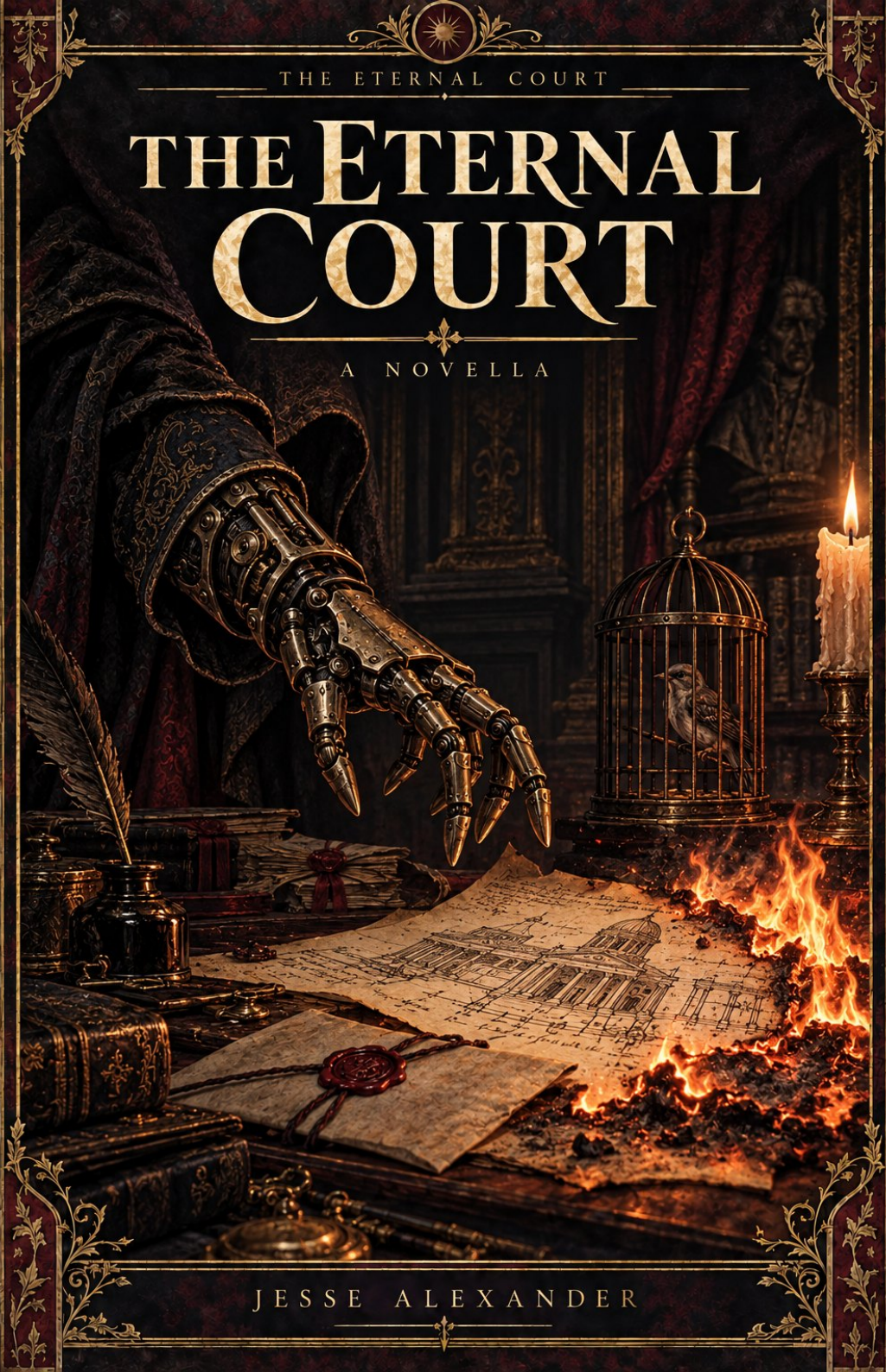


THE ETERNAL COURT

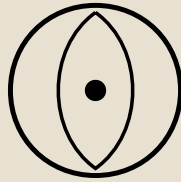
THE ETERNAL COURT

A NOVELLA

JESSE ALEXANDER



THE ETERNAL COURT



The Eternal Court

A Novella · Enhanced Edition

Sixteen chapters adapted from the pilot: an Albion accountant sent to reconcile a ledger, a dying foreign minister, a soldier who is more than he seems, and a princess who wants out of the castle.

KORMOR KIRAK · 1793

JESSE ALEXANDER



CHAPTER ONE: THE FIRE AND THE BIRD

Craggy mountains loomed over the valley like the shoulders of sleeping giants, and beneath them, the walled city of Kormor Kirak slept too. The place looked like something out of a storybook -- cobblestone streets, peaked roof buildings shoulder to shoulder, the whole thing built in the style of Dubrovnik and Nordlingen. The city climbed the cliff face in layers, steep and defensive, with narrow lanes that twisted between pale stone buildings. Above it all, perched on the city's skyline like something that had no business existing on earth, a castle straight out of a fever dream.

Torony Piros rose from the cliff itself, its pale gray stone shot through with dark veins of red that caught the moonlight and threw it back as something closer to blood. The scarlet tower at its heart stood out against the starless sky. Think Neuschwanstein by way of Dracula. The kind of place that made you believe in fairy tales right up until the fairy tales believed in you. The Videk Mountains behind the castle threw up a shield of jagged peaks, and the mineral scent of those distant heights drifted down on the night air -- cold, sharp, metallic. Under boot heels, the cobblestones were worn smooth by centuries of traffic, grooved in patterns that showed which routes people took again and again.

On the south side of town, the Theater of Everlasting Peace sat abandoned for the night. It was designed to be a three-story, in-the-round venue with

capacity for a few thousand, built in the modern style with soaring lines meant to evoke optimism. At the moment it was only thirty percent built and a hundred percent made of wood. A bad combination if someone showed up with a crate of Molotov Cocktails.

Someone did.

His name was Feeney, and he looked like a man who'd made a decision he couldn't take back. Thirties, hair gone every direction, brass-buttoned uniform rumpled from whatever he'd been doing before this -- running, most likely. His hands shook as he lit the wicks and threw the bottles one after another at the half-built structure. The flames caught fast. Wood does that.

Feeney watched wild-eyed as the fire spread, orange light crawling up the scaffolding, licking at the beams. When it was clear the whole site would be ash by morning, he turned and moved with purpose.

He didn't notice the hooded figure watching from the shadows. But then, nobody ever noticed the Automatic Assassin until it was too late. Through clockwork eyes that whirred and clicked behind a shrouded face, the machine tracked Feeney's retreat with mechanical precision. The thing was a masterpiece of terrible engineering: gears visible beneath translucent panels, pneumatic joints hissing with measured breath, metal hands with pistons for fingers, each digit capable of devastating force. With a faint hydraulic hiss and the grind of gears, it followed.

Feeney burst through the door of the Albion Consulate and slammed it shut behind him, dropping the crossbar into place. The room was a working office -- construction plans pinned to a bulletin board, folders stacked on desks, a long work table covered with architectural drawings and supply manifests. All evidence of the theater project and the empire's investment in it. The space had the particular sterile efficiency of an administrative center: functional desks, filing cabinets, the smell of old paper and lamp oil.

He set the bulletin board ablaze first. Watched the plans curl and blacken. Then he scrambled to the back of the room where an official-looking desk sat in front of a complex vault door set into the wall. His fingers found the keys of an arcane coding machine, and he typed with the kind of speed that only panic provides, generating a paper strip of encrypted text.

Outside, the Automatic Assassin arrived at the consulate's front door. A placard identified the building. The seal of the Albion Empire was mounted above it -- a magnificent Griffin wielding two swords, standing guard over a cityscape. The machine tried the door with a metal hand. Locked.

Inside, Feeney heard the door rattle and typed faster. Then -- WHAM. The outer door buckled inward, the metal crossbar bending under a force no human hand could produce.

Feeney ripped the coded message from the machine and ran for the stairs. WHAM. The crossbar snapped. The door shattered inward.

He was halfway up the staircase when he saw the Automatic Assassin step through the wreckage, raising a pneumatic crossbow with mechanical precision. The weapon's cylinders hummed as compressed air built pressure. Bolts punched into the wall and banister around him. One pierced his shoulder, and he bit down on a scream and kept running. Desperate men don't stop for pain.

He hit the roof deck at a sprint and made for the pigeon coop. Blood from his shoulder ran down his arm as he sealed the coded message into the chest capsule of a Homing Pigeon. His hands knew the work even as they trembled.

The access door behind him crashed open. The Assassin stepped through, crossbow leveled.

Feeney turned his back to the machine.

Two bolts meant for the bird found him instead, punching through his torso. He dropped to his knees but held on long enough to release the entire flock

from the coop, tossing his messenger bird up to join them. A cloud of pigeons exploded into the night sky.

We leave Feeney to his fate. His story is over. The bird's is just beginning.

The Homing Pigeon flapped hard, surrounded by the flock, as arrows shot from below found other birds instead. Those unlucky ones dropped away while the rest climbed above the walled city. Below them, the construction site burned, throwing flickering light across the rooftops. Peaked ridges cast jagged shadows that stretched toward the castle like reaching fingers.

The flock rose into a stormy sky and vanished into dark clouds.

What followed was a journey measured in days and weather. The birds burst through the storm clouds, leaving the mountain range behind them. They soared above a caravan road cutting across a rocky wasteland, skimmed over forest treetops, and then crossed a battlefield where massed armies were dug into trenches, killing each other by the hundreds.

Then through the broadside exchange of war zeppelins -- massive gas bags bristling with guns, trading fire in the sky while the birds threaded the space between them.

The Albion Empire had been at war for a hundred years. A generation of children had grown up knowing nothing but sacrifice, hardship, and the particular kind of quiet that settles over a village when its young people march away with the army and don't come back.

The birds flew over one such village, watching the stoic elders say goodbye.

Finally, the capital city appeared on the horizon. It was ringed with armament factories belching black smoke into an already gray sky. But at its center stood a cluster of imposing white marble buildings -- the same ones emblazoned on the Albion Seal. In the central plaza, a grand statue of that sword-wielding Griffin loomed over everything.



CHAPTER TWO: THE FOREIGN MINISTER AND THE ACCOUNTANT

Barron Whitehallow, the Albion Empire's Foreign Minister, was the last man out of Parliament House. He was in his sixties and had found a way to make the standard-issue uniform look like something worth wearing -- blood-red lining, high-collared vest, and a cape that actually worked on him. The man exuded political charm the way other people exuded sweat. Parliament House itself was a monument to imperial power: pale marble columns, windows tall enough to throw a man from, the kind of building that made you feel small on purpose.

He'd just finished a speech. The kind that used the word "love" in a building that only understood the word "war." His colleagues were not convinced.

"Staking the future of the empire on love?" one of them said on the steps, face pinched with doubt. "How is that a prudent course?"

"Follow the math," Barron said, descending. "Where hate and violence reduce our numbers. Love consistently does the reverse."

A corpulent colleague waddled alongside. "Have you considered the economic price of peace? What will our great factories produce if not weapons and ammunition?"

"When our Designers and Engineers turn their slide rules from machines of death to mechanisms of hope, prosperity will be the result."

A withered colleague, the kind who'd been pessimistic since birth, piped up from behind. "Without a foreign villain, might the mob's attention turn domestic?"

Barron reached the bottom step. With the Griffin Statue rising behind him, he turned to face them all. "Our citizens have endured decades of sacrifice. Bravely. Without any protest. It is not their attention that I fear. But my own ability to be worthy of their faith."

He turned his back on them and started across the plaza. Then he coughed -- a deep, wet sound that he caught in a handkerchief. When he pulled away, the fabric was flecked with blood. Whatever was killing him from the inside, it was getting worse.

"Minister! Minister!"

A Messenger Boy came running, hand outstretched, holding a familiar capsule. Barron took it, cracked it open with his signet ring, and read the coded message inside. His face went dark.

He crumpled the tape and handed it back to the boy. "Chew this up and swallow. Right?"

"By the emperor's grace, I serve," the boy said, and stuffed it in his mouth.

Barron moved toward his waiting carriage, his mind already elsewhere.

Across the capital, in the financial quarter, the Imperial Counting House occupied a squat stone building that had all the charm of a tax bill. Inside, a high-ceilinged room was full of the sound of adding machines. CLICKETY-CLACK-DING. The noise was relentless and methodical, the sound of numbers being forced into submission. Uniformed civil servants sat at individual desks, tapping away at their comptometers with varying levels of enthusiasm. The room smelled of machine oil and paper. Rows of desks stretched back into

shadow, with clerks hunched over their work like supplicants at an altar of bureaucracy.

One woman had enthusiasm to spare.

Olivia Faren, twenties, serious as a ledger, hair tied back tight. Her hands moved across the keys with expert speed, stacks of receipts piling up on either side of her workspace. Nobody else came close to her output. Her lips moved as she worked, checking and rechecking her sums.

She finished a calculation, penned the result into her ledger, then picked up a necklace from her desk and clicked open its locket. Inside was an illustration of Albion's Prince with the Princess of Terrassia -- young, beautiful, happy.

"By your grace, I serve," Olivia whispered, and went back to work.

But the next receipt made her frown. She pulled a hand-held mechanical calculator from her pocket -- a brass cylinder like a pepper mill, with tiny levers and switches -- and ran the numbers again. Something didn't add up. Or rather, something added up in a way it shouldn't.

One floor above the counting floor, Lord Wooster's office had a window that looked down on the workers like a foreman's perch. The room was lined with display cases, each one carefully arranged with rare objects from across the empire: carved jade from distant lands, ancient pottery, ceremonial masks, strange implements whose purpose was unclear. Lord Wooster himself was sixties, manicured, eccentric, and carried the faint aroma of shadiness. He rose from his elaborate desk to greet Barron with the warmth of an old friend.

"Barron Whitehallow, I presume! Oh, how I've missed your giggle-mugg."

"Too rare, Benji. Too rare."

They clasped hands and turned to admire the display cases ringing the room -- indigenous artifacts from across the empire, the kind of collection that comes from knowing the right people in the wrong places. Sunlight from the high window caught on brass plaques identifying each object.

"I've a new something or other in custody for you to crow over." Wooster produced a fragment of ancient pottery. "From Gravinia. Pulled out of the mud by a Trencher. He smuggled it back aboard a hospital ship."

"Hidden in his coffin?"

"Fair play. In his rolled-up pants. Lost his legs, didn't he? Plenty of room. Cost me an arm and a leg. Ha!"

"The spoils of war."

"Are the rumors true? Will this wedding bring it all to an end?"

"Think of it as a beginning."

Barron drifted to the window and looked down at the workers. "I'm in need of a new assistant. They must be precise. Confident. And devoted to Albion."

Below, Olivia had risen from her chair and was waving a receipt in the face of another Accountant with the kind of intensity that suggested somebody was about to get hit. She moved on to confront a second colleague, then a third. Relentless.

Wooster joined him at the window. "Bally snaps! Always with the ranny-gazzoo, that one."

"Not what I'm looking for?"

"Olivia Faren. Brickly to a fault. Since her waif years at the orphanage. Snootered her first Task Manager 'til he reorganized the line. It tip-topped their efficiency. She's been levied to our dormitory ever since."

They watched Olivia get into a shoving match. One of the accountants tried to snatch the receipt from her hand. She broke free and ran, holding it high, chased by the group. Barron laughed.

"Amusing it isn't," Wooster said. "You don't have to live with her nonsense. She's far too detail-oriented if you ask me."

Olivia charged into the office, breathless, her pursuers hovering at the door.

"My Lord! I've found an anomaly!"

"Yes, Olivia. I'm sure you have."

"Another receipt that defies classification. A direct payment from this office to a regimental corporal. A recent invalid, just back from the trenches of Gravinia." She paused, building her case. "It may be more evidence of wrongdoing. I don't yet know if they're smuggling medicine, weapons, or intelligence. But I believe we have a traitor in the counting house."

She handed the receipt to Lord Wooster with the trust of someone who'd never been betrayed.

"I'll look into it personally," Wooster said.

"It's not worthy of your station, Sir. The burden of inquiry is mine."

"I'm afraid that burden will be impossible for you to bear, Miss Faren. You're being reassigned at the Foreign Minister's request."

Olivia froze. She glanced at Barron, recognized who he was, and straightened up like a soldier. "By the grace of our Divine Emperor, I serve Albion. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In life everlasting."

"I'm constantly inspired by the dedication of our imperial youth," Barron said.

"Fair play?" Wooster asked.

"I don't know about fair, but for you, it's positively fortuitous." He turned to Olivia. "Pack a bag, Miss Faren."

"With what expectation, Sir?"

"A journey to the furthest boundary of the empire."

Wooster couldn't contain his joy. "Marvelous! Won't you be missed!"

As Barron regarded Olivia, her zeal faded to worry. She nervously clicked and spun her calculator, the way some people fidget with a coin.

Outside the Counting House, Olivia emerged dressed for travel, locket around her neck, a Gladstone bag in each hand. At Barron's carriage, she set down her bags and peered inside to find him coughing, pocketing a handkerchief.

"My apologies for the hot scramble, but we've an airship to catch."

Olivia hesitated. She actually took a step backward. But the Coachman had already grabbed her bags.

"Oh, dear. This is my first time away. Let alone traveling aloft."

"If it's good enough for the royal family, it's good enough for us."

Olivia touched her locket, then took one last worried look back at the counting house. Lord Wooster and her colleagues were visible in the windows. As she climbed aboard the carriage, they let out a collective "Huzzah!" -- the sound of people thrilled to see the back of her.

In the carriage, Olivia stared out the window, lips moving, absently working her calculator. Barron watched her for a moment.

"Forgive my query, Miss Faren. But are you talking to yourself?"

"In a way, Sir. When anticipation threatens my nerves, I'm calmed by the calculation of simple sums."

Out the window, she noticed troops marshaling for a military train. Soldiers checking gear, lining up by squad.

"Simple sums?"

"Haversack, braces, knapsack, ammunition, rifle. Four squads of five in each platoon. The cost to the empire would be thirteen thousand pounds and twenty, rounding for error."

"By what metric would you calculate the benefit of that expense?"

"Sir?"

"Would it be money well spent based on territory lost or taken?"

"Taken. Expansion is the obligation of the Albion Empire."

"I'm afraid you've got a null set. Frontlines haven't moved in years."

"Haven't they?"

"If those men and women have a twenty percent chance of surviving their first day of combat. Stabilizing at ten over their wartime service. How would you account for their potential loss to imperial productivity in peacetime?"

"I'm not familiar with peacetime. Do you have any supporting statistics?"

"If they even exist, they would be a hundred years out of date. I've any number of current tables regarding mortality, disability, and the lingering effects of battle trauma."

"The effects of trauma are subjective. I doubt they could be tallied with absolute confidence."

"Quite right. So please, Miss Faren. Never again calculate the cost of war using simple sums. Our troops deserve more nuanced reflection."

"Yes, Sir. I must admit my personal experience is limited. I've had no one to lose in the war."

"What of your friends? Did you not lose anyone to conscription?"

Olivia's walls went up. Fast. Like the crossbar on a consulate door.

"As I said, Sir. I had no one."

"A blessing and a curse."

She turned her eyes to the window and changed a setting on her calculator. Conversation over.



CHAPTER THREE: THE SOLDIER AND THE STALLION

At a cavalry stable on the outskirts of the capital, a war stallion stood in a riding ring, dressed for battle. The air was thick with hay and leather and horse sweat. The Cavalry Count sitting tall in the saddle was dressed for a portrait. Late teens, rigid, chesty in his uniform, radiating the kind of confidence that hasn't been tested yet.

"Enough dithering," the Count said. "Set those obstacles ablaze."

He was speaking to Jack Winbow, who was holding a burning torch and not looking particularly impressed. Jack was in his thirties, dressed as a stable hand, but he was built like something else entirely. An athletic war veteran with unkempt hair and kind eyes. He spoke to the Count with the easy confidence of someone who'd been in actual danger.

"My Lord, on a first run, the obstacles can surprise you. Before your attempt, may I advise --"

"Are you deaf? Light the damn fires!"

So Jack lit them. Gates, beams, barrels -- all designed to simulate a battlefield. Mannequins with wooden weapons were scattered about. As smoke and flames rose, Jack waved to a horn player and percussionist, who launched into a cacophonous racket.

Barron and Olivia arrived at ringside just in time to watch the Count spur his horse into a gallop toward the first obstacle. Olivia was rapt, anticipating a graceful leap.

The horse pulled up short. The Count sailed over its head and landed face-first in the mud.

The embarrassed Count stalked over to his horse, grabbed the reins with one hand, and raised the other to smack the animal on the nose. His arm was caught mid-swing by Jack.

"Easy there, my Lord."

"Unhand me, you rough-coated dog!"

"A stallion is proud. He won't respond to threats. You'll do better with a reassuring word."

The Count dropped the reins and took a swing at Jack, who stepped out of the way like he'd done it a thousand times. The Count stumbled, now doubly annoyed. He raised his riding crop at the horse.

"After I've whipped this stupid beast, it'll be your turn, cur."

Jack shoved him backward into the mud. Then he swung up into the saddle.

What followed was the kind of display that makes you understand why some people are born for certain things. Jack guided the stallion through the obstacles like they were dancing -- leaping through smoke, darting around fire, spin-kicking mannequins off their posts. The horn and drum duo abandoned their noise-making and started playing something heroic instead.

Jack pulled up before the awestruck Count, stroking the panting horse's neck.

"Treat him right, and this beast will save your life." He dismounted, landing face to face with the boy. "Treat him wrong, and this beast will take yours."

The Count's mud-soaked ego had nothing left to say.

In the barn afterward, Jack was shirtless, pitching hay into a feed bin. The work was methodical, practiced, the kind of task that lets the mind wander. When he turned his back, Olivia saw the scars. Parallel lines, deep and white against his skin, running from shoulder blade to ribs. They looked like claw marks from something very large, something that had raked him with deliberate force. There was a lot of scar tissue there.

"On the last full moon's night, your room was ready and waiting," Barron said.

Jack hung the pitchfork on the wall. "I was hunting in the hills."

"Did you catch anything?"

"Nobody you know."

He grinned at Barron, then noticed Olivia.

"Olivia Faren, Jack Winbow. Our guardian for this endeavor."

"I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

Jack offered his hand. Olivia shook it with the grip of someone who'd been arm-wrestling accountants.

"A firm grip for a lady."

"I'm not a lady. I'm an accountant."

"Pack up your fighting kit," Barron told Jack. "Our blimp goes bag up within the hour."

"You're not concerned my presence might complicate your mission?"

"Our destination is Kormor Kirak. So your affliction may prove advantageous."

"I admit I'm unfamiliar with Kormor Kirak," Olivia said. "Is it near the front lines?"

Jack moved to the tool rack, where bladed weapons hung alongside the farming tools. He selected an elegantly curved Shamsir sword, its blade

catching the light in a long, sinuous arc. He moved with the efficiency of someone selecting familiar tools. A pouch of throwing daggers went over his shoulder. And a thick cane, about three feet long, hinged at one end.

"The territory is remote," Barron said. "Neutral ground. Nothing to be afraid of."

Jack flicked the cane. A menacing central blade unfurled while a pair of side prongs clicked into place above the hilt. The weapon -- a folding Spetum -- stood six feet tall. More spear than sword. The mechanics of it were precise, the spring-loaded sections snapping into place with the efficiency of engineered violence.

Olivia stared at it, wide-eyed.

Nothing to be afraid of. Sure.



CHAPTER FOUR: THINGS OVERHEAD

The blimp climbed into blue sky, a great lumbering thing with a gondola slung beneath its gas bag. The structure creaked as it rose, the weight of the envelope pulling on the rigging with constant, audible strain. Through the observation glass in the nose, you could see three people standing around a table with a map spread between them. One of them was gripping the table edge like it owed her money. The floor of the gondola was polished wood, and it tilted subtly with each shift in the wind, throwing the passengers slightly off balance.

"What I'm about to relay is for your ears only," Barron said. "It mustn't be discussed beyond our circle. Understood?"

"Who've I got to tell?" Jack asked.

"Miss Faren? Can you keep a secret?"

Olivia opened her mouth to answer and burped instead. Mortified didn't begin to cover it.

"I'll consider that a yes."

"Don't lock your knees," Jack told her. "It's like a sailing ship, just much higher."

"All forms of travel are new to me."

Barron laid it out. "The union of Albion's Prince to Terrassia's Princess is the world's best chance at peace in years. After much debate, a site for the royal wedding was agreed upon."

He pointed to the map. The flags of Albion and Terrassia flanked a mountain range, and nestled in its center, tiny and remote, sat the territory of Kormor Kirak.

"The natural barrier of the Videks and the ever-present storms along the border makes it easy to secure."

Jack watched Olivia trying to keep her balance. "Loosen up. Go with the flow." He swayed to demonstrate. She copied him, awkwardly.

"A venue for the event had been under construction," Barron continued. "Designed such that while the marriage festivities carry on above, confidential peace negotiations might transpire below. But not days ago, the construction site was burned to the ground."

"It wasn't an accident?" Jack asked.

"Albion's Counsel has gone missing, so my information is limited."

"Who would commit such a crime?" Olivia's voice was sharp, almost angry. "Against peace! Against love!"

Both men looked at her, surprised by the outburst.

"Pardon my outburst, Sir. But it's positively ghastly."

"Indeed. Our job is to see that construction resumes and the work finished in time for the wedding."

Olivia was turning green. Jack took her arm gently and walked her to the wide observation window at the nose of the gondola. The curved glass was thick and slightly warped, giving a dizzying view of the world below.

"Steady. Eyes on the horizon."

Barron stayed at the table, looking at the map where Kormor Kirak was marked with a tiny illustrated castle.

Later, up on the observation deck atop the gondola, Olivia stood in the wind and took in a view of distant mountains on the horizon. She breathed deep, savoring something she'd never had before -- the world, spread out beneath her. The wind was constant and strong here, catching her hair and clothing. The vast expanse of sky and earth below her made the concerns of the carriage and the office seem impossibly small.

"How are you feeling?" Jack asked from behind her, dressed for training, weapons laid out nearby.

"Healthy. Thank you."

"You adapt quickly."

"Do I? No sooner have I mastered air travel do I learn we must transition to a carriage."

"The Videk storms are notorious. They'd rip this gas bag apart."

She turned back to the view, scanning for any sign of danger. Then she heard the clatter of boots and turned to find Jack running through fighting forms with his Shamsir, the curved blade cutting the air in precise arcs. The movement was fluid and practiced, each strike flowing into the next with economic efficiency.

Her lips moved. Counting.

"There's a four-four beat to your steps. You're moving in patterns."

Jack kept at it. "My forms? They're just good for practice. When the music starts, these routines go to hell."

"What music would that be?"

"The bugles of war. Drums of gun and cannon. You'll never see a delicate lunge and parry on a battlefield. Just a scrum of hacking and slashing. Until the last exhausted blade falls. Nothing left but a pile of barely grown kids. All of them screaming, crying, then quiet. That silence will crush your heart like an iron shroud."

He finished his routine, and for a moment his face showed what he usually kept hidden. The things he'd seen. The things he'd done.

"Your passionate words convey the critical nature of our mission," Olivia said.

Jack tried to change the mood with a quick dance step. "I look forward to the day when our young people will not practice for battle but the dance floor. When that music kicks off, it's all about the well-rehearsed routine."

"Is it?"

"Do you prefer improvisation?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you dance?"

"I've never had the occasion."

"Then how do you celebrate joy?"

Olivia blinked, flustered, as if the question was in a language she hadn't learned yet. "Excuse me, I must re-pack my kit for the overland journey."

She left him standing on the observation deck, watching her go with curiosity. Here was a woman who could count anything except the things that mattered.



CHAPTER FIVE: THE GOTH PRINCESS

Bhile Feeney's pigeon had been crossing an empire, and while Barron had been recruiting his team, life in Kormor Kirak carried on in its own peculiar way.

In the attic lab of the Terrassian Consulate, a machine lay on a table. The Automatic Assassin -- the same one that had chased Feeney across rooftops -- was splattered with blood and bits of gore. A man in a blood-stained apron cleaned it with oil and brush, working with the methodical care of a watchmaker. One of his arms was mechanical -- a clockwork prosthetic where flesh and bone should have been. His name was Devorlen Koss, and he built killing machines the way other people built cabinets. The attic was his space, tools hung in perfect order, every screw and spring accounted for.

A loud pounding on the door downstairs pulled him from his work. He stripped off the apron, put on a crisp military jacket, and went to see what the fuss was about.

Outside on the High Street, Red Suited Guards were pounding on every door on the block, hauling the occupants out of their beds. Koss looked toward the castle that loomed over the city and understood.

Someone important was going for a ride.

Up at Torony Castle, the gate swung open and a woman burst out on horseback like she'd been fired from a cannon. A blur in a broad hat and flowing dress, she charged through the streets while the dutiful citizens lined up to cheer and wave. The moment she passed, their faces fell, and they shuffled back inside. Civic enthusiasm had its limits.

Rozito Vallikozo was waiting outside the Kereskedo Market -- the oldest building in the city, thick stone walls with arched entrances, a Silk Road Caravanserai crossed with a Persian Bazaar. Rozito was in his thirties, the market's resident fixer, dressed in eclectic garb that mixed foreign fabrics and colorful patterns -- the outfit of a man who knew a guy who knew a guy. Behind him, the marketplace spilled onto the streets in controlled chaos: merchants calling their wares, the murmur of negotiation. He shifted nervously at the sound of clattering hooves and forced a smile as the rider pulled up and dismounted.

Szeret Veresz was a goth princess, and she owned every inch of it. Twenties, dark garb that evoked menace and Gothic elegance -- black dress with ornamental cuts, leather accents, the deliberate styling of someone who wanted to be taken seriously as a threat. Yet her mood was cheery and delightful -- the kind of contrast that kept people off balance. She handed her reins to a Red Guard and strode toward the market entrance without a glance at Rozito, who bowed low.

"By the comet's tail, Rozito. Don't bow to me. We're friends."

He hurried to catch up. "Royal blood requires respect."

"Uggh. You sound like my mother."

"Please let her know that I'm a traditionalist and not to blame for your progressive interests."

"Did you tell the Guards of our appointment? The blaggards roused the good people from their beds."

"So their dreams might be filled with visions of their most beloved princess."

"You were trying to spare them from having nightmares about their terrifying queen. How considerate."

"What? No! That's not what I meant!"

Szeret laughed as she swept inside. Rozito caught the eye of a Red Guard holding Szeret's horse. The guard was staring right at him. "She said it! I didn't!"

Inside the dress maker's shop, Szeret and Rozito sat on a settee watching nervous young models parade past in formal outfits. Ruffles and bustles, the whole stuffy catalog. A matronly dressmaker orchestrated from the side, clapping her hands to signal changes. The shop smelled of fabric and sizing, with bolts of cloth stacked on every surface. Szeret was not impressed.

"Mushroom." A pause. "Tomato." Another. "Lettuce."

"I didn't know you ate vegetables," Rozito said.

Then a Gawky Model appeared in a leather bodysuit, and Szeret perked up like a cat spotting a bird.

"Peach!"

She leaped from the settee and started stripping off her own dress right there. Rozito and the rest watched, aghast, as she peeled down to garter and hose. The Gawky Model tried not to panic as Szeret approached, snuggling up behind her, matching her body to the model's limbs, and placing her head on the woman's shoulder.

"How do I look?"

"Like a two-headed prostitute," Rozito replied.

"Flirty-Flirt-Flirt!"

Szeret took the bewildered model's hands and led her in a confident waltz around the room. Then she dipped the quivering young woman, holding her firm, face to face. Szeret's lips pulled back in a teeth-baring smile.

"Does it bind?"

The suit was so tight the woman could only manage a squeak.

Szeret spun her back to her feet. "Delicious! I'll take it!"

"Your mother won't think it's too modern?" Rozito ventured.

"Uggh. You're soooo provincial." She turned to the Gawky Model. "Ever been inside the castle?"

The bewildered model shook her head. Szeret smiled and led her toward the door, still barely dressed.

"Szeret! Your clothes!"

"I'd only be taking them off again when I get home. Sweet dreams!"

She was gone. Rozito glared at the self-satisfied Dressmaker. "I'll deny that I was ever here."



CHAPTER SIX: KORMOR KIRAK

The walled city of Kormor Kirak looked impenetrable from the outside -- one mountain road in, one road out, a switchback carved directly into the cliff face. The Cliff Road, worn smooth by centuries of merchants and soldiers. As Olivia's carriage climbed higher, she watched the city shrink below, a patchwork of slate and pale stone getting smaller with each hairpin turn. The wind picked up. She caught the scent of pine, something metallic underneath it -- iron, or maybe the memory of blood.

Every half-mile, the road widened into guard stations. Red Guards in crimson surcoats. Olivia counted them without thinking about it, her lips moving slightly, the way a passenger counts telephone poles to stay awake. They looked courteous enough to travelers who belonged. The kind of courteous that misses nothing.

When the carriage finally leveled out at the Southern Gate, Olivia pushed the door open and stepped down, stretching her arms. Barron and Jack were already haggling with guards ahead. She looked up.

The gate was wrought iron banded with dark steel, silver inlaid in the pattern of the Veresz sigil -- a crowned skull impaled on a scepter, thorns wrapped around it. Centuries of rust had stained the iron red-brown -- or maybe that was intentional. Above it, mounted on iron hooks, were skulls. Weathered nearly to nothing by time and wind, but unmistakably there. Traitors. Failed invaders. A message written in bone.

She craned her neck to look at the castle.

Torony Piros straddled the city wall in a way that made the eye hurt. Half of it sat protected behind stone, the other half hanging over a vertical drop to nothing. Built over centuries, each Veresz ruler adding their own ambitious sprawl of Gothic stone. But what caught her was the Red Tower -- the original structure, built from stone that was genuinely red, darkened by age into something closer to dried blood. Sixty feet of it, squat and ancient, its upper levels sealed, no windows, no way in. The stone seemed to absorb light rather than throw it back. Like the mountain itself bled here.

In one of those high windows, Szeret stood naked at a telescope mounted on a brass stand. The room around her was warm -- a brazier in the corner, an act of defiance in a castle that refused heat anywhere else. Behind her, asleep in a lavish bed, the Gawky Model didn't stir.

The carriage descended through the Blood Gate. Swift and final, echoing through the gatehouse with a resonance that seemed to last longer than physics allowed. Olivia pressed her face to the window.

The Outer Courtyard sprawled beyond, paved with dark stone blocks stained in places -- old blood worked into the foundation, if the stories were true. To the east, the carriage house: covered stalls, a fleet of vehicles that were less practical than artful. Black lacquered wood trimmed with silver. Wheels bound in iron bands hammered with runes. A queen's toys.

The city streets came next, worn cobblestones, the mountain air mixing with woodsmoke and commerce. Beside her, Barron coughed into a handkerchief. Jack noticed the blood on it and offered a look of concern that Barron deflected with a question.

"Welcome to Kormor Kirak," Barron said. "It's your first time, isn't it, Jack?"

"It is. Though I did meet some of their local boys years ago," Jack replied.

"Of course, you did. An experience that left its mark. Will you seek them out for a reunion?"

Barron nodded grimly. Olivia hadn't been paying attention to any of that.

"Those symbols," she said, pointing out the window. "I'm seeing them on many walls and doors. Do they identify the occupants somehow?"

Barron followed her gaze. "Their purpose is to protect the people inside."

"From what? A misunderstanding? To signify they've paid their taxes?"

"They're wards of defense, against the attacks of evil spirits."

"Woof," Jack said.

"Though it's my first time afield, I'm surprised to find superstition so pervasive, let alone permitted. Is this common in the provinces?" Olivia asked.

"After my military service, I joined the diplomatic corps. Kormor city was my first posting, as General Counsel. When I arrived, my world-view was much like your own. Fixed. I encourage you to regard whatever you may encounter, no matter how strange, with open-minded curiosity," Barron said.

"I'll try, Sir," Olivia replied.

"You could also try fear," Jack offered.

They looked at him.

"If something you encounter scares the hell out of you, run," Jack continued.

"Don't listen to Jack," Barron said. "There's nothing for us to be afraid of."

Olivia looked past Barron to see Jack nodding slowly. Yes, there is.

What none of them noticed was the thing keeping pace with them above. Up on the rooftops, something tracked the carriage through the streets. Moving fast, keeping to the shadows, leaping smoothly over the gaps between buildings. Was it an animal? Was it that killer machine?

Not the latter. Because whatever had been running across the rooftops was now staring a few blocks ahead at the Automatic Assassin, who crouched on a rooftop directly above the theater ruins. The machine was a marvel of mechanical precision: articulated joints moving with the efficiency of gears and springs, its movements economical and practiced. The killer machine was prepping an explosive crossbow bolt with methodical care, a task that might have seemed impossible for a mechanical construct but which its specialized servos and gear-work managed with inhuman precision. The arrow was oversized, its glass tip filled with flaming gel, the mechanical string drawn back with a soft hydraulic hiss.

Down on the street below, the carriage rolled to a stop at the charred ruins of the theater. The structure had been reduced to blackened stone and fractured timber. Rebuilding it was going to be a project that would strain anyone's resources. The devastation was total, precise, the work of someone who knew what they were doing.

"Ghastly," Olivia said.

On the rooftop directly above them, the Automatic Assassin nocked its arrow and took aim at the carriage. But before it could fire, a shape tackled it from behind. The arrow shot skyward and exploded in a ball of smoke and fire, the sound carrying across the city.

Jack had the carriage door open in an instant, sword in hand, scanning for danger. Olivia poked her head out for a look. They both saw the fading fireball in the sky above them, dissipating smoke trailing downward.

Barron gently pulled Olivia back inside. "Curiosity, yes. But in moderation."

She settled back, trying to remain calm. Barron tapped the roof with his cane. "To the Albion Consulate, please." The carriage lurched forward and carried on down the street.

Above them, on the rooftop they'd just left behind, the Automatic Assassin squirmed on its back, pinned by the furry paw of an unseen creature. With a

low growl, the beast used another paw to take the machine's head clean off. The head rolled to a stop, neck cables leaking fluid, clockwork eyes dimming to darkness.

Across town, in his attic laboratory, Devorlen Koss watched a blip fade from the screen of his radar-like device. He sighed, then turned to regard a rack of spare mechanical limbs and heads. Plenty of parts to build more. Always more.





CHAPTER SEVEN: THE VAULT

The door of the Albion Consulate had been destroyed. Olivia and Jack followed Barron through the wreckage into a room that had been thoroughly ransacked. Everything smashed and broken. The construction plans on the bulletin board were charred remains. What should have been a working diplomatic office--a space of polished order and imperial authority--had been reduced to wreckage. Furniture splintered, papers scattered across the floor like autumn leaves, the careful arrangement of official business scattered to the winds.

"Why didn't the authorities stop the looting?" Olivia asked.

"The consulate is considered Albion territory. Within these walls, the Red Guards have no jurisdiction," Barron said.

"I've never seen anything so awful," Olivia said.

She was about to revise that statement.

Barron approached the vault door at the back of the room. Its surface was dented and burned from multiple failed breach attempts. Deep gouges scarred the iron, and the surrounding wall had been smashed away at the edges, but the door had held. Whoever had tried to get it open had thrown everything they had at it and failed. He removed his signet ring and pressed it face-down into a port beside the lock. A timer began to click--steady, insistent, counting down. Barron's fingers flew across three combination dials, spinning them with the

practiced speed of a man who'd done this before but never under this kind of pressure. The dials had intricate mechanical clicks, each one engaging with the next as he worked.

A pneumatic KA-THUNK from the lock. Jack stepped forward and hauled the heavy door open.

Olivia stared at what was inside. Her jaw dropped. Her eyes went wide. Her body shuddered. And her lips began to move, counting.

The vault had been ransacked. Anything of value was gone. The walls and floor were caked with dried blood. And in the center, suspended in a crude frame made of entwined branches, was Feeney.

Dead.

His naked body was covered with hundreds of tiny wounds. But these weren't random. They formed patterns--the runes of a demonic language, carved into human flesh with surgical precision. The blood had crusted over his skin, creating a grotesque map of agony. The smell hit them like a physical thing: copper, decay, and something else--something burnt and wrong.

Olivia's eyes fluttered. She was about to faint. Jack was already behind her, catching her in his arms before she went down. The contact jolted her back.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" she gasped.

He released her. With a shaking hand, she produced her calculator. Her fingers moved over it reflexively, though she wasn't sure what she was trying to sum. Maybe it was comfort she was calculating. Some number that would make the world make sense again.

Jack followed Barron into the vault.

"If they tortured him for the combination, why was the door still locked?" Jack asked.

"They used his pain to gain entry, but not that way. These wounds. This trellis. It's portal magic," Barron said.

"Some kind of druid ritual?" Jack asked.

"The runes reek of necromancy. The manipulation of dead things for magical ends. An abominable craft," Barron replied.

"What were they after?" Jack asked.

"There would've been a robust deposit of gold. To fund construction of the theater," Barron said.

"Eighty-eight."

Barron and Jack turned back. Olivia stood at the vault's entrance, tears running down her cheeks, analog calculator in hand, trying to be brave.

"If the average surface area of the human body is twenty-two square feet. And the observed circumference of each mark is three inches. There are eighty-eight wounds on that man's body," she said.

Barron looked at her for a long moment.

"It's been a long day. I've heard the mistress of our hostel makes delightful cocktails. Shall we retreat and put her to the test?" he offered.

Olivia regarded him, still shaking, and nodded.





CHAPTER EIGHT: LIQUID COURAGE

The Bastion Inn was a squat stone building with a slate roof, its grey exterior softened by hanging planters of herbs and flowers that shouldn't survive the mountain winters but somehow did. A weathered sign reading "BASTION" swung slightly in the wind above the entrance. Barron's carriage sat parked out front alongside a steam-powered vehicle that huffed and puffed even while stationary.

Olivia pushed through the door and the warmth hit her like a physical thing -- it carried weight, substance, the accumulated comfort of a fire that had been burning for hours. A massive fireplace dominated the northern wall, its opening arched in fitted stone, flames crackling and casting dancing light across the grey stone. She moved deeper into the common room, past the worn dark wood bar that ran the eastern wall, its surface smoothed by decades of elbows and coins. Behind it, shelves climbed toward the ceiling, lined with bottles and mysterious jars, some glowing faintly in the candlelight. She looked up. Above, a painted ceiling depicted an unfamiliar night sky -- constellations rendered in the artist's imagination, a falling comet arced across the heavens.

Olivia sat at the bar, staring at an empty glass. Barron sat nearby, spreading new theater blueprints across the counter. Behind the bar, mixing a cocktail in a pitcher with practiced ease, stood a woman with distinctively pointed ears -- elegant and sleek, fae or elven heritage marked in that unmistakable shape. She

wore earthy tones -- browns and greens, muted golds -- and her hands moved with the certainty of someone entirely comfortable with her work. This was Eppy Flinder.

"Liquid courage," Eppy said. "That's what my Grandmother called it. Dewrder Hylifol in her tongue."

"Miss Flinder, I must admit I've never had an alcoholic beverage," Olivia said.

"Call me Eppy," Eppy replied.

Olivia watched her fill the glass.

"Eppy, should I fear intoxication?" Olivia asked.

"It won't burn those dreadful sights out of your memory, but it will help your thoughts move on," Eppy said.

Olivia took a wary sip. It tasted good.

"Sweet. Like honey," Olivia said.

She turned on her stool to scan the room. Locals filled the dining tables. A cleared area served as a dance floor, with a platform where a singer and instrumental trio performed a traditional folk song. The musicians had positioned themselves on a raised area maybe six inches higher than the main floor, giving them a natural platform. The walls were decorated with weapons, rugs, relics, and paintings of fantastic beasts and monsters. Unicorns. Werewolves. Oversized bats. Elves. And other things Olivia didn't have names for.

"Feeney was wise to place an extra set of blueprints in your charge," Barron said, not looking up from the plans.

Olivia noticed the ceiling and turned back to set down her now empty glass. Eppy refilled it.

"Mind your sips, Olivia. Too much sweet can end with a sour," Eppy cautioned. Then to Barron: "Change hasn't come to Kormor Kirak since the comet fell from the sky."

"If that were true, the gates would still be closed to foreigners," Barron replied.

"The queen's favor can be bought. But I can't imagine the price for turning a blind eye to necromancy," Eppy said.

"The uprising of the Lich Cult was the only real threat to her reign," Barron offered.

Olivia frowned. "Lich? I don't know that word."

"A Lich is a powerful wizard, dead but resurrected. Their memories, skills, and agenda are intact," Barron explained.

"What is the local fascination with all of this paranormal poppy-cock?" Olivia asked.

Eppy and Barron shared a smile.

"You live in the new world," Eppy said. "We live in the old. Never shall they meet."

"Oh, dear. Have I offended you?" Olivia asked.

"If I was easy to offend, I'd be in the wrong job," Eppy replied.

Olivia took another drink, clearly enjoying it. "You're in the right profession."

She spotted Jack across the room, playing cards at a table with a few other men. One of them had a clockwork arm -- gears and pistons where flesh should have been, mechanical fingers that moved with unsettling precision. She noticed his lapel pin: the flag of Terrassia. He caught her staring and smiled knowingly.

"Sir, are you aware that Jack is playing cards with a Terrassian?" Olivia asked.

"Kormor Kirak is neutral ground, Miss Faren. A place for commonality, not conflict," Barron said.

Eppy and Barron watched Olivia chug the rest of her drink and start across the room toward the card table, a little unsteady.

Barron returned to the blueprints. What happened next was not his problem.

Olivia pulled up a chair. Jack and the others reacted politely.

"Olivia. This is Rozito. Chulligan. That's Pidge. And Devorlen Koss," Jack said.

Olivia ignored the others. She was fascinated by Koss.

"You're Terrassian," Olivia said.

"The least remarkable element of my identity," Koss replied.

"I've never met one of you before," Olivia said.

"War keeps the opposition separated," Koss said.

"Not on the battlefield," Jack said.

"That's why I prefer the card table," Rozito added.

"I hope you're looking forward to the royal wedding as much as I am," Olivia said.

Koss leaned back. "Your hope is misplaced. I'm revolted by the arranged marriage of those leisure class infants."

Olivia was the only one shocked. "How dare you! It's not an arranged marriage. The prince and princess are in love."

"I don't see how. Not only have they never met. But our princess is ten years old. Yours is what, twelve?"

Olivia pulled out her locket, opened it, and held up the illustration of the handsome young couple. "Nonsense. They're obviously of age. And devoted to one another. Look!" she said.

Koss laughed. He couldn't help it. "Your proof is in the illustration? Let's hope the artwork on these walls is nowhere near as accurate."

Olivia's eyes flicked to the paintings of monsters on the walls. For a moment, something cracked in her certainty. But rather than get embarrassed, she got angry. Jack saw her reach for his drink and pulled it away just in time.

"You play cards, don't you 'Liv?" Jack asked.

She looked at the cards in their hands. The pile of money and trinkets at the center of the table.

"I don't approve of gambling," Olivia said.

"There's some chance at work. But it's skill-based. If you can count, you should be able to pick it up," Jack said.

Jack winked at her as he dealt. Olivia caught his meaning and played the ingenue. "Numbers? Oh, dear. It may take me a few turns to get my bearings."

"As long as you can feed the kitty, you're welcome to play," Koss said.

Olivia placed her locket on the table, sliding it into the pot. Koss was amused. This would be easy.

Some time later, the center of the table was piled high with money and trinkets. Everyone had folded except Olivia and Devorlen Koss. The others watched the showdown.

Olivia laid out her cards. "Does this add up to victory?"

Koss flicked his clockwork fingers in disgust, shredding his own cards. Jack, Rozito, and the others cheered for Olivia as Koss rose from the table, straightening his coat.

"Lucky I've another event. Or you might end up taking my arm. I hope you'll indulge me in a rematch?" Koss said.

Olivia dragged her winnings toward her and reclaimed her locket. "Your hope is well placed. I'm saving money for a dress to wear at the royal wedding," she said.

Koss took his leave, heading toward Barron on his way out.

"That was remarkable," Rozito said. "Were you cheating?"

"Never in my life!" Olivia said.

Eppy appeared behind Jack, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Which one of you is chasing away my customers?"

"Liv has an affinity for numbers," Jack said.

Olivia basked in the compliment. She was starting to feel something warm and unfamiliar--belonging, maybe. Then Eppy leaned down and whispered something in Jack's ear. Whatever it was, it made him smile in a way that Olivia did not care for.

She watched Jack get up from the table and follow Eppy to the dance floor.

"I have a friend you should meet," Rozito said. "She's fascinated by the world outside of Kormor Kirak."

Olivia watched Jack and Eppy dance--some coordinated folk thing, a mix of clogging and square dancing. Fast, fun, complicated. The musicians picked up the tempo, the firelight catching the moving figures in warm, golden tones. Was she jealous or just curious? Her moving lips betrayed she was calculating their steps.

"And looking forward to the wedding," Rozito continued. "Szeret loves dancing."

"So do I," Olivia said.

She pounded the rest of Jack's abandoned drink, grabbed Rozito's hand, and pulled him onto the dance floor. He was startled but game.

Jack and Eppy welcomed the newcomers. The two couples twirled and maneuvered around each other while the musicians picked up the tempo even more. The warmth of the room seemed to intensify, the fire-cast light creating moving shadows on the stone walls as bodies moved through the space.

At first, Olivia's face was serious as she counted her moves, executing what she'd memorized by watching. Gradually she loosened up. Matching the others step for step. Smiling. Then laughing. This was the first time anyone had seen her joyful. It might have been the first time she'd ever been joyful. The music swept them all into its rhythm, the warmth of the room and the heat of the dancing bodies creating something almost like magic.

But it was also the first time she'd ever had alcohol.

Olivia's smile faded. She bolted off the dance floor, hand over her mouth.





CHAPTER NINE: THE VAMPIRE QUEEN

The courtyard of Torony Castle was lit by torches and filled with the parked carriages of visitors. Red Guards stood at their posts, stiff as furniture, their crimson surcoats catching the flickering torchlight. The dark stone blocks of the courtyard floor were notably discolored in places--stained with something that time had not quite washed away. The scent of forge-smoke from the blacksmith's workshop mixed with night air and something older, something that spoke of centuries of blood and darkness. The rhythmic puff of a steam-powered vehicle announced the arrival of Devorlen Koss and Barron Whitehallow, riding together. They eased to a stop and walked toward the castle entrance, their boots finding the dark stone of the courtyard path.

Barron had one of his coughing attacks on the path. The sound echoed off the courtyard walls, swallowed by the vast space and the night air above.

"Sounds like I'm not the only one with a gift from the trenches," Koss said, offering a handkerchief with his clockwork arm. "Did you fight at Schaffen Platz?"

Barron wiped his mouth and pocketed the cloth. "The mounds at Barrow."

"The use of asphyxiating gas is a great shame on my country. From one soldier to another, I apologize," Koss said.

"Let peace be the cure for what ails us," Barron replied.

"Will it grow my arm back?" Koss asked.

"I'm afraid not. I'll take some metal lungs if you have them," Barron said.

They reached the double doors where a pair of Red Guards flanked a uniformed Bouncer. Koss flashed an invitation and got an approving nod.

"The Queen said if I ever found a reason to return, I could swing by the castle anytime, unannounced," Koss said.

Barron produced a gold medallion. A dragon's head with amber eyes, the pupils made from drops of actual blood. The Bouncer tipped his hat, and the doors opened.

The Grand Entry Hall revealed itself in stages. First the threshold, then the vast space beyond -- fifty feet of ceiling painted with the history of the Veresz dynasty, Kiraline rendered in oils across centuries of scenes, always centered, always in command. The colors hadn't faded: deep blues and golds, reds that bled into blacks that seemed to swallow light. Barron stepped inside, Koss at his shoulder.

The floor caught them both. Polished dark stone so reflective it mirrored the painted ceiling overhead, and for a moment the world inverted -- walking felt like moving through a space that existed both above and below, a trick that wouldn't release its grip until the eye adjusted. Barron's boots clicked against the mirror-surface. The sound echoed.

Inside, the air thrummed with music and conversation. The masquerade was a non-traditional affair. The word "debauched" didn't do it justice. Canded sconces threw shifting light across guests in Gothically Victorian attire -- men and women of all races and sizes, their faces hidden behind elaborate masks made from animal hides, scales, fur, bones, materials that had once been alive. A stag's skull adorned one woman's face. Another wore treated shark skin, rows of teeth suggested in delicate bone work. A man wore feathers that shimmered in the candlelight, peacock plumage arranged with artful precision. The whole scene felt like a dream designed by someone who didn't sleep well.

Above the crowd, performers executed aerial gymnastics on ropes and wires. Among them was Szeret, the princess, entwined with that Gawky Model from the dress shop. When Szeret spotted Barron entering with Koss, she abandoned her partner to swing alone and dropped twenty feet, landing easily behind the Foreign Minister with the grace of something that didn't obey the normal laws of physics.

"Is that a ghost I see?" Szeret called.

Barron nearly jumped out of his cape. "Szeret! You haven't aged a day!"

"You look decrepit," she said.

"I'm told it's called dying," Barron replied.

"I wouldn't know about that," Szeret said.

"Then you wouldn't know anything about a necromancer on the loose," Barron pressed.

"On the loose where, in hell?" Szeret asked.

"My consulate. I found my man riddled with dark marks, strung up in a wooden trellis, inside a locked vault. A Lich Cult portal," Barron said.

"The Cult was before my time." She turned to Koss. "Hello there, tick-tock. Bring me any new toys to play with?"

"My bag is empty, Princess. Cleaned out by a cardsharp at the Bastion," Koss said.

"Please, Szeret," Barron pressed. "If the Cult is rising in this modern age, I fear the spread of their dark ideology."

"You've become quite the worrywart. Mother's crushed them before. She'd have no bother doing it again," Szeret said.

A hush swept through the room. Every head turned toward the upper balcony, and Szeret, Barron, and Koss turned with them.

Queen Kiraline Veresz Eroszakos entered.

She was in her forties. Or she appeared to be. The word "eternal" suited her better than any number. Her clothes were layered with ornamental couture, heavy enough to anchor a lesser person, but she moved as if weightless, descending the stairs with preternatural grace. She glowed with a charisma that wasn't entirely natural and a regal allure that made you forget to breathe. Her gaze was serene as every soul in the room dropped to a knee.

Kiraline basked in their submission, then gracefully motioned for them to rise. The chatter and music resumed, like a spell being released.

She found Barron in the crowd. Their eyes locked. He stood transfixed, caught in something he hadn't been prepared for. He blinked --

- and she was standing in front of him. She'd crossed the entire room in the space between his heartbeats, by means that had nothing to do with walking. The air around her seemed to ripple slightly, a distortion that suggested reality itself bent to her will. Koss flinched. Szeret rolled her eyes. Barron was barely holding it together.

"At last, you have returned to me," Kiraline said.

"I bet you say that to all the boys," Barron replied.

"You are no longer a boy," she said.

Her hand reached up and stroked his face, her touch cold and electric. Then the ballroom dissolved around them.

When the world reassembled, Barron found himself on the upper balcony of the great hall, alone with the queen. The ballroom floor was far below now, the masked crowd a distant murmur. He stifled a cough.

"Forgive me, my constitution isn't what it used to be," Barron said.

"Yet your spirit remains vital," Kiraline replied.

She moved close. Her lips found his in a kiss that was gentle on the surface and something else entirely underneath. When she pulled back, the balcony was gone.

They were somewhere else in the castle now. A private bedchamber, deep in the keep. Kiraline's bedchamber. Barron was reeling, his composure held together by decades of diplomatic practice and not much else.

The room was alive with barely-contained magical energy. Necromantic trellises grew from the walls themselves, their thorned vines organic but wrong, moving with a slow pulse as if they breathed. Arcane runes were carved into the floor in patterns that hurt to look at directly, their purpose obscure but their power unmistakable. The air was heavy with supernatural presence, thick enough to taste on the tongue. It carried the scent of soil and decay and something else--something ancient and hungry.

"Kiraline, you know I'm not well," Barron said.

She licked his blood from her lips. "Isn't that why you've returned?"

"I've come because I fear my nation's interests are under attack from a threat we share," Barron said.

"So you will not accept my offer?" she asked.

"I will not be your slave," Barron replied.

"We have played that game before," Kiraline said.

"My priorities have shifted," Barron said.

"Beyond passion? Beyond pleasure?" she asked.

"I've found my calling. To end the pain and suffering of the innocent," Barron said.

"You want this for others while you refuse it for yourself," Kiraline said.

"However intense my personal desires, I will not be turned away from my duty to the greater good," Barron replied.

"Not even by a queen's love?" Kiraline asked.

"I'm sorry, Kiraline. My heart belongs to Albion," Barron said.

"Yet here you are in Kormor Kirak. Where the rule of my heart is law," Kiraline said.

Then Kiraline showed him what she really was. Her jaw unhinged, rows of serrated teeth fanning out like a shark's, her tongue snaking forward. She lunged --

- and just like that, Barron was back down on the ballroom floor, staggering, barely on his feet, surrounded by the creepy masked crowd. Up on the balcony, Kiraline stood looking down at him, no longer a monster, wearing a mischievous smile. She pressed her palm over her heart. A promise. Or a threat.

Szeret stood with Koss, watching Barron fumble for his dignity.

"I'm his ride," Koss said. "Goodnight, Princess."

As Koss went after Barron, Szeret looked up at her mother.



CHAPTER TEN: THE QUEEN'S BUSINESS

Far below the ballroom, deep in the stone guts of Torony Castle, torches flickered in a dungeon hallway as Szeret walked beside Kiraline. The air changed with each step downward -- the stone growing older, stranger, cut by methods that didn't match anything above. The torches burned with flames that moved in ways that shouldn't happen in still air, pulled by something imperceptible. Shadows pooled in corners like standing water. The walls wept cold, condensation beading and running in rivulets that found their way down into darkness. With each level, the smell shifted from the ballroom's perfume and sweat toward something older: damp earth, the metallic tang of minerals, something beneath it all that made the breath catch.

"Did he ask you about the Cult?" Szeret asked.

"We discussed matters of the heart," Kiraline replied.

"Don't be foolish, mother. He knows they've returned."

"The Cult is our concern. Not his."

"He blames them for the attack."

"Does he? Why?"

"Evidence of necromancy in his consulate. Do you think Barron will invite me in for a look?" Szeret ventured.

Kiraline didn't like the sound of that.

"Szeret, I'm worried about your interest in the outside world," Kiraline said.

"You opened the gates of our city to them. Did you think I'd be unaffected by their influence?" Szeret asked.

They arrived at a closed door. The stone around it was older than the surrounding walls, covered in scratches that looked like they'd been made by something that didn't have hands.

"If I hadn't opened the gates," Kiraline said, "it would only have been a matter of time before the humans broke them down. I'd hoped within our walls, they would be vulnerable to our influence. I still believe that."

"Their war has kept them at each other's throats. If they ever find peace. Our days will be numbered," Szeret said.

"Stay away from them, Szeret," Kiraline said.

"Don't worry, Mother. I'll never forget what I am," Szeret replied.

Szeret opened the dungeon door. Inside, half a dozen cowering people in chains. Guests from the party above, masks gone, terror visible in every line of their bodies. Eyes wide and wet. Mouths open to scream or plead or simply hang slack with shock. Some tugged at chains with the frantic desperation of prey that still believed escape was possible. Others sat motionless, the kind of stillness that came from the body giving up before the mind caught up.

Mother and daughter entered the room with a speed that wasn't human. The door slammed behind them. And then the screaming began.



CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE THEATER OF WAR AND PEACE

Morning came to Kormor Kirak with the kind of gray light that doesn't promise anything good.

At the Albion Consulate, a cleaning crew scrubbed bloody water from the vault floor. The work was methodical and grim -- they'd done this before, perhaps, or they were simply trying not to think about what their hands touched. One of them wrapped Feeney's corpse in muslin, threw it over their shoulder, and carried it out like a sack of grain. The water they used was pink, turning darker as they worked, spreading the stains they were meant to erase. Olivia sat at the desk near the vault entrance, going over construction figures, trying not to look as the body passed. She couldn't help herself, watching as it went by and disrupted a meeting in progress.

Barron stood with Devorlen Koss in front of the bulletin board where Eppy was pinning up the new theater plans. A pair of roughnecks -- a woman called Zaffir and a man called Nero -- were making their case.

"You can't expect us to make the old deadline," Nero said. "It's a scratch job."

"Working around the clock will be required," Barron replied. "My accountant is drafting a schedule. And Devorlen has suggested some uniquely Terrasian machinery to speed construction."

"Some training will be required," Koss added.

"If you want my crew workin' nights. They'll need to be protected," Nero said.

Jack spoke from his perch on the staircase. "Can't you handle that? You look like the kind of guy who doesn't mind a fight in the moonlight."

Nero looked at him, nostrils flaring, sniffing the air like an animal catching a scent. "Have we met?"

"Have we? I'm new in town," Jack replied.

Barron stepped between them. "Nero. Zaffir. Please. This job is by decree of Albion and Terrassia."

"You will be under our protection," Koss said.

"Maybe that has meaning in other parts of the world," Nero replied. "But the nights of Kormor Kirak are filled with threats you can't even imagine."

"Oh, Barron's quite familiar," Szeret called from the doorway.

Everyone turned. Szeret stood in the doorway, Rozito visible behind her, along with a royal carriage and Red Guards. The carriage was the color of old blood, its wheels polished to black mirrors, its door bearing the seal of Torony Castle. Red Guards flanked it, their armor gleaming with the careful obsession of men who serve a vampire queen and understand the cost of tarnish. Every person in the Consulate dropped to a knee, except for Barron.

"You needn't bow. You're on foreign soil. May I come in, Sir?" Szeret asked.

"We would be honored," Barron replied.

Szeret entered and motioned for everyone to rise. She barely broke stride, moving across the room with her sights set on Olivia. Her energy crossed the space like a current, drawing every eye.

"Feet-feet-feet. There you go," Szeret said. She turned to Nero and Zaffir. "Your queen supports this work. Anyone who contributes to its rapid completion will be in her good graces. As will their families."

That got their attention. Nero straightened up. "My team will get the job done, your highness," he said.

Szeret was already past him. She reached Olivia, who curtsied. Szeret took both her hands and pulled her upright.

"I wouldn't mind having you kneel before me, but not in public," Szeret said. She hadn't let go of Olivia's hands.

"Your hands are shaking. Am I so terrifying?" Szeret asked.

"Pardon my nerves. I've never been in the presence of royalty," Olivia replied.

"That makes me your first princess," Szeret said.

"Yes, your highness," Olivia said.

"If we're going to be friends, you must call me Szeret, Miss..." Szeret said.

"Faren. Olivia Faren," Olivia replied.

Szeret spun her in a waltz twirl. Olivia stumbled through it, grateful when Barron stepped in and deftly separated them.

"Hands off the help, Szeret. Miss Faren is critical to the timely completion of our endeavor. I won't let you distract her from work," Barron said.

"But that's why I'm here. To work," Szeret replied.

"Excellent, Nero and Zaffir are off to organize their crews. Maybe they will lend you a hammer," Barron said.

"Mother was adamant that I aid your necromantic investigation," Szeret said.

"Was she? I'm glad she's taking the threat seriously. Olivia was about to go with Jack and Eppy to visit --" Barron began.

"The Market?" Szeret asked.

"Oh, I must introduce you to my seamstress," Szeret said to Olivia. "Rozito mentioned that you're saving up for a new dress."

"No-no," Barron said firmly. "Today they're following up on rumors of odd activity in the Hallaset Fields."

Szeret's face fell. "The cemetery. During the day? Uggh," she muttered.



CHAPTER TWELVE: THE HALLASET FIELDS

On the outskirts of the city, the Hallaset Fields sat on a plateau with a sheer cliff on one side. Distant mountains were cloaked in fog beyond the drop, their summits lost in cloud. The ground was covered with a reed-like grass that grew head-high, a forest of pale stalks that swayed in a wind that never stopped. The grass was thin, wiry, with small flowering nodes that released a green scent into the air -- living, organic, the smell of slow growth and eventual decay. The ground beneath was packed earth, the trails worn deep by centuries of processions carrying the dead. A network of these trails wove through the grass, connecting raised stone plinths where the dead were deposited. In the tradition of this place, like the sky burials of Tibet, bodies were left to decompose under the elements or be devoured by carrion birds. Drifting mist made the whole scene feel like a painting of the afterlife -- something not quite real, existing in the borderlands between what was and what came after.

Rozito sat atop the parked royal carriage, watching the others enter the trailhead in two groups. He cupped his hands and called out.

"Szeret! Can't we hunt necromancers in a place that's not so smelly?" Rozito called.

One of the Red Guards looked up at him. Rozito swallowed.

"Have I told you how grateful I am for your protection? Thank you," he offered.

On the winding trail, Szeret and Olivia walked side by side, followed by two Red Guards. Boots on packed earth made a soft, rhythmic sound. The grass brushed shoulders as they passed, thin stalks bending and returning. Glimpses between the tall reeds revealed funeral plinths with their grim cargo -- bodies in various states of transformation, some recently deposited, others reduced to bone and memory.

"Rozito's not wrong," Szeret said. "We could be strolling in the Gillikoi Woods. Or dipping our toes in the Erdo Pools. Not treading through the Hallaset, in search of dark wizards."

"You don't believe in that provincial nonsense, do you?" Olivia asked.

"Don't I?" Szeret replied.

"Necromancy. Paranormal poppy-cock."

"Wasn't there a dead man in your vault?" Szeret asked.

"With eighty-eight wounds on his body. That's no proof of magic," Olivia said.

"I believe in things I haven't seen," Szeret said.

"What do you mean, like ghosts?" Olivia asked.

"You traveled here by airship," Szeret said.

"Most of the way," Olivia replied.

"I take you at your word, though I've never seen such a machine," Szeret said.

"Technology. That's different," Olivia said.

"Did you fly over the ocean?" Szeret asked.

"Briefly," Olivia replied.

"I've never seen the ocean," Szeret said.

"You're not a traveler?" Olivia asked.

"That word has no meaning to me," Szeret replied.

"This is my first trip. I'd never been away from the Capital City," Olivia said.

"Where they have grand theaters, and libraries, and elegant restaurants," Szeret said.

"Yes. But I never visited them," Olivia said.

"What about electric lights and indoor plumbing?" Szeret asked.

"Have you never seen a toilet?" Olivia asked.

"I may be exaggerating, but just because you haven't seen something doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Szeret said.

Olivia went quiet. She looked around the cemetery with new eyes, and for the first time, the place scared her a little. The mist moved like something living. The plinths rose like monuments to absence. She pulled out her calculator and started clicking.

"Ooh! I've never seen one of those," Szeret said.

"A calculator. You know, for math," Olivia said.

"What's math?" Szeret asked.

Olivia's shock transformed into the kind of enthusiasm that only comes when someone finds their favorite subject.

On another trail, Jack walked with Eppy, who plucked a stalk of Hallaset grass and smelled its flower. The grass made a sound like paper tearing, delicate and final.

"How does the Hallaset grow so tall, this high in the mountains?" Jack asked.

"The soil is rich," Eppy replied.

They rounded a corner to a funeral hub where two carrion birds were eating a fresh corpse atop a raised plinth. The birds scattered at their approach, dropping body parts as they went -- a hand, a section of something unidentifiable. The sound was the worst part: the wet crackle of feeding, then silence.

"A thousand years of fertilizer," Jack said.

"I love it here. Don't you?" Eppy asked.

"Surrounded by the dead? No thanks," Jack replied.

"Outside. Feeling the breeze. The light. The spirits of the animals. It's where I feel the most at home," Eppy said.

"For most of my life, the army was home," Jack said.

"Was it all bad?" Eppy asked.

"Not all. With my mates, together, even under fire, it always felt like we had a purpose. Conquering the world for the greater glory of the empire. It's funny what young people are willing to believe," Jack said.

"My ancestors ruled the world. Really. It's true. So long ago that the world forgot they ever existed. Good thing. It helps the few of us who remain to stay alive in secret," Eppy said.

"Your secret's safe with me," Jack replied.

"Jack, when we're together, you don't need to hide. I know what you are," Eppy said.

Jack's eyes went hard. "Whatever you think you know about me is none of your business," he said.

"Not yet," Eppy replied.

Eppy took no offense and returned to the trail. Jack followed, thinking things he wasn't ready to say.

Meanwhile, back in the city at the Albion Consulate, the cleaning crew was packing up. Barron and Koss studied Olivia's construction schedule.

"Your mechanisms had better deliver," Barron said. "Otherwise we won't be done in time."

"One of my machines can do the work of three men in half the time," Koss replied.

"I look forward to seeing what they're capable of," Barron said.

The last of the cleaners left, and Koss decided it was time.

"You already have," Koss said. "On the night of the fire, one of my automatons broke down that door."

Barron went very still. "What the devil are you on about, Koss? Are you admitting Terrassian forces attacked Albion territory?" he asked.

"It was in pursuit of the arsonist. Your man, Feeney. He was the one who set our theater ablaze," Koss replied.

A beat. Barron didn't look surprised enough.

"You are not surprised?" Koss asked.

"Feeney sent me a message. Explaining what he'd done," Barron replied.

"Had he lost his mind?" Koss asked.

"I wondered that myself. He claimed the theater was to be exploited by the Lich Cult. It wasn't until I saw his mutilated body that I considered the possibility," Barron said.

"Necromancers only care about the dead. What is their interest?" Koss asked.

"That's what we need to find out. Before the most powerful people in the world gather under one roof," Barron replied.

They both stared at the theater plans. Neither of them noticed that in these new plans, there was no roof.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE DEAD WALK

Back at the trailhead, Rozito had hopped down from the carriage roof. He scanned for any sign of his companions in the grass. Nothing moved except the mist. The wind blew down from the mountains, carrying the smell of earth and death and something older underneath.

He motioned for the carriage driver to come closer.

"The princess has been gone too long for comfort," Rozito said.

When the driver stepped beside him, Rozito produced a hidden blade and slit the man's throat in a single practiced motion. He eased the body to the ground, not roughly but with the care of someone handling a tool.

"Help! Your man's down! Help!" Rozito called out.

The pair of Red Guards hurried over. They received Rozito's blade in quick thrusts between their armor plates. As they clattered to the earth, Rozito moved to the dead driver, sliced open his shirt, and pulled out a pair of elegant scalpels.

He went to work on the man's bare chest like it was a canvas.

In the Hallaset Fields, Olivia was teaching Szeret how to use the calculator.

"Slide, lift, twist to set the parameters of your calculation," Olivia said.

"Then crank?" Szeret asked.

"Like a pepper mill," Olivia replied.

"Two hundred and fifty-seven! How remarkable! I love it! Thank you!" Szeret said.

Olivia flinched as Szeret hugged her.

"I'm glad you like it. But that one's mine," Olivia said.

"Didn't you just give it to me?" Szeret asked.

"That was not my intention," Olivia said, taking the calculator back.

"I'll make you one," Olivia added, turning the instrument over in her hands.

"I'll have Mister Koss build us one."

Szeret laughed. A real laugh, full of warmth and delight, the kind that catches you off guard coming from someone in dark Gothic garb.

Back on the winding trails, something was wrong. Body parts -- hands, arms, feet, heads, fingers -- were sliding and rolling across the trail. Moving on their own, drawn from one side to the other, pulled by a force that had nothing to do with gravity or wind. They scraped across stone, left trails through the packed earth. Some still had flesh clinging to bone. Others had been here long enough to be nearly anonymous.

Jack and Eppy burst from the grass, weapons drawn, following the moving body parts with grim determination.

Olivia saw them and froze. "Does that happen often?" she asked.

"Not that I've seen," Szeret replied.

"To the carriage. Let's go," Jack said.

Olivia and Eppy ran while Jack covered the rear. Szeret was in no rush, watching the spectacle with more curiosity than fear.

They didn't make it far.

Something barreled out of the grass ahead and attacked the two Red Guards escorting them. Olivia and Eppy screamed.

It was the Necrotic Bulk -- roughly the shape of a human, but made from the discarded parts of multiple corpses. Limbs writhed and entwined with each other in a mass of dead flesh that moved with terrible purpose. You could see the seams where different bodies had been joined, the places where necromancy had stitched incompatible parts into a single, awful thing. Faces frozen in agony composed its mass -- faces of the dead, their mouths open in silent screams, their eyes empty. The thing moved with the weight of death, each motion accompanied by the wet sound of corrupted flesh. It smelled like a tomb opened after centuries. It tore through the Red Guards like they were made of paper, and both went down in seconds, armor and bone offering no resistance.

The women turned and ran, nearly crashing into Jack. He raised his weapon, took one look at the thing, and ran too.

Szeret was surprised to find everyone sprinting toward her. They waved frantically. She hesitated, saw the Necrotic Bulk lumbering down the trail behind them, and seemed almost amused. Then she hurried after the group.

At a funeral hub, they made their stand. The Necrotic Bulk crashed in after them. The humans ducked and dove around the raised plinth while Jack and Eppy slashed at the monster with their blades. Their weapons met resistance that felt like fighting through layers of wet cloth and bone -- no give, no yielding, just the horrible density of multiple bodies assembled into a single thing.

Olivia saw Szeret standing in the open and tackled the princess to the ground as a necrotic limb whipped over their heads. The wind of its passage stirred their hair.

"What are you doing?" Szeret asked, flat on her back.

"Saving you!" Olivia replied.

"Do I need saving?" Szeret asked.

Olivia dragged Szeret to cover, then watched Jack and Eppy fight. Her lips moved, tracking their steps, memorizing patterns. The monster was strong but not fast. It was coordinated but not intelligent. There were ways to move against it, rhythms to exploit.

Then she turned to Szeret.

"Flee, your highness! We'll give you time to get away!" Olivia said.

Before Szeret could respond, Olivia dashed toward Jack, grabbed one of his spare weapons, and threw herself into the fight. Jack and Eppy were surprised but glad to have her.

Szeret watched these brave, foolish humans battle the hulking dead thing.

"You can't kill that thing," Szeret said.

"Go, your highness!" Eppy shouted.

"It's already dead," Szeret said.

"Run!" Jack roared, and pushed Szeret toward the trail. She shoved him back with a strength that sent him stumbling.

"Enough. Someone's in control. I'll go find them. And make them stop," Szeret said.

"How the hell will you do that?" Jack asked.

Szeret showed them.

Before their eyes, her body changed. Bones cracked and reformed with the sound of breaking glass multiplied by the whole architecture of her skeleton. Skin rippled and split to reveal fur, and the transformation wasn't clean or smooth -- it was violent, it was painful to watch. Muscles tore and reweave

themselves. Her spine lengthened. Her face stretched and reformed. She ripped out of her clothes, shredding fabric, and in the space of a few heartbeats, the bipedal woman was gone. In her place stood a quadrupedal leopard, black as ink, powerful as a nightmare. Claws that could tear stone. Eyes that saw in a spectrum humans didn't have access to.

The humans froze. For one terrible second, they thought they'd have two monsters to fight.

Then the Szeret-Leopard leaped onto the raised plinth, scanned the tall grass, spotted Rozito crouched over his bloody work at the carriage, and charged. She vanished into the grass with a raging growl that shook the mist.

Olivia stood shaking, watching the space where a princess had been. Jack and Eppy grabbed her arms and dragged her into a fighting retreat.

At the trailhead, Rozito was focused on his scalpels and the corpse beneath them. He didn't see the black leopard burst from the grass behind him until it was too late. The beast knocked him clear across the ground and moved in for the kill, snarling. Rozito felt the weight of four hundred pounds of predator bearing down on him, felt the heat radiating from its body, saw the teeth.

Rozito didn't beg. He flung his scalpels at the creature. The Szeret-Leopard dodged easily. Rozito drew his blade as the beast attacked.

On the trail, the Necrotic Bulk collapsed. It fell apart in an instant, disassembling back into a pile of scattered body parts, dead for real this time. Whatever had been controlling it had lost concentration.

Olivia threw up.

When they reached the trailhead, they found the Szeret-Leopard crouched beside the carriage, eating what was left of Rozito. The beast looked back at them, roared once, and then galloped off toward the city, moving with the grace of something born to motion.

Olivia stared after it.

"The princess is a cat," Olivia said.

"The new world meets the old," Eppy said.

Olivia wouldn't have believed any of it unless she'd just seen it with her own eyes.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

Night settled over Kormor Kirak. Barron's carriage sat parked outside the Bastion Inn, and inside, the four of them gathered around a table. Everyone was drinking. After what had happened in the Hallaset Fields, nobody was going to judge. The alcohol sat before them in glasses that caught the candlelight, each drink a small acceptance of the fact that the world was not what they'd thought it was.

Barron scrutinized the pair of necromantic scalpels -- Rozito's tools -- turning them over in the candlelight. Elegant things. Beautiful, even. The metal was worked with patterns that suggested craftsmanship, and the handles were bone carved with symbols. And soaked in bad intentions. Dark ichor stained the blades, a substance that wasn't quite blood, that smelled like endings. It didn't wash off easily.

"When I sent you looking for clues, I hadn't expected such a bounty," Barron said.

"Tomorrow we can follow up on this Rozito fellow," Barron said. "He was a merchant?"

"In charge of the Kereskedo Market," Eppy replied. "It's an official position. A royal appointment."

"That doesn't bode well. Does it? I'll encourage the queen to have a thorough look at her confidantes," Barron said.

"The princess may have already shared the bad news," Jack said. "After she ate."

"Indeed. We have busy days ahead," Barron replied.

Barron's cough hit hard. He caught it in a handkerchief and rose from the table. The others watched, their concern visible even through the haze of alcohol and adrenaline. The sound of it was rough, wet, the sound of a body in slow rebellion against its own existence.

"It's worst near bedtime. Before I retire, know that I'm inspired by your courage. I shall try to muster some of my own. I'm afraid we're going to need it. Goodnight," Barron said.

As Barron moved toward the stairs, Olivia followed.

"Pardon me, Sir," Olivia called.

He stopped. "Yes, Miss Faren?" he asked.

She struggled to find honest words, which was new for her. Honest numbers came easy. Honest feelings were a different calculation.

"You said there was nothing to be afraid of, Sir. You lied to me," Olivia said.

"It was the truth, based on past experience. I don't know if you'll take comfort in my being honest and wrong. If I had lied, at least it might have suggested I had more control over the situation. Either way, I'm sorry you were in danger. And I'm grateful that you're safe," Barron replied.

"Sir, I don't feel safe," Olivia said.

Barron regarded her for a moment.

"If you'd like to return to the Capital, I can arrange it. Be a shame to lose you. You did such astounding work on that schedule," Barron said.

"The Terrassian said the wedding isn't about love. He said they're just kids. That they've never met," Olivia said.

"That's not my understanding. So either he's lying, or human, like me, even with that automatic arm," Barron replied.

"But what if he's not wrong?" Olivia asked.

"I refuse to live by what-ifs. My job is to prepare that facility for not only a wedding but an event that will bring peace to the world. A job I take seriously. Don't you?" Barron asked.

Olivia straightened. The reflex was instinctive, drilled into her since the orphanage. "By the grace of our Divine Emperor, I serve Albion. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In life everlasting," she said.

"I am inspired by your dedication," Barron said.

Barron started up the stairs slowly, the strain triggering another cough. Olivia moved to help him ascend, taking his arm.

"Let me help you, Sir," Olivia said.

"Thank you, Miss Faren. It's a comfort having you at my side," Barron replied.

Olivia liked being appreciated. She liked having clarity of purpose. In a world that had just revealed itself to be full of vampires, shapeshifters, and walking corpses, purpose was about the only thing she could hold onto.

Back downstairs in the Bastion's dining hall, Jack laid out his weapons on the abandoned table. The blades were stained with necrotic ichor -- a dark, viscous substance that smelled like the end of something. Rot. Corruption. The complete negation of living things. He began cleaning them, working the cloth across each blade, trying to remove what wouldn't come out, watching the candlelight catch on edges.

He looked up to see Eppy at the bar, making tea. The smell of it -- some herbal blend with notes of honey and something green -- cut through the ugliness of the evening.

"Hey, Eppy Flinder?" Jack called.

"Yes, Jack Winbow?" Eppy replied.

"I don't love it here," Jack said.

"You will," Eppy said.

She filled two mugs. Jack pushed an empty chair out with his foot, drawing attention to its availability. Eppy smiled and brought the tea over.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THINGS IN THE DARK

In her room at the Bastion Inn, Olivia undressed for bed. Tired didn't begin to describe it. She'd gone from numbers and schedules to watching a princess transform into a leopard to cleaning blood off stone. Her hands shook as she undressed. Her chest ached with each breath. She reached into her pocket for her little calculator -- the one constant in a day that had unmade everything she thought she knew about the world.

It was gone. Szeret.

Olivia stepped to the window and looked out at the dark castle. Torony Piros sat on the city wall like a predator on a ledge, all sharp angles and watching stones. Somewhere in there, a vampire princess was playing with a brass cylinder and teaching herself math.

Across the city, inside the walls of Torony Castle, Szeret sat in a bathtub in her chamber. The water was red with gore -- whose, exactly, was a question better left unasked. She fiddled with the calculator, fascinated, cranking its little gears and levers. The mechanics were so elegant, so precise. She worked through problems, watched the numbers appear, felt the satisfaction of a system that made sense. Then she remembered something and looked over at the empty bed. Someone was missing. The Gawky Model.

Szeret glanced across the room at the too-tight bodysuit draped over a chair. Where had the girl gone?

She returned to the calculator, her mind already on a new toy. Olivia. Clever Olivia with her shaking hands and her fierce determination to be useful.

Deeper in the castle, in Kiraline's private chamber, the air was different. Colder. The walls themselves seemed to breathe with dark magic. A trellis of entwined branches grew from the stone walls, branches that hadn't been carved but had been grown there, twisted into shapes that could hold weight. The Gawky Model hung dead and naked in the trellis, suspended like a butterfly pinned to a board. Her skin was pale from blood loss. Her body was marked.

A woman's hand -- Kiraline's hand -- used a knife to carve a rune into the cooling skin. The Queen was methodical, artistic even. Each mark was precise, each rune carefully drawn. Kiraline admired her handiwork with the satisfaction of an artist contemplating a finished piece. The Queen was up to something far worse than anyone suspected. This wasn't just feeding. This wasn't just control. This was something else, something that required the specific death of a specific person, required the body to be marked while still warm, required the magic to be woven into flesh while it was still fresh enough to hold it.

Kiraline stepped back, knife in hand, and examined her work. Perfect. The runes glowed faintly, barely visible, a pattern that spiraled down the corpse's torso. She set down her knife and touched one of the marks with her fingertip. Power flowed through her at the contact, dark and thrilling, a taste of what was to come.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE OFFER

Across the city from the castle, in his room at the Bastion Inn, Barron lay in bed, coughing in his sleep. His body fought for air the way it had been fighting for years -- a slow, losing battle waged in the dark. His handkerchief was spotted with red. His breathing was labored, even in rest, as if the illness had invaded his dreams.

He startled awake to find Kiraline seated at his bedside.

Behind her, on the other side of the room, a necromantic portal shimmered in the wall. A doorway made of shadows and runes, the kind that moved like oil, that bent light in ways it shouldn't bend. The runes that composed it shifted slowly, rewriting themselves in languages that predated human speech. The same kind of doorway that had been used to steal gold from the consulate vault. The same kind that required a dead body as fuel -- a key written in flesh and blood, a sacrifice to make the way between places.

"Kiraline?" Barron rasped. "Why... How are you in here? I didn't invite you."

"Someone else bid me welcome," Kiraline replied.

"You're not welcome. Not by me," Barron said.

"Why won't you accept my help?" Kiraline asked.

"Your kind of help has consequences," Barron replied.

"What if we could carry out your life's calling, together? Ridding the world of pain and suffering. Isn't that what you want... Peace?" Kiraline asked.

"Forgive my suspicion. It's not often a vampire queen invades a man's bed-chamber claiming benevolence," Barron said.

"You are right to be wary. I'll explain everything, but first, I need to guarantee our trust is eternal," Kiraline said.

Kiraline went full vampire. The jaw extended, the teeth erupted from her gums -- fangs that were not theatrical but functional, made for puncturing, for drawing blood. Her tongue, too long, black at the edges. Her eyes became pools of darkness. She lunged.

And then there was only darkness.

END OF PART ONE



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jesse Alexander is an Emmy Award-winning screenwriter and producer with over two decades of experience crafting iconic television series. His credits include *Alias*, *Lost*, *Heroes*, *Hannibal*, *Star Trek: Discovery*, *American Gods*, and *Citadel*. A pioneer in transmedia storytelling, Alexander has designed award-winning content that extends narratives across platforms. In the gaming world, his contributions include *Predator VR*, animated trailers for *Blur*, and narrative design consulting for *VALORANT* and other Riot titles.

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ABOUT THE WORLD

The Eternal Court takes place in 1793, in a world where the Age of Reason collides with ancient supernatural forces. The city-state of Kormor Kirak sits at the crossroads of empires, governed by a vampiric queen whose court harbors creatures that the civilized world has tried to forget. When an imperial accountant and her battle-scarred bodyguard arrive to investigate a murdered tax collector, they step into a conspiracy that could reshape the balance of power between the living and the dead. The Eternal Court -- Part One is the first installment of this story.



A NOTE ON THE ADAPTATION

The Eternal Court began as a television pilot screenplay. This novella adapts and expands the first episode's story, deepening the characters and world while preserving the pacing and tone of the original script. The Eternal Court is also available as a tabletop roleplaying game product line, with campaign guides, character sheets, and adventure materials for both 5E and Daggerheart systems.