

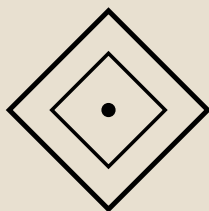
THE ETERNAL COURT

SESSION ZERO GUIDE

TABLE MATERIALS

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THE ETERNAL COURT
FILE · EC · SESSIO · EDITION I · MDCCXCIII



Session Zero

A Guide for the Table

*Before the first die is cast — the table agreements, content cautions,
and questions that shape how the company will run.*

KORMOR KIRAK · VIDEK · ANNO 1793

FORMAT	AUDIENCE	STAGE
<i>Guide · A5</i>	<i>GM & Players</i>	<i>Pre-Campaign</i>

CAPITULUM

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

You arrive in Kormor Kirak, a 1793 city held in an iron grip by the immortal Vampire Queen Kiraline, who rules from her clock-tower castle high above the gas-lit streets. The city hums with surveillance, clockwork mechanisms, and the constant dread of being noticed by the wrong people -- but resistance networks operate in shadow, and even monsters can bleed. In this campaign, you'll navigate a city of political intrigue and moral compromise, where a successful night might mean exposing corruption, saving someone from the dungeons, or simply surviving another day without drawing the Queen's attention.

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TONE AND GENRE

THE ETERNAL COURT is *Gothic Gaslamp Fantasy* -- a blend of three distinct atmospheres:

GOthic: The campaign leans into *dread, decay, and the unnatural*. Vampirism isn't romanticized; it's predatory and horrifying. The dungeon beneath the city is a place of genuine suffering. Beauty exists in this world, but it's often twisted -- the architecture of Castle Torony Piros is breathtaking and utterly wrong. Think *Bloodborne's* clinical horror, *Ravenloft's* inescapable dread, and *Castlevania's* gothic excess.

Gaslamp: We're anchored in 1793 -- gas lamps flicker in the streets, clockwork mechanisms are cutting-edge technology, and society is rigidly stratified. There's a veneer of civilization and order that masks deeper corruption. Think *Dishonored's* industrial unease, *Penny Dreadful's* gaslit London, and the paranoid social pressure of Regency intrigue under wartime strain.

NOT NIHILISTIC: Kormor Kirak is *dark but not hopeless*. The Queen cannot be everywhere. People resist, help each other, and sometimes win. Princess Szeret's existence in the castle suggests that even monsters can question their nature. Your characters can change things -- perhaps small things, perhaps large ones. The world is hard, but not meaningless.

MEDIA TOUCHSTONES: If your players are familiar with *Interview with the Vampire*, *Dishonored*, *Ravenloft*, *Bloodborne*, *Castlevania*, or *Penny Dreadful*, they'll have a strong intuitive sense of the tone. You might also reference *The Magicians* (moral compromise and found family), *The Poppy War* (dark consequences of power), or *Piranesi* (reality twisted by immortal will).

CAPITULUM

CONTENT WARNINGS

THE ETERNAL COURT contains mature themes. This is not a campaign where everything can be glossed over or played for laughs. Below are the specific content areas that may appear. Read this aloud to your table and ask players which, if any, they need to avoid.

VAMPIRISM AND PREDATION: The Queen feeds on humans. This is not glamorous -- it involves violence, loss, and violation. Victims may be NPCs the party encounters, knows, or has failed to save. Vampirism also appears as a form of control and transformation, stripping away agency.

POLITICAL OPPRESSION AND SURVEILLANCE: The city is ruled by an immortal dictator with centuries of power. Citizens are watched, imprisoned, and executed. The party will regularly encounter the moral weight of living under a tyranny they cannot immediately overthrow. Resistance means risk.

TORTURE AND IMPRISONMENT: Istvan the Jailer runs the dungeons beneath the city. Torture is presented as real, deliberate, and systematic -- though we don't graphically describe it at the table. NPCs may bear scars and trauma from imprisonment. Rescue missions may involve witnessing the effects of captivity.

BODY HORROR: The Necrotic Bulk and Bone Sentinels are the Queen's creations. These are bodies repurposed and transformed into something that violates the line between living and dead. They are disturbing. They are *meant* to be disturbing.

MORAL COMPROMISE: Your characters will face situations with no clean answers. Saving one person might require letting another suffer. Resisting the Queen might require becoming like her. There is no "good" option, only

choices you can live with. The campaign asks: what do you sacrifice for survival? For resistance? For your principles?

DEATH AND LOSS: Character death can happen. More importantly, *permanent loss* is real in this world. People disappear into the dungeons. The Queen's agents can un-make people. Failed missions have consequences. We play to find out what happens, not to guarantee everyone survives.

INTENSITY LEVELS: These themes are present throughout the campaign, but you and your table get to decide *how dark* individual sessions become. A session might involve political intrigue (cerebral, tense) or a rescue from the dungeons (emotionally heavy). Use the safety tools below to dial intensity up or down.

ABSOLUTELY OFF-LIMITS (unless explicitly negotiated): We do not play sexual violence. We do not detail child abuse. We do not belabor graphic suffering for its own sake -- if someone is tortured, we acknowledge it happened and move to the consequences, not the play-by-play.

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SAFETY TOOLS

THE X-CARD: Before session one, explain the X-Card to your table. Any player can make an X gesture with their hands (or say "X-Card") at any moment if content is becoming too much. When this happens:

- The scene *immediately stops* and rewinds
- No explanation needed -- the player doesn't have to justify why
- Everyone moves forward as if that content never happened

This is not a failure on anyone's part. It's a normal, healthy part of collaborative play. Use it. Normalize it. If you're GMing, you can also call for an X-Card pause if something's going in a direction you didn't anticipate.

LINES AND VEILS: Before session zero, ask your table:

- **LINES:** What topics are completely off-limits? (e.g., "I don't want to roleplay torture, even if we don't describe it graphically")
- **VEILS:** What topics are okay but should be handled with care or fade-to-black? (e.g., "We can have violence, but don't describe wounds in detail")

Write these down. Post them at the table. Refer back to them. *This is collaborative trust-building.*

IMPLEMENTATION FOR KORMOR KIRAK: Specific applications for this setting:

- If torture is a Veil or Line for someone, we might learn NPCs were imprisoned without roleplaying the experience
- If vampirism as predation is intense, we can have vampire encounters with less visceral feeding descriptions

- If surveillance and loss of autonomy triggers someone, we skip scenes where the party is helplessly watching bad things happen
- If moral compromise causes analysis paralysis or distress, we can reframe as "your characters are competent people solving hard problems," not "you're bad if you don't save everyone"
- The Lights Lower is an optional horror escalation mechanic (see The Lights Lower supplement) that heightens tension through resource sacrifice. Discuss with your table whether and how often to use it, as it can significantly intensify encounters and create a sense of inexorable creeping dread.

THE RESET CONVERSATION: After any heavy session, be willing to debrief. Ask: "Does anyone need to talk about what happened?" Sometimes people need to confirm it was just a game. Sometimes they need to discuss how a character's trauma will affect them going forward. Honor both needs.

YOUR OWN LIMITS: As the GM, *you* get boundaries too. If running torture scenes genuinely distresses you, say so. If moral complexity around imperialism or genocide hits a nerve, name it. Your mental health matters as much as anyone's at the table.

CAPITULUM

CHARACTER
GUIDANCE

CREATION

Who Fits This World?

Strong character concepts for Kormor Kirak tend to fall into these broad categories:

THE OUTSIDER: You've arrived in Kormor Kirak recently (months, years) from elsewhere. You're still learning how the city works, which makes you a natural point-of-view character. You have no deep ties to the old power structures, which frees you to question them. *Why did you come here?* (Fleeing something, searching for someone, seeking opportunity, exiled?) *What have you discovered?*

THE TRAPPED LOCAL: You were born here or came here by accident and have spent enough time in the city to know its hidden passages, its gossip, its survival strategies. You have connections -- family, old friends, people who owe you favors. You also have history with the oppression. *What have you lost to the Queen's rule? Why haven't you left?*

THE INSERTED AGENT: You work for a faction with a stake in Kormor Kirak -- a rival noble house, a revolutionary cell, an academic order, a criminal syndicate. Your presence is semi-official or entirely covert. You have resources and a mission but also *complications* (your faction might not have your best interests at heart; your mission might conflict with saving a specific person). *Who sent you? What do they want? What are you willing to do?*

WHAT DOESN'T WORK: Avoid characters who are:

- Openly hostile to literally everyone (the city will crush you)
- Morally neutral to the point of "I don't care about anyone" (isolation isn't fun at a shared table)
- Trying to destroy the Queen alone (you're a party, not a lone wolf)
- With motivations entirely internal and disconnected from the city (Kormor Kirak will feel like scenery)

BACKSTORY HOOKS: When creating your character, ask yourself:

- *How did you meet another party member?* (Shared safe house, same cell, both arrested then released, mutual friend?)
- *What's one person you're trying to protect or find?* (This gives the party a concrete emotional stake)
- *What's one secret the Queen's agents would kill to know?* (Information, hidden location, sympathetic noble, rebel safe house)
- *What compromise have you already made to survive?* (Worked for the Queen once? Betrayed someone? Looked away from something horrible?)

These aren't required, but they create natural points of connection to the world and to each other.

ON REDEMPTION AND MONSTROSITY: Some players may want to play as something *other* than human -- a vampire, a construct, someone touched by the Queen's magic. This is fine. Discuss with the table: *Can you still be part of the party's mission?* A vampire character might be genuinely horrified by their own nature and actively working to undermine the Queen. A bone sentinel might have regained some autonomy. Being monstrous doesn't mean being the villain -- but it does mean wrestling with what you are.

CAPITULUM

PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

WHAT THIS CAMPAIGN REWARDS:

INVESTIGATION AND INFORMATION-GATHERING: Kormor Kirak runs on secrets and hidden knowledge. Who is the Necrotic Bulk? Where is the safe house? What does the magistrate want badly enough to negotiate? The party that digs, asks questions, observes patterns, and connects dots will uncover more about the world and gain leverage. Investigation is as valuable as combat.

SOCIAL INTRIGUE AND NEGOTIATION: The Queen cannot be assassinated through a single dramatic duel. Power in this world shifts through bargains, blackmail, revealing secrets, flipping minor nobles, and building alliances. Sometimes the "win" condition is convincing someone to help you, not defeating them. NPCs have their own agendas and can be negotiated with, threatened, bribed, or turned.

MORAL CHOICE AND ROLEPLAY: The campaign frequently presents situations without a clean "good" answer. Do you steal medicine to save an NPC, risking your cover? Do you accept help from someone whose methods you despise? Do you sacrifice one mission to save a specific person? These choices matter -- not because the GM will punish you, but because they shape what kind of person your character becomes and what the party becomes together.

EXPLORATION OF PLACE: Kormor Kirak is a character. Learning its neighborhoods, its architecture, its history, and its hidden corners is rewarding. The city is *alive* with things to discover -- hidden shrines, secret passages, bases of operation, places where it's safe to breathe for a moment.

FOUND FAMILY AND CONNECTION: This campaign is about people banded together against impossible odds. The relationships between party members matter more than individual heroism. The game rewards you for remembering each other's struggles, for showing up for each other, for building something together in the dark.

WHAT THIS CAMPAIGN DOES NOT EMPHASIZE:

This is not a *dungeon-crawl-and-loot* game. We're not optimizing inventory, calculating the most XP-efficient encounters, or designing character builds for maximum damage output. If that's what you want, this might not be the campaign for you.

This is not *high fantasy*. We're not saving kingdoms through epic quests, gaining magical artifacts that shift the balance of power, or playing hero farmers who somehow got strong enough to fight dragons. Power in Kormor Kirak is distributed through networks and secrets, not levels and gear.

This is not *comedic*. We have moments of dark humor and gallows comedy, but we don't play the city as a joke or undercut emotional moments with quips. Your characters are trying to survive something genuinely threatening.

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TABLE AGREEMENTS

ON PvP (PLAYER VERSUS PLAYER): Conflict between player characters is *allowed* but requires explicit conversation first. A character might have reasons to distrust another character, but *conflict should be roleplay-driven, not optimization-driven*, and should be resolved through scenes, not dice rolls that permanently wreck another player's character.

If two player characters are at odds, we handle it like this: the players talk outside the game about what kind of conflict is interesting to both of them. We play it out in scenes where both characters get to make meaningful choices. We don't use PvP as a shortcut to sideline someone else's character.

ON METAGAMING: Using *real-world* knowledge your character shouldn't have (e.g., "I know the third door is trapped because I've played Dishonored") is not allowed. Using *in-game* knowledge you've acquired (e.g., "My character warned everyone the magistrate is two-faced because I heard rumors last session") is always allowed and encouraged.

ON CHARACTER DEATH: Death in Kormor Kirak is possible and *meaningful*. If your character dies, we don't immediately retcon it. However:

- You can create a new character and fold them into the party quickly (refugee from the dungeons, new contact, etc.)
- Or, your character might become an NPC ally or absence that shapes the party's choices going forward
- Discuss with your GM what you want -- some players want to play again immediately, others want a session to process the loss

The point: death has weight, but it's not the end of fun.

ON UNDEATH: In a world with vampires and necromancy, undeath is a *real possibility*. Discuss: If your character dies and the Queen or another powerful entity offers to raise them, do you want to be offered that choice? What would undeath mean to your character? Is it rescue or damnation? Agree on this *before* it becomes an issue.

ON SPOTLIGHT AND PAGE: We're all here to have fun. If one player is dominating scenes, the GM will gently redirect. If your character isn't getting much screen time, *speak up*. The GM wants to know. We might adjust what missions are coming, or find ways to tie your character more directly to ongoing plots.

CAPITULUM

QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE

Use these questions during Session Zero to calibrate tone, build connections, and flag concerns early. You don't need to ask all of them, but pick the ones that matter most.

1. Tone and Comfort

"On a scale of 'dark but we're safe' to 'genuinely unsettling,' where do you want this campaign to sit? Are there specific dark themes from the content warnings that genuinely distress you, versus ones that are just 'mature content' you're comfortable with?"

2. Character Motivations

"What does your character want most in Kormor Kirak? Not the big-picture 'overthrow the Queen' -- the *specific* thing. Is it finding someone? Surviving long enough to escape? Undermining one person? Getting information? Having these concrete goals will help me build sessions that hit what matters to you."

3. Party Connection

"How do you see your character relating to the other party members? Are you meeting them for the first time, or do you have existing history? What do you

want from the group -- protection, camaraderie, a shared mission, something else?”

4. Boundaries and Safety Tools

”Let’s talk Lines and Veils now. What’s completely off-limits? What do you want handled with care? And will you all be comfortable using the X-Card? Can I normalize checking in mid-session if things get heavy?”

5. On Winning and Losing

”What does success look like for you in this campaign? Is it character growth, achieving specific goals, saving NPCs, uncovering secrets? And what would feel like failure -- something that would genuinely upset you if it happened? Let’s know what not to do.”

6. Moral Complexity

”This campaign assumes characters will make hard choices without clear ‘good’ answers. Are you comfortable with your character having to compromise, break laws, or sacrifice things? Or do you want situations where doing the right thing is harder but ultimately possible?”

7. Mystery and Trust

”There are things you won’t know at the start -- factions’ true motives, the full extent of the Queen’s power, who you can trust. Are you okay with discovering these things over time, or do you want more transparency about what’s happening behind the scenes?”

8. Pace and Difficulty

”Do you want Kormor Kirak to feel like a place where the party can win, just not easily? Or should danger feel genuinely overwhelming sometimes? Should some missions fail? Let me know what kind of challenge curve keeps you engaged without feeling hopeless.”

9. Spotlight and Downtime

”Do you want intense mission-focused sessions, or do you want quieter roleplay time in between -- going to safe houses, reconnecting with people you care about? What pacing makes this feel alive to you?”

10. Campaign Arc

”Big picture: are you hoping this campaign builds toward a specific end state? The Queen’s defeat? Escape from the city? The party becoming something new? Or would you rather discover the ending together? No right answer -- just helps me know what you’re imagining.”

CAPITULUM

BEFORE SESSION ONE

- **CREATE CHARACTERS TOGETHER AT THE TABLE.** Yes, Session Zero itself is a session -- you'll need 2-3 hours to introduce the world, establish these agreements, create characters, and start play.
- **EXCHANGE CONTACT INFO FOR X-CARD CONVERSATIONS.** Someone might need to text you mid-week saying "That thing in last session is still bothering me." Make space for that.
- **ASK ONE-ON-ONE QUESTIONS.** After the table conversation, grab each player individually and ask: "What's one thing you're hoping for from this campaign? What's one thing you're dreading?" These private conversations catch things people won't say in the group.
- **SET A REGULAR SCHEDULE.** Consistency matters when players are investing emotionally. "Every other Thursday at 8pm" is better than "whenever."
- **PREPARE A ONE-PAGE HANDOUT** with the content warnings, the Lines and Veils list, and the X-Card rules. Hand it to players before Session One. Reference it.

You're going to tell a story about people surviving something terrible together. That's worth getting right. The care you put into Session Zero becomes the foundation of everything that comes after.

Welcome to Kormor Kirak. The gas lamps are lit. The Queen's bells are ringing. And somewhere in the city, resistance stirs.

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