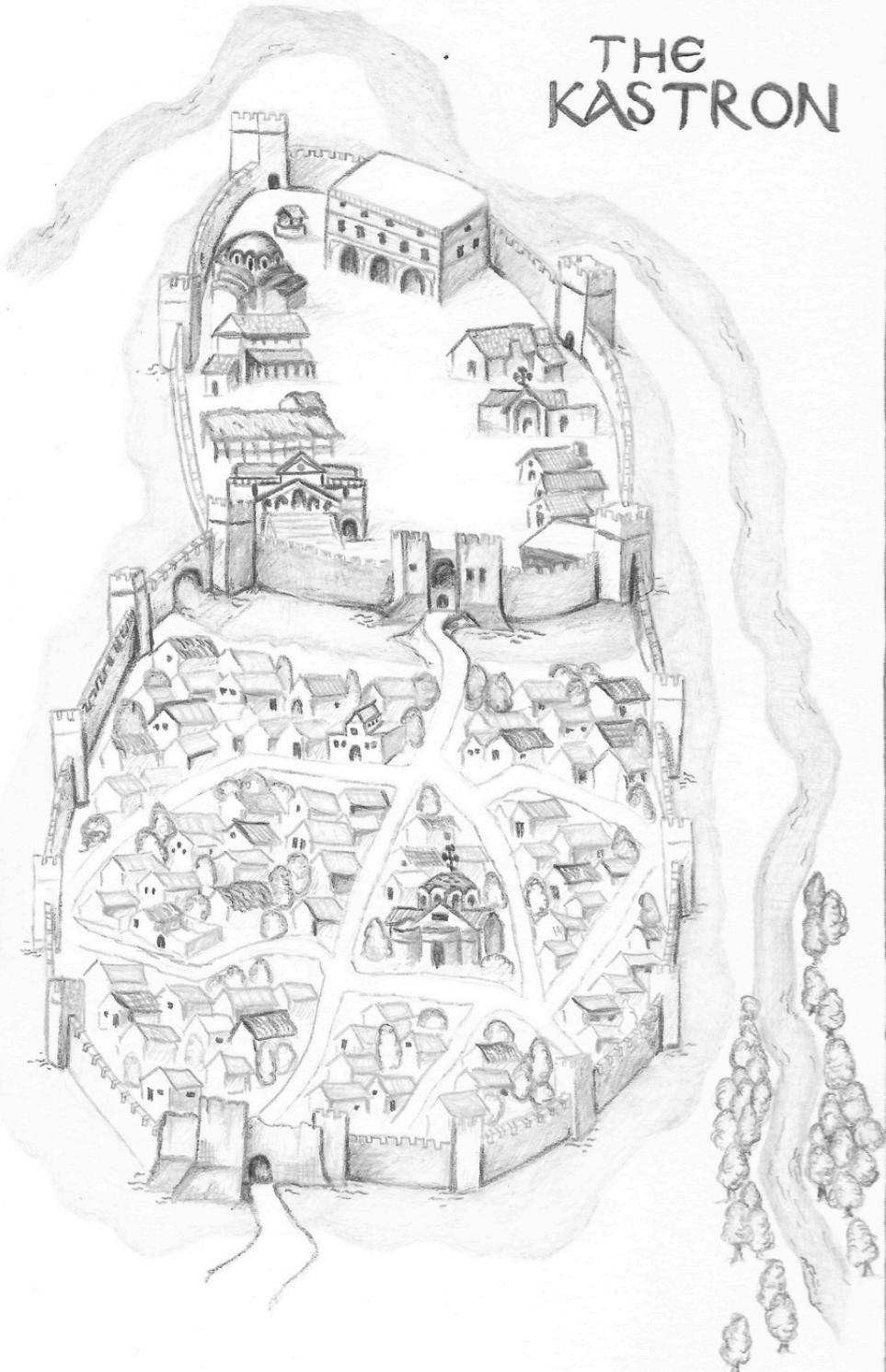
I loved those stories, so I decided I would publish them independently. Based on everything I had learned of Indie publishing, I thought it would be best to have at least three books to work with. I had wanted to write a story about Ivan's older brother anyway, so when I finally felt like I had caught up on my other projects and commitments, I wrote Konstantin and Suzana's story. It ended up being even longer than Ivan and Helena's story. Yet in those years of waiting, my publisher's business model and my track record had changed enough that my publisher was now interested in publishing all three. I emailed my editor Konstantin and Suzana's story, then Ivan and Helena's story both on the same day. (I don't expect that will ever happen again.) Later, we added a novella telling Miladin and Magdalena's story, and then I finished revisions for Danilo and Maja's story.

Ivan and Helena's story remains very special to me. During 2025, I had two books nominated for a Whitney Award, but according to the rules, I could only accept the nomination for one of the stories. There were many reasons to choose the other book, *Roads of Resistance*, but ultimately, I chose *Beyond the Crescent Sky*. I love Ingrid and Gerrit from *Roads of Resistance*, but I have loved Ivan and Helena longer. I hope that in reading *Beyond the Crescent Sky*, you have also grown to love them and their story.



Balkans Map by Heather Willis

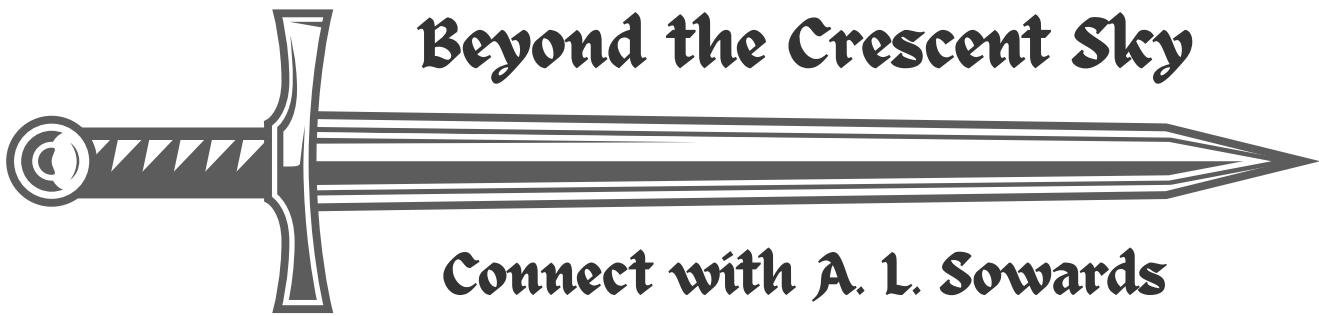
THE KASTRON



Kastron Map by Heather Willis



Character art by A. Woolley



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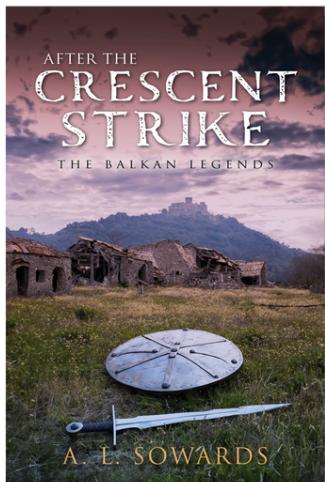
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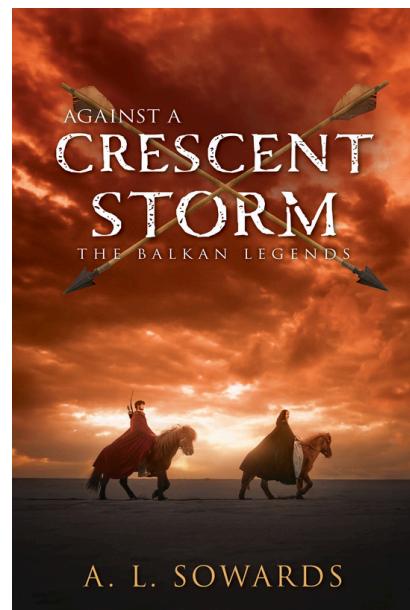
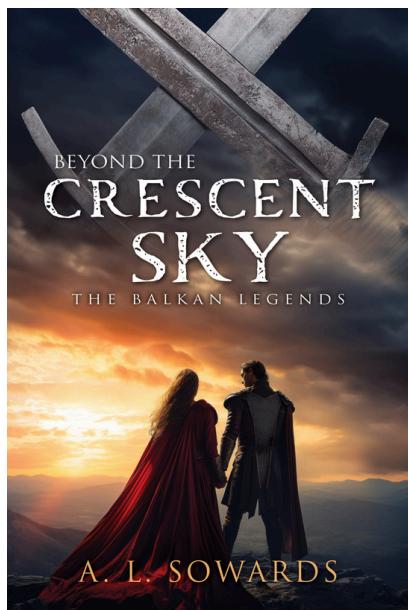
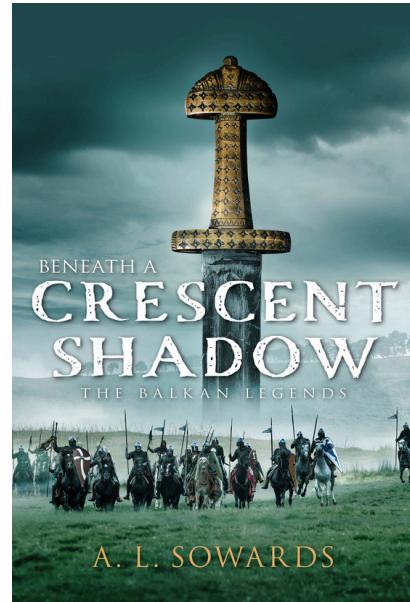
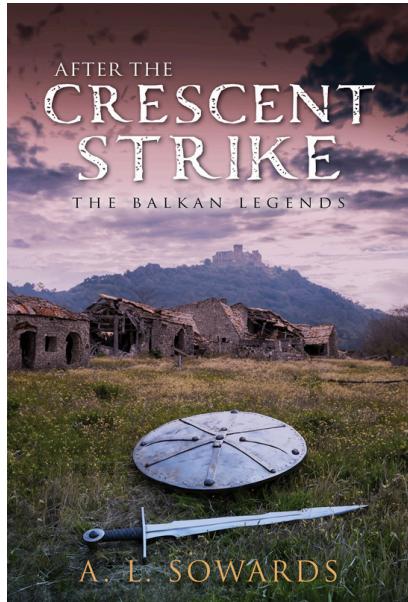


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After the Crescent Strike
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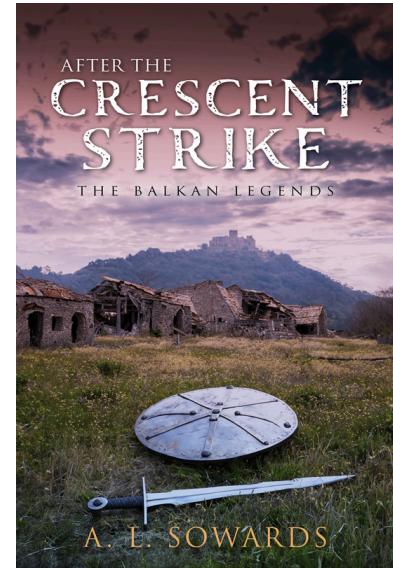


The Balkan Legends Series



After the Crescent Strike, a prequel novella
Beneath a Crescent Shadow, Book One
Beyond the Crescent Sky, Book Two
Against a Crescent Storm, Book Three

After the Crescent Strike
A Balkan Legends Prequel Novella
Available in ebook and audiobook



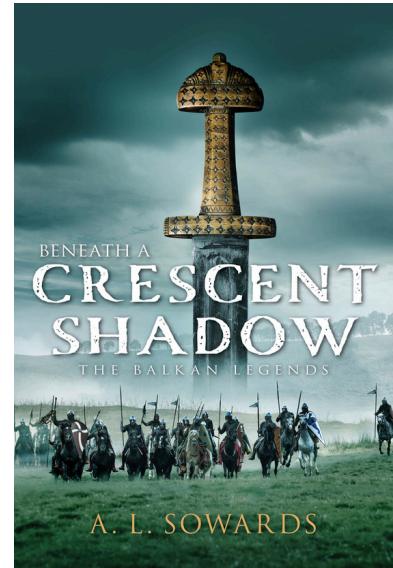
The Balkans, 1371

After conquering the Serbian army in battle, bands of Ottoman warriors terrorize the land, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake. As one of the few survivors of a deadly attack on her village, Magdalena is determined to protect her newly orphaned niece. When a group of battle-weary Serb warriors offers to lead Magdalena and her charge to safety, a flame of hope flickers to life for the desperate woman, burning brighter when she spots a familiar face among the group: Miladin, the man she once loved—and lost.

Following a devastating defeat on the battlefield, Miladin resolves to return home to Rivak and pledge his loyalty to the new *župan*, Konstantin, the young son of the slain leader who led Miladin to war. As Miladin travels back from the Maritsa River Valley to offer aid and allegiance to the inexperienced youth, he expects the way will be fraught with danger, but he never dreams that the journey will reunite him with his first love.

Even as Magdalena and Miladin rekindle a romance once doomed by youth and circumstance, hidden threats draw ever closer. Before they can truly be safe, they must face a ruthless enemy who will stop at nothing to seize power.

Beneath A Crescent Shadow
The Balkan Legends Book One
Available in print, ebook, and audiobook



The Balkans, 1373

A devastating battle claimed the lives of Konstantin's father, uncle, and most of their Serb army, leaving him to rule as a vassal of the Ottoman sultan, a role he is wholly unprepared for. Between war, famine, and a persistent band of brigands, Konstantin is nearly bankrupt. He will need to find a wealthy bride to marry if he is to have any hope of saving his lands and securing his future.

A betrothal to Suzana, the daughter of a prosperous merchant, is soon arranged, and upon meeting her, Konstantin immediately feels hope that their marriage could someday grow into love. Yet, from the moment of Konstantin and Suzana's betrothal, enemies threaten their lives, outlaws prey on their lands, and the terrors of Suzana's abusive past haunt their fragile new relationship. As this onslaught of threats closes in, the two face challenges that will test their love, their faith, and their hope to save their people and win their freedom from the heavy weight of Ottoman oppression.

Beyond the Crescent Sky
The Balkan Legends Book Two
Available in print, ebook, and audiobook



The Balkans, 1383

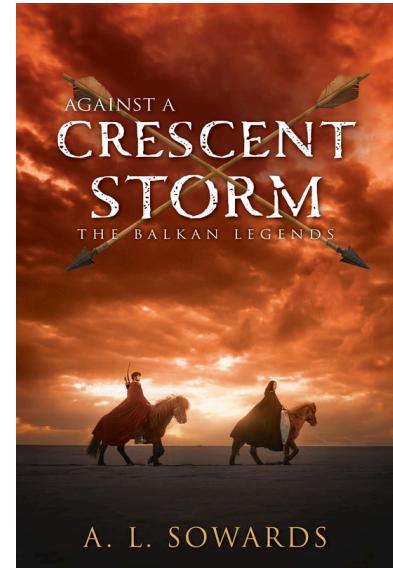
A sudden conflict between Serbs and Greeks has forced Ivan to join his brother and fight with the Serbian army. On the battlefield, Ivan is wounded and captured by the hostile Greeks, and he soon becomes a hostage to be used as a pawn in a deadly bid for power.

Helena, a Greek midwife, is tasked to care for Ivan, a request that will not only test her healing abilities but also her loyalty. Though war has made her reluctant patient an enemy, she can't help but forge a connection with him, yet falling in love with him could turn her world upside down and brand her a traitor.

As the Ottoman Empire extends its grip into the Balkans, events beyond their control force Ivan and Helena to choose between loyalty to their families and people or following the longings of their hearts.

Award-winning historical novelist A. L. Sowards creates an engaging world of overlords and spies, rebellions and battlefields, and forbidden love.

Against a Crescent Storm
The Balkan Legends Book Three
Available in print, ebook, and audiobook



The Balkans, 1389

Three years ago, Danilo's people won their freedom from the hated Ottoman Empire, but with enemies on every side, the Serbs' hard-earned peace remains fragile. Knowing the sultan will soon come for revenge, Danilo sets out to gain key allies for the coming war—and to escape the haunting grief of personal loss.

War has orphaned Maja and her brother, but they've moved forward from the turbulent aftermath of battle by crafting religious mosaics. Yet after being cheated and robbed, they are desperate for help. Rescue comes from Danilo, the man who once saved them from slavery to the Turks. What begins as an offer for safe escort is soon complicated by threats from a Hungarian noble who suspects them of conspiracy and from Iskandar, an Ottoman spy consumed by a vendetta against Danilo and a dangerous obsession with Maja.

As their journey grows more perilous, Danilo and Maja are drawn together by shared grief and affection. Yet upon returning home, Danilo finds that his župan, unaware of Danilo's growing emotional entanglement with Maja, plans to use Danilo's hand in marriage as a tool to forge a crucial alliance. Danilo is soon torn between love for Maja and loyalty to his family and people.

As tensions escalate, sabotage and vicious rumors weaken Christian unity, and hope of victory in the Balkans grows dim. Allies and enemies converge on the fields of Kosovo, where an epic battle will shape the destiny of nations for centuries to come.