

# THE KING OF WOE

*Book 1 of The Shattered Crown*



## EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

*Chapters 1–3 • City Map • Magic System Guide*

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This preview contains the first three chapters, a city map of Palencia,  
and a guide to the Seven Gates magic system.

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# Chapter 1: Vigil: 1 — The Golden Glitz



The burn of cinnamon whiskey slid down his throat like wildfire, sharp, hot, and inevitable. His mind had begun to experience relief before the whiskey even hit his gut. It had learned long ago that fire meant peace was coming. It was a good burn.

Vigil surrendered to the sensation, leaning back against the sticky wood of the cushioned barstool. The tavern roared around him. Clinking glass, raucous laughter, the smell of unwashed bodies and roasting meat, but he let the whiskey build a wall against it all. Comfort was growing shorter with each passing day. He wasn't seeking joy anymore; that innocent dream had died years ago in muddy battlefields and empty bedchambers.

Now, there was only the absence of *her*.

What remained was a desperate bargain: brief moments of blessed numbness bought with increasing portions of his soul. No celebration or laughter. Not even escape.

Just... *less*.

The void she left was a physical weight in the chair opposite him. He still had trouble believing she was gone. When the realization hit him... that this was reality, not some fever dream he'd wake from shuddering... he tipped the glass back, trying to drown the thought.

But his sorrows knew how to swim.

*Fuck her. How could she...*

He stared at the amber dregs in his glass. *How could she not?*

*I treated her like I'd purchased the charter to her soul. She was his home, and all she asked was that he lay his head only there. But he had wanted holidays. Other beds. Other hearths.*

*"Selfish and entitled," she'd said, ripping up that imaginary deed. No amount of gold could buy it back.*

*In truth she was never something to own. She was someone to adore. A person, not property. I gave her everything she wanted and thought that meant I could do whatever I pleased. I showered her with gifts and used them as permission for betrayal.*

*No wonder she left. The miracle is that she stayed as long as she did.*

The glass trembled between his fingers. Not from weakness, but from the constant tremor that lived beneath his skin. A pulse within his very bones. A gnawing itch in the marrow that no amount of coin, combat, or carnality could scratch. The clawing ghost of hungers that never slept, never sated, never stopped their relentless whisper: *More. Always more.*

The alcohol and elixirs had reformed his mind, hammering something sacred into a weapon that cut both ways. The whiskey didn't register as luxury anymore... it felt essential as air, needed as water after a day of swordwork under Palencia's merciless sun. His body didn't just crave it; it had convinced

itself it would die without it.

The madness wasn't in the wanting. It was in how *logical* the wanting felt.

Already the anxiety of the wear-off hummed beneath his skin, a low warning that whispered of the coming valley. He lived in the space between a hit of Thunderroot and the fading haze of Poppyshade, always chasing the peak, always dreading the drop. The cycle was as rhythmic as his heartbeat now. He couldn't remember when it had started feeling normal.

He leaned back in the velvet-cushioned chair and let the tavern's noise wash over him like surf against coastline. The movement pulled at the wound beneath his ribs, still tender, still healing. He had trouble believing that surviving it was a good thing. The stitches had come out two weeks ago, but the flesh hadn't forgotten the dagger. Laughter bounced off vaulted ceilings. Coin clinked against coin. Dice clattered across polished oak tables worn smooth by countless nights of fortune won and lost. In the corner, a string quartet plucked melodies that wound through conversations like ivy through cracked walls.

The Golden Glitz was leagues above the piss-soaked holes that festered in Lowmoor. Here, silk curtains framed arched windows that looked out over Palencia's Golden District. Crystal chandeliers caught candlelight and threw it back in dancing fragments. The patrons wore fine wool and expensive perfume, their purses heavy with gold.

But beneath the polish and pretense, they were still wolves. Every last one of them.

Vigil belonged here about as much as a Bhulkuhm dwarf belonged in the fire-forged depths of Zarakduhm. But his coin was good, his blade stayed sheathed, and the whiskey bought him what he needed most: temporary peace from the war inside his skull.

His satchel hung from the chair back, heavy with coin and habits. The blade at his hip was nothing remarkable to look at. Plain crossguard, leather-wrapped grip worn smooth by years of use. But the edge beneath that battered scabbard could split a man from crown to navel.

Each sip dulled the restless thrum in his ribs, blurred the sharp edges of memory until the world became bearable again. Yet even as warmth settled in his belly, dread began its familiar coil. Because the whiskey always wore off, and with it, the hollow cavern in his chest... the one no amount of poppyshade or thunderroot could keep full for long.

A commotion broke through Vigil's dark musings. Four men huddled around a table scattered with empty tankards, raising their drinks in a sloppy toast. He knew their faces, they were here every day, but for him to know that... it meant he was here every day... Stone masons, by the look of their hands, thick with callus but not blackened like smiths.

"Have you heard the latest about Prince Enzo?" the eldest boomed, slapping the table. "Crown claims it's a 'diplomatic journey.' Diplomatic journey, my arse. Half the city swears he's dead."

"Don't talk rot," the sharp-eyed one interrupted. "A man like that? Finest sword in seven kingdoms. He doesn't just fall and vanish."

"One of the finest," the pale one cut in. "They say there's a man from Albanor who might be better. What's his name... gods, it's on the tip of my tongue. Ed... Eldric? Eldovar?"

"You're thinking of the Snow Bear's champion," the elder said. "Different style entirely. Mountain fighting. All ice and patience."

Vigil's lips quirked faintly behind his glass.

The youngest of the group, still smooth-cheeked and too eager to sneer, leaned in. "Everyone bleeds. Especially spoiled princes who've never seen real steel." His companions skewered him with hard looks, the kind that quiet a boy fast.

Simple lives, honest ones. They could argue, drink, and dream of heroes. Vigil had none of that left. They were living, he merely existed between drinks.

"There's more to it," muttered the sharp-eyed one, lowering his voice. "Princes don't disappear after tournament preliminaries without cause. Gambling. Or women. Mark me."

"Gambling?" the elder barked a laugh, spraying ale. "Enzo could wager the palace walls and still have coin to spare." The elder snorted. "And women? Every time that lad steps into the sun, girls start unlacing their bodices. They practically throw their undergarments at his horse's hooves."

"Maybe he finally bedded the wrong lord's wife," one muttered, and the table erupted in knowing laughter.

"Then why are the Cutthroats sniffing for him?" the sharp-eyed man pressed once the laughter died. The question lingered, heavy as an anvil.

The youth broke the silence, voice softened with sudden conviction. "May Aydwyn keep him. King Marcus rules well, aye, but Enzo? He'd have been the most benevolent ruler Palencia has ever known. I saw him once in the market, helping a child find his mother. Like something out of the old tales. Strong, kind, handsome as any hero."

"Hah! If you love him so much, why don't you go on and suck his cock while you're at it?" one jeered. Laughter erupted, rough and merciless, and the boy flushed scarlet, staring at his cup.

"Had it all," the elder sighed once the laughter ebbed. "Beauty, fortune, skill with a blade, a kingdom waiting... and they say he got mixed up with The Cutthroats. Nonsense."

Together they fell quiet, sighing like men measuring their small lives against unreachable heights.

Then the eldest raised his tankard. "Long live Prince Enzo!"

The cry spread like brushfire. Across the tavern, cups rose in answer. "Long live Prince Enzo!" The serving girls, the gamblers, even the string quartet paused to join the toast. For one moment, the Golden Glitz united in grief for a prince most of them had never met.

Vigil drained his glass and raised a finger for another.

Kaitlin slid to his side, her straight red hair gleaming in the candlelight like strands of fire. She poured whiskey deep, as always, her smile touched with warmth that softened the sharp lines of her face.

"Some lucky woman's going to snatch you up one of these days," she said with a grin that held more hope than conviction.

"Tell that to my last one," he murmured, managing something that might have been a smile. The image came unbidden. Blonde hair, a face too beautiful to forget. The ache cut through him like steel.

He tipped her two gold pieces. Twice what the drink cost, but he knew her mother was very ill and coin was scarce. Small kindnesses were one of the few luxuries he still allowed himself.

His gaze drifted across the tavern with practiced efficiency, cataloging threats and weaknesses out of habit. Every face was a page in a book he'd read too many times: drunk nobles playing at being common, desperate merchants hunting for connections, predators wearing expensive masks over their true nature.

Three men near the far end of the bar caught his attention like a discordant note in the quartet's melody.

Well-dressed. Clean-shaven. Composed. But their eyes told a different story. Cold calculation barely concealed behind expensive facades. They scanned the tavern with the lazy confidence of wolves who'd forgotten what it felt like to be prey.

Then their collective gaze shifted and found her.

She sat alone at the bar's curve. Dark hair swept back on one side with a silver clasp, catching candlelight. Teal eyes watched the room with the calm of someone who knew exactly where every exit was. She sipped from a crystal goblet, movements precise and unhurried.

Unbothered by the chaos around her. Or masterfully pretending.

Vigil's instincts prickled. He didn't know her name, her story, her business here, but something in her stillness spoke of experience with worse predators than these tavern wolves. She had the aura of someone who'd survived things that broke lesser people.

Still, when the tallest of the three rose with a predator's smile, Vigil felt his hand drift toward the dagger concealed beneath his coat. The way they moved. Coordinated, purposeful, spoke of practice. This wasn't their first hunt.

The man's companions flanked him, grinning. All three moved with the easy confidence of abductors who'd done this before. Cornered women in taverns where screams could be dismissed as enthusiasm. Where missing persons became cargo for ships bound south.

*She can handle herself*, Vigil told himself. His fingers found his weapon's hilt anyway.

She shrugged the tall man off.

That should have ended it.

He whispered something else. She turned, and Vigil read her lips clearly: *Leave me alone*.

That should have ended it.

Instead, the man grabbed her blouse and yanked it down, exposing the curve of her pale breast to the leering crowd. His friends laughed.

One leaned close, wine on his breath. "Pretty thing like this? Our friend down south pays well for spirit."

Vigil was already moving.

One of the men reached for her.

Vigil crossed the floor in three strides. He didn't run; he arrived.

"Walk away."

The tall man turned, surprise shifting to sneering contempt. Expensive cologne failed to mask the scent of cheap wine. "What's it to you? We saw her first."

"She's not yours to see."

"Back off, friend. You don't want trouble with our benefactors."

Vigil didn't blink. The familiar cold settled into his bones, the calm that came before violence. "Well. You can't say I didn't give you the chance."

The stranger's hand shot toward his belt. A flash of steel caught the candlelight. It was a telegraphed, amateur draw. The kind that got men killed in alleys when they thought a blade made them dangerous.

Vigil slipped past the clumsy motion and seized the man's wrist. He twisted. The bone shattered with a wet crack that cut through the tavern chatter. The knife spun away, but Vigil caught the handle before it touched the floor.

He slammed the man's ruined hand flat against the oak table. With a single fluid motion, he drove the blade through flesh, sinew, and timber, burying it to the hilt.

The scream that followed was high and animal, the sound of a predator discovering it had become prey.

The second attacker lunged forward, wielding a heavy crystal wine bottle like a club. Vigil flowed beneath the wild arc. His hand wanted to reach for his blade, instead his fist found the thug's chin.

With no hesitation, he delivered a blow to his gut.

The man folded, gasping. Vigil caught him by the hair and slammed his face into the bar's edge. Once. Twice. The bottle shattered somewhere in between.

He released and the man crumpled, blood sheeting from his ruined nose. Unconscious before he hit the floor.

The third attacker charged with a roar that betrayed both courage and stupidity.

Vigil waited. At the last moment, he pivoted. Hands found arm and hip. Using the fool's own momentum, he redirected two hundred pounds of muscle and sent him flying.

It should have been difficult. It wasn't.

The man crashed through a cluster of tables. Wood exploded. Tankards launched skyward. Broken glass rained down. Patrons scrambled to escape the debris.

Something about the throw had been too easy. Too perfect. Vigil flexed his fingers, felt a fading warmth he couldn't explain.

Silence fell.

Vigil stood among the wreckage, breathing slow through his teeth. His knuckles throbbed. A split had opened across two of them, leaking thin lines of red he didn't bother wiping. His side protested where the old wound lived, scar tissue pulling tight after weeks of disuse. He let the pain register, then filed it away. The tavern's patrons stood frozen, wearing the look of people who'd just learned something about the world they'd rather not have known.

The pinned man struggled weakly against his wooden imprisonment, his free hand clawing at the dagger's hilt with desperate futility. Blood pooled beneath his palm, the golden oak drinking it greedily until the wood turned the color of old wine. Tears and snot ran down his face as shock gave way to terror.

"Please," he choked out between hitching sobs, eyes rolling white like a spooked horse. "Please, I'll pay. Name your price. Anything. Gods, anything."

Vigil leaned down slowly, deliberately, letting his shadow fall across the man's face. His voice dropped to a whisper meant only for the bleeding man's ears. "Your Master. Name. Now."

The man's eyes widened with a different species of terror, the kind that came from being caught between two deaths. His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. "I can't. He'll kill me. Kill my family."

"I'll kill you now." Vigil gripped the blade's handle and gave it the slightest twist, just enough to grind bone against wood. The resulting scream scattered the remaining patrons near the door. "Or you talk, and maybe you keep enough of that hand to count coins with. Choose quickly."

"The Shepherd!" The name burst from him in confession. "They call him The Shepherd!"

"Tell me about this Shepherd. Where does he operate?"

"The docks! Ships leave twice a month for the southern markets! The pretty ones go to private buyers, collectors who pay in gems! The rest..." he swallowed hard, "the rest go to the brothels in Abarados. Gothume if they're unlucky."

"And this Shepherd? Description. Location. Patterns."

"I don't know his real name! Nobody does! He's smoke, shadow, never the same face twice!" The words tumbled over each other. "He runs everything through intermediaries. Drugs from the poppy fields, flesh from the slums, weapons from the forges. We just collect. We identify targets. Please, that's all I know! I swear on my mother's grave!"

Vigil straightened slowly, his gaze tracking to where the second attacker was struggling to sit upright, one hand pressed to his bleeding face while the other groped blindly for purchase on the floor.

"You." Vigil pointed at him. "Help your friend when you can stand. Pull that knife out carefully. Twist it wrong and he'll bleed out before you reach a healer."

His finger shifted to the third man groaning in the debris. "You. Clean up this mess. Every splinter, every drop of blood."

His gaze found each of them in turn. "If I hear the Shepherd's name in this city again... if a single woman goes missing from these streets..." He let the silence do the rest, gesturing once at the pinned hand, the shattered table, the blood-slicked oak. "There won't be a conversation next time. Am I

understood?"

The conscious man nodded so vigorously his teeth clacked together, while the pinned one just whimpered his agreement through tears and snot, his dignity as shattered as his hand.

The tavern keeper, a portly man who'd watched the entire affair from behind his bar, stepped forward nervously. "Sir, I should probably summon the city watch."

"No need." Vigil pulled out a leather purse and counted out gold coins with deliberate precision. Twenty pieces. Enough to repair the damage twice over and ensure silence. "Accidents happen. Sometimes drunkards drink too much and fall down stairs."

The keeper's eyes widened at the small fortune, then darted to the groaning attackers. Understanding dawned. "Aye, sir. Terrible how clumsy drunk men can be. Always tripping over their own feet."

Vigil nodded once and pocketed his purse. Around them, conversations slowly resumed, hushed at first, then gaining volume as people processed what they'd witnessed. He caught fragments of amazed whispers:

"...threw him like he weighed nothing..."

"...never seen anyone move that fast..."

"...did you hear what he said about trafficking..."

At the bar, the woman sat still, composed, though her eyes tracked his every movement with newfound intensity. There was something different in her gaze now. Not just attraction, but recognition. She'd seen violence before, but nothing quite like this.

As Vigil walked back toward her, the pinned man's whimpering faded into the tavern's ambient noise. By morning, this would be another story told over ales, embellished and exaggerated until truth became legend. But for now, it was simply over.

The predators had learned their place in the food chain. And Vigil had reminded himself why he usually preferred to avoid attention.

Some instincts, once awakened, were difficult to put back to sleep.

He turned slowly. She held her goblet with steady hands, one eyebrow raised.

"Well." She took a deliberate sip without glancing at the moaning heap behind him. "That was thorough."

"He crossed a line."

Her teal eyes followed him with cool assessment. "At first I thought they were just tavern roaches. But watching them move..." She tilted her head, dark hair shifting against the silver clasp at her temple. "They would have done more than embarrass me."

"I would not have allowed that."

The words came out harder than intended. She noticed.

She stood with fluid grace, every movement controlled. The lavender scent of her perfume cut through the tavern's smoke. Something in the way she moved reminded him of cats. Not hurried. Purposeful.

"I know," she said simply.

Two words, but they landed like a confession. Heat and challenge and recognition of something kindred. She closed the distance between them without hurry, close enough that he caught the lavender again beneath the smoke. Vigil held his ground, though every instinct told him he was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"You've earned a drink," she said.

"Not necessary."

"It wasn't a request." Her voice remained calm, but firm.

He hesitated. Not from defiance, but from habit. Years of war had taught him to resist orders from strangers. But this wasn't really a command. It was gravity, and gods help him, he was tired of fighting it.

Vigil sat.

Without turning, she raised one elegant hand to summon the bartender.

"Two cinnamon whiskeys. Neat."

She didn't need to look to know he was watching her. The weight of his attention was tangible, like storm-pressure before lightning struck.

When the drinks arrived, she slid one across polished wood with practiced ease. "How did you know what I was drinking?"

"I watched you." She met his eyes directly, unflinching. "You watch people too, don't you?"

"Constantly." *Always face the door. Never have your back to it. Observe your surroundings. All of it...* His father's voice had come unbidden.

"I thought so." She sipped, considering. "You move like someone who sees threats before they manifest. I've known soldiers who moved like that. Spies. Assassins."

"You always this forward with strangers?"

"Only the ones who bleed for me without being asked." She raised her glass in mock salute. "It's charming."

"I didn't bleed for you, they did, and I'm. Not. Charming."

"No," she agreed, eyes gleaming. "You're dangerous. But you're also lonely. Those two things make for a very interesting combination."

The banter crackled between them, sharper than the whiskey burning his throat. Her fingers traced the rim of her glass with deliberate slowness, a hypnotic motion that drew attention to hands that were well manicured.

"I'm still deciding if I like you," she announced.

"I'm still deciding if I care."

"Oh, you care. You just hate that you do."

He laughed. A quiet, genuine sound that surprised them both. Despite everything, the violence and whiskey and weight of secrets, he found himself liking her. Or at least the version of herself she wore like armor.

She shifted closer, her thigh brushing his beneath the table. He didn't move away.

"Where are you from?" The question came softly, almost conversationally.

"Around." Evasion was second nature now.

"Let me guess..." She tilted her head, studying him like a puzzle. "Born in the north, raised in the south, educated here in Palencia."

The accuracy was unsettling. "Lucky guess."

"Smart, cultured, and handsome." Her approval seemed genuine, which made it dangerous. "A rare collection of virtues."

Despite countless women, countless encounters, countless nights that blurred together in memory's haze, Vigil felt heat rise in his cheeks. Shyness was a weakness he couldn't afford, but somehow she'd found it anyway.

"Does my valiant rescuer have a name?"

"Vigil. Just Vigil."

She frowned prettily. "No one's name is actually Vigil, but given recent circumstances, I'll allow it."

"And yours?"

"I, believe it or not, have a real name that isn't also a verb." Her smile held genuine warmth. "Randilyn. My friends call me Randi."

The air between them thickened with possibility. Vigil savored the burn of whiskey and the growing awareness that Randilyn was exactly the kind of trouble he'd been avoiding. Exactly what he needed.

"Well," he said, making a show of standing. "Randi, thank you for the drink. It was my pleasure defending your honor. But you came here for solitude, so I'll leave you to it."

"Sit back down." Her tone brooked no argument, though amusement flickered in her eyes. "Who says I wanted to drink alone? I just didn't want to drink with them." She gestured toward where the groaning heap of expensive clothes and bruised egos had been. They had disappeared. "You've done much for me tonight, so leave if you must... but there's still much I hope you'll do to me before morning."

Heat flared in Vigil's chest. Want and whiskey and the dangerous promise of forgetting himself completely.

He sat back down, no longer pretending this was anything but inevitable.

"What do you say we have two more drinks," Randilyn suggested, her voice dropping to honeyed suggestion, "and then find somewhere more... private?"

Vigil's mind raced through possibilities. His own lodgings were too risky. He'd learned never to bring strangers to his sanctuary. But the Glitz maintained private suites for wealthy guests seeking discretion.

"I'll rent us a room," he said. "The finest they have."

Randilyn's eyes glittered with shared understanding. "I have no objections whatsoever."

Nine gold coins changed hands. An extravagant sum that ensured silence and comfort. As Randilyn returned with their final drinks, she leaned forward provocatively, offering glimpses of curves that made his pulse quicken. When she straightened, her lips found his neck in a whisper-soft kiss that sent heat racing through him.

"Drink quickly," she murmured against his ear, breath hot and promising. "I've been soaking wet since you threw that first punch."

The words hit him almost physically. "Care to make it interesting?" he managed, voice rougher than intended.

"Always. What did you have in mind?"

"First one to finish both drinks wins."

Her smile sharpened. "And the loser?"

"Gives pleasure before receiving it."

"Deal." She extended her hand for a shake that lingered longer than necessary. "But I should warn you... I don't like to lose."

Vigil reached into his coat and withdrew a small vial of poppyshade extract. Liquid heat that would enhance every sensation. He paused and looked to her, she nodded. He poured half into his glass, half into hers. Randilyn watched with raised eyebrows but no objection.

They raised their glasses in silent toast, eyes locked. The tavern noise thinned to nothing. Each sip was a dare, and neither of them had any intention of backing down.

Randilyn set her empty glass down first, moving immediately to the second drink without pause. She met his eyes over the rim, her meaning unmistakable.

"I want you to do terrible things to me," she said quietly, words meant for him alone. "Until my body shakes and I forget my own name."

Vigil felt his arousal spike, urgent and demanding. He matched her pace, their glasses clinking as they raced toward mutual destruction driven by nothing but pure, desperate want.

Both reached for their final drinks at the same moment. A standoff.

"I should tell you," Vigil murmured, his tone strained with control, "I favor granting satisfaction... over receiving it. Though make no mistake... I savor each."

"You first," Randilyn challenged, eyes blazing with competitive fire.

Vigil considered, then smiled with genuine warmth. "Every problem has a solution." He lifted his glass. "We finish together. Both winners."

Understanding flickered across her features. "Clever man. It's been too long since I've been in that position."

They drained their glasses in perfect concert. Without another word, Randilyn turned and headed for the stairs leading to the private suites, her hips swaying with deliberate invitation. Each step a promise, each glance back over her shoulder a challenge.

Vigil followed.

The upstairs corridor muffled their footsteps with thick carpeting and heavy tapestries. Randilyn led him to the end suite. The Lord's Chamber, judging by its ornate door and gold inlays. She entered as if she owned the space.

The room smelled of sandalwood and distant roses. A fire crackled in the marble fireplace, casting warm light across silk-draped walls. The canopied bed dominated the space, its violet curtains promising privacy and secrets.

Randilyn stood silhouetted against moonlight streaming through tall windows, her profile sharp and perfect.

"You make a habit of rescuing women in taverns?" she asked without turning.

"Only when I'm bored."

"Or maybe you just like making scenes."

"Maybe." He moved closer. "Depends on the company."

She turned then, eyes meeting his with an intensity that made breathing difficult. The tension between them had weight now, substance that filled the space between them.

"You like trouble," she observed.

"Depends on the kind."

Her smile returned. Slow, dangerous. She closed the final distance between them, fingers sliding up to curl in his collar and pull him down to her level.

Their lips met with no hesitation, no pretense. The kiss was half hunger, half surrender, the kind that burned slower than whiskey and hit twice as hard. She responded with equal need, hands mapping the scars and muscle beneath his shirt.

Her dress and his trousers became obstacles quickly discarded. Firelight painted their skin in gold and shadow as they tangled in silk sheets, both seeking something neither would name but both desperately needed. He admired her breasts and her eyes widened when she saw him.

What followed was neither gentle nor rushed, but something more primal. They moved together like they'd done this before, each touch deliberate, each moan earned. As promised, when his tongue made her climax she went from running her fingers through his hair to trying to shove his head away. He wouldn't budge. When he came up for air, her face displayed shock, pleasant surprise. "Give me that," she gasped.

A devious grin grew across his face. "Yes m'lady," he said as he obliged. When he entered, he felt intoxicated with pleasure. *Ah, good fucking thing I have plenty of poppyshade and whiskey in me to last.* And last, he did.

Randilyn's breath was a slow heat against his ribs. Her fingers traced the jagged architecture of his scars. Neither of them spoke. When she found the one below his ribs, the ugly, puckered thing that had nearly killed him, her touch lingered.

'This one's newer,' she murmured.

'Disagreement with a business partner.'

'Looks like you lost.'

'He lost worse.'

Her fingers moved on and she didn't ask more. He was grateful for that.

The sandalwood incense had burned down to a bitter ember, mixing with the sharp scent of sweat.

Outside, Palencia was a collection of cold stone and locked doors. Vigil watched the moonlight catch the amber curves of the untouched whiskey bottle.

Tomorrow, the marrow would start to itch. Tomorrow, the hollow in his chest would open again.

He closed his eyes and listened to the fire die.

But tomorrow wasn't tonight.

## Chapter 2: Casey 1 — The Feast of Unity



Blood soaks stone. It doesn't matter how many times you scrub the surface; the iron settles deep in the pores and waits.

The Grand Hall of Palencia's Palace was built around a magnificent waterfall, but tonight it felt less like a celebration and more like a tomb with better lighting. Ancient wounds hid beneath the regal polish. Marble columns soared skyward, their stone threaded with fractures, black veins left over from battles long past.

Two hundred lords and ladies crowded the noble tables, while wealthy merchants took the lower hall. Servants moved like a fluid current, filling the gaps between nobles, and guards stood sentinel at every arch. It was a riot of silk and velvet shifting under crystal chandeliers that had witnessed a century of diplomatic triumphs. And the betrayals that preceded them.

The air was heavy. The scent of roasted crown hen and Vivona wine tried to mask the dry, dusty smell that clung to Gothume's delegation, desert sand ground right into their souls. It clashed with the Arceneaux jasmine, and the mix sat wrong in her nose, sharp enough to make her teeth ache.

Tonight marked the tournament's final feast and the renewal of the treaty binding seven kingdoms with words instead of swords. Seventeen centuries ago, the Veytharil rose in conquest, and it was Palencia and the Anuryans who stood against them. The invaders broke against them like glass on iron. But the defenders broke too. The Anuryans perished to the last, leaving Palencia a ruin of smoke and ash. Victory purchased at the price of existence.

For sixteen centuries the land lay divided. Only a hundred years ago had House Connelly and House Nalbaveli bound their heirs in marriage, rebuilt the fallen city, and raised Palencia anew as the crown of the east.

Yet beneath the pageantry, something was wrong. The kind of wrong she felt in her spine before she understood it with her head.

"You're doing it again," Everett Wren murmured beside her.

His ceremonial robes, midnight blue shot with silver constellations, marked him as heir apparent to magical authority. But Casey was looking at his hands. The wine in his goblet swirled gently, though his fingers were still. He was leaking Anu through his Navel Gate again. Nervous energy bleeding into the physical world.

"Doing what?" Casey replied.

She didn't look at him. She was working the room. Her position near the wall gave her clear sightlines to three exits. She'd already clocked the threats: which tapestries were loose enough to conceal an assassin, and which servants moved with a dexterity that didn't match their station.

"Reading the room like a siege map." A hint of amusement flickered across Everett's lips, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Your hand hasn't left your bracelet in twenty minutes."

Casey forced her fingers to uncurl. She rested them against the cold metal of her goblet. The bracelet concealed three poisoned needles, her father's practicality. The slim blade strapped to her thigh was her mother's.

"Force of habit. Twenty-three minutes, actually."

"Ah. My error." Everett raised his goblet but didn't drink. For a man preparing to follow his grandfather into magical scholarship, he'd developed a surprising tolerance for her paranoia. "Any particular reason for the heightened scrutiny? Or are you simply missing your cousin?"

Bullseye. Casey's lips pressed into a thin line. Her gaze snapped to the empty chair at the high table. Positioned between King Marcus and Queen Sandrella, it sat draped in Nalbaveli purple.

Prince Enzo. Crown Prince Enzo. Heir to three kingdoms and the elusive promise of an eastern alliance.

Missing for nearly three months.

Officially, he was engaged in diplomatic missions. Unofficially, half the court whispered he was dead, while the other half speculated he'd fled. Casey felt the familiar ache settle behind her ribs. Three months of searching, dead ends, and contradictory stories. Watching her aunt cry herself to sleep and her uncle drink himself numb.

"Any new leads?" Everett asked. He posed this question at every gathering, but the concern in his voice ran deeper than political necessity. They were childhood friends. Casey the strategist, Everett the scholar. And Enzo... the golden prince who could charm a cobra into a knot.

"Two theories," Casey said. She swirled her wine, eyes tracking the shadows. Around them, nobles gossiped and preened, unaware of the intelligence network operating in their midst. She had three Hive operatives working the feast: a server, a musician, a lady's maid. Invisible in their visibility. "Both stink of half-truths."

She leaned closer, dropping her voice. "First, that he slipped into the vice dens after the tournament preliminaries. The Pink Pearl claims he was there. Multiple witnesses. But their stories fracture after that. One swears a different man emerged from the room than entered. Others insist he went upstairs and never descended." She paused, the admission sour on her tongue. "Even Madame Rosalind broke her code of silence to tell me she knows nothing. Which tells me everything."

"And the second theory?" Everett's fingers drummed against his goblet.

"His guards swear they followed him to the canal docks. That he boarded a smuggler's skiff bound for Folkenstone, coin changing hands at midnight. Yet there's no passenger manifest. No crew willing to speak. No trace of him arriving." Casey's hand tightened on her cup. "The guards might be covering their shame. Losing a prince carries harsh consequences. But princes don't vanish so cleanly unless someone planned it far better than we think."

Neither said what they were both thinking. Everett opened his mouth to respond, then stopped. Casey's gaze shifted to the high table.

The Archmage's chair was empty too.

"I don't see your grandfather either."

Everett blinked, following her gaze. "I... hadn't noticed." Concern creased his brow. "Where is he?"

"I saw him during the first course. Speaking with someone I didn't recognize. Tall, thin, wearing Vivonan garb but moving with the precision of a soldier." Casey's tone left no room for argument. "He hasn't returned. Your grandfather never abandons formal proceedings."

Her gaze drifted across the hall with practiced efficiency. Lord Morteth sat closer to the Gothume delegation than protocol demanded, engaged in what appeared to be warm conversation with Prince Bryndyn. *Bridge-building*, Casey reminded herself. Morteth had lost two brothers under mysterious circumstances during a diplomatic visit to Gothume years ago. Fever, the official reports claimed. Poison, the whispers suggested. If anyone had reason to distrust Gothume, it was him. Yet here he was, toasting to continued peace.

Still, something in his laugh rang hollow. A discordant note. She filed it away.

Before they could voice their mounting unease, the Master of Ceremonies stepped forward. His ceremonial staff struck marble. *Crack. Crack. Crack.*

Each impact silenced another wave of conversation. Goblets paused halfway to lips. The hall's attention shifted like a turning tide.

Into this hush strutted Liorane Cartier.

He didn't just walk; he projected. He wore fame like others wore cloaks. Midnight velvet shot with silver thread, chains heavy as oaths, rings on every finger catching light like shrapnel. Ink peeked from his collar, ancient Anuryan script from a dead tongue that the temples considered too holy for flesh. His dark locs fell past his shoulders, threaded with gold rings. When he smiled, diamonds winked in his canines.

He didn't bow. Instead, he raised his lute, dragon bone and gold, worth more than most estates, and plucked a single note. The crystal chandeliers rang in harmony.

"Lords and ladies." His voice was sweet enough to rot teeth. "I bring you a song about absences."

The melody started gentle. Almost mocking in its prettiness. Then it twisted into something darker.

*The golden prince who danced at dawn  
Now sleeps where no court light has shone,  
They search the dens, they search the docks,  
But princes hide in stranger locks.*

A few nervous laughs rippled through the hall. Casey's eyes narrowed. Liorane was poking a bruise.

*Some say he sailed on ships of lies,  
Or drowned beneath a lover's cries,  
But here's the truth the court won't tell...  
The crown itself can be a cell.*

The lute's rhythm quickened. Almost martial.

*Oh, the feast tables groan while beggars starve for bread, We toast to peace built on the backs of dead, Sign treaties with our fingers crossed behind, And smile while rot spreads through the mind.*

King Halrik shifted in his seat. Queen Sandrella's expression turned glacial.

*So here's to absences, to those who flee the light, To princes trading crowns for darker fights, For when these marble halls grow still with wine, Remember... even kingdoms die on the vine.*

*Masks on every face and heart, Each soul playing their scripted part, Kings drink deep while death walks soft... One blink, my lords, and thrones are lost.*

The last note hung like an accusation. But Casey was watching the singer, not the audience.

Liorane's diamond-studded grin never wavered as he surveyed the silent hall, daring someone to object. Yet his eyes found that empty chair between the king and queen. For three heartbeats, the showman vanished. Raw concern flickered across his features. It was the look of a man who'd lost a friend and feared he'd never find him again. His fingers tightened on the lute's neck until his knuckles whitened.

Then the mask snapped back into place.

"To unity," he said, raising an imaginary cup. Voice dripping irony.

The applause that followed was thunderous yet uncertain. King Marcus clapped slowly, deliberately. But Casey noticed how conversations resumed in lower tones. Eyes kept drifting to that purple-draped chair. Even the servants moved more carefully.

Liorane swept an elaborate bow and departed. But Casey had seen what she needed to see. Whatever had happened to Enzo, his friends grieved his absence more than they showed.

The feast resumed with forced gaiety. Servants appeared with the next course. Wine flowed from Vivona's finest vineyards. At the high table, the assembled royalty presented a unified front, despite the fractures beneath.

King Marcus sat with the easy confidence of a man who'd never met a challenge he couldn't charm his way through. His reputation for keeping mistresses was well known, though he conducted affairs with discretion befitting a king. Queen Sandrella maintained her dignity with equal grace several seats away, her new husband Lord Paul Silbereve at her side. Though their marriage had been annulled years ago, friendship and three sons remained. The unity of the realm demanded they rule as partners still, whatever warmth had faded between them. Lord Paul seemed content in his role, quiet support, never overstepping.

To their right sat Keith Nalbaveli, Marcus's younger brother, and his sharp-eyed queen. Nearby, the Albanor contingent was led by "The Snow Bear," Lord Thomas Connelly. Sandrella's brother. Casey's father.

From Bhulkuhm came a dwarven prince representing the mountain clans, his braided beard decorated with gems that sparkled when he laughed. From the Northwest, the Jade Emperor of Komai wore the finest silks in all the kingdoms. And from the southern marshlands, a half-elven envoy from Arceneaux, moss-green eyes marking his mixed heritage.

But attention drifted to the table's far end, where King Halrik of Gothume sat beside his son, Prince Bryndyn. The tournament had ended with Bryndyn's victory, his first championship in seven years. The golden laurels should have been a triumph. Instead, they sat heavy on his brow.

Everyone knew who wasn't there to fight him. Whose absence had left the field hollow despite Bryndyn's skill.

Beside Bryndyn sat his bride, the Lady Lyralei. She was a jarring dissonance in the Gothume delegation. Her skin possessed the dusky, twilight hue of her people. Her hair was a cascade of deep violet that caught the chandelier light like spilled wine. She did not clap. She did not smile. While Bryndyn preened under the court's adulation, trying to ignore the whispers that his victory was unearned, Lyralei's violet eyes remained fixed on the empty chair at the center of the table.

The longing there was naked. Dangerous. She entirely ignored the man who had just won the crown of laurels. It was the look of a woman mourning a ghost, or perhaps praying for one's return. She swirled her wine but did not drink. Her silence was louder than her husband's boasting.

Casey pushed food around her plate, appetite diminished by worry and Liorane's lingering melody. The evening wore on with stately pace, each course following the last like waves against stone. Gradually the formal atmosphere softened under the wine's influence.

At the high table, toasts were raised. To peace. To prosperity. To bonds between kingdoms. Each ruler stood offering words carefully negotiated through treaties and hope from children who had never known war.

King Halrik rose last, as protocol demanded. He looked carved from desert stone, sun-weathered skin, eyes the color of sandstone, hair bleached pale by the harsh southwestern sun. His kingdom lay in arid reaches where the sun scorched mercilessly and water proved more precious than gold.

He lifted his goblet. "To the bonds that unite us," he began. His voice carried the dry authority of sun-scorched lands. "And to the peace that..."

The words died in his throat.

No swaying. No dramatics.

His face just went ashen. Color drained like wine from a cracked cup. His eyes went wide with shock, not pain, but terror. His free hand clutched his chest, clawing at silk as if tearing invisible bonds.

He dropped.

He pitched forward into his untouched meal. The goblet struck marble like a funeral bell.

Chaos erupted. Chairs scraped as nobles leaped up. Crystal shattered. Wine spread like blood across white tablecloths. Screams pierced the air, first Queen Matilda's wail, then others as reality crashed over them.

Casey was already moving. Training overrode shock. She vaulted her table, gown tearing as her hands found hidden blades. Behind her, Everett surged up, magical energy crackling around his fingertips.

Guards materialized from the walls, armor clanking as they formed protective formations around the royal family. Steel sang as swords cleared sheaths, the sound sharp and terrible in the sudden pandemonium.

At the high table, chaos reigned. Queen Sandrella pressed back against her throne, hand at her throat. Marcus shouted orders that were lost in the din. Physicians rushed forward, black robes fluttering, but their faces already showed grim resignation.

Even across the hall, Casey could see it was too late. King Halrik lay unnaturally still. Face buried in the crown hen. Rich sauce mingled with something darker. The metallic scent of blood cut through the aroma of fine food.

Prince Bryndyn stood frozen beside his father's chair. Shock transformed into profound grief that seemed to crumble his posture in an instant. His hands trembled as they reached toward the fallen king, then pulled back. As if touch might make the nightmare real.

"Father?" Barely a whisper. Lost in the chaos. Then breaking. "Father!"

But Casey's eyes darted past the weeping prince to Lyrarei. The dark elf hadn't moved. She hadn't screamed. She sat amidst the screaming nobles as though the sound couldn't reach her. As though she'd heard it before. Staring at the dead king with an expression that wasn't shock.

It was resignation.

Master Helene, the court's chief physician, knelt beside the king. She pressed weathered fingers to his throat. Searching. After an eternity's moment, she met Bryndyn's desperate gaze and gave a slight shake of her head.

Answer enough.

Anguish tore from Queen Matilda's throat. She collapsed into her chair, hands covering her face as sobs wracked her frame. The sound cut through the noise, gradually quieting the shouting to horrified murmurs.

Lord Morteth was among the first at Bryndyn's side, steadying the young prince with a hand on his shoulder. King Marcus nodded approval at the gesture.

Prince Bryndyn straightened slowly. Casey watched him change. The young man who had laughed over wine was gone. What straightened in his place was harder. Older. Shaped in the space of a single breath.

"My father..." He cleared his throat. Tried again with desperate dignity. "King Halrik of Gothume has fallen. By ancient customs, ten days of mourning must be observed before..." His voice cracked. "Before I can ascend and take his place at this treaty signing."

He addressed the assembled royalty, each word measured despite obvious grief. "I give my solemn word. I will return within a month to honor all agreements. Gothume stands by its alliances."

Tears tracked down his cheeks. But his spine remained straight. The picture of a grieving son doing his duty despite overwhelming loss.

King Marcus rose, face grave with sympathy. "Of course, Prince Bryndyn. Take the time you need. The other rulers will sign tonight as planned. Only Gothume's seal will wait. Peace has endured this long."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the hall. Though Casey noticed worried glances between delegates. A month's delay would complicate trade agreements, troop movements, and delicate negotiations depending on precise timing.

But no one questioned ancient customs or a son's need to mourn his father. Not yet.

Casey's mind cataloged inconsistencies as she moved through the crowd. Poison was obvious. But who had access? The tasters had sampled everything. Her eyes tracked the servants. Most moved with appropriate deference, shoulders hunched, eyes downcast.

But one near the wine service stood differently. His posture was too straight. Weight balanced like a fighter's. And there, on his right hand as he set down a pitcher... the distinctive callus pattern of someone who'd spent years gripping a cavalry saber. No common servant bore such marks.

She committed his face to memory. Dark hair. Olive skin. A thin scar running from his left ear to his jawline. Not a dueling scar, too clean, too surgical. The mark of an interrogation that had gone wrong. Or very right, depending on your perspective.

Near the wine service, Lord Mannering murmured something to a passing serving girl. She smiled, not the forced smile of the cornered, but genuine. Grateful. Mannering was known for paying his household staff twice the going rate and funding three orphanages in Lowmoor. The common folk loved him for it.

His gaze lingered on the girl a moment longer as she walked away. Fatherly concern, perhaps. Or something else. Casey couldn't decide which.

As she watched, the scarred servant caught Lord Mannering's eye and gave a slight nod. The kind servants offer patrons they recognize.

Nothing unusual. Mannering employed half the servers in the Golden District.

Casey caught the eye of one of her Hive operatives, a server two tables down. Gave the smallest tilt of her chin toward the kitchens. The woman nodded imperceptibly and drifted in that direction.

By the time Casey looked again, the scarred man had vanished.

The evening dissolved into subdued farewells and anxious departures. Carriages clattered across cobblestones as delegations retreated to their quarters or prepared for journeys home. The festive atmosphere had died with King Halrik, leaving only uncertainty's bitter taste.

By midnight, the great hall stood empty save for servants cleaning wine stains and guards maintaining vigil. Torches burned lower, casting long, hungry shadows across the marble.

Casey found Everett near the hall's lesser entrance. Both absorbed the evening's horror in silence.

"We need to see the Archmage," Casey said quietly. Urgency threaded her voice. "Your grandfather's absence during an assassination. That's not coincidence."

Everett nodded, already moving toward the exit. They slipped through corridors to the palace's eastern gate, then crossed the courtyard to Anuza Tower. The tower rose against the night sky, its crystal dome catching moonlight like a beacon. The main door stood unlocked.

Casey's instincts screamed.

They bypassed the lift, too slow, and took the spiral stairs two at a time. Each step echoed against ancient stone. Casey's hand found her bracelet, fingers seeking the comfort of hidden steel.

"Grandfather?" Everett called as they climbed.

No response. Only silence that felt wrong. Heavy with absence rather than peace.

The door to the sanctum stood ajar.

Wrong. All wrong. The Archmage never left it open. Casey's blade was in her hand before conscious thought. Its weight familiar as breathing.

Everett pushed the door wider. Magical shields manifested around them both in rippling barriers of force. The room beyond was dark save for moonlight streaming through the crystal dome.

It illuminated a scene from nightmares.

Archmage Veridian lay sprawled across the marble floor. His robes pooled around him like spilled ink. Blood had dried to rust beneath him, hours old by the look of it. His desk sat untouched. Sky-charts and half-finished workings undisturbed. He hadn't come here to work. He'd come here to meet someone.

The man in Vivonan garb. The stranger Casey had seen speaking with him at the feast. Whoever that was had drawn him away from the most important diplomatic gathering of the decade. And Veridian had trusted them enough to leave.

The blood pattern told its story: a single blade thrust from behind. Quick. Precise. He'd had his back to someone he believed was a friend. Somehow he'd turned after the strike. Crawled toward the center of the room. Toward the moonlight.

"No." The word tore from Everett like flesh from bone. He stumbled forward. Dropped to his knees beside his grandfather's body. "No. No, no, no..." His hands reached for the old man's face, cradling it as sobs wracked his frame.

Casey moved on training alone.

Scan. Clear. Secure.

She knelt beside the body while Everett grieved. Her fingers found the old man's throat. No pulse. Skin already cooling.

Then she saw it. Veridian's right hand was clenched in a fist against his chest. Something pulsed with faint silver light between the old man's fingers.

An Anurilite crystal. Small, thumb-sized. The kind scholars used to record lectures and merchants used to store contracts. Common enough that half the households in Palencia owned at least one. But Veridian had clutched this one with his dying strength instead of reaching for a weapon, a ward, or the door.

He'd had something to say. Something worth more than fighting for his life.

Footsteps echoed up the tower stairs. Heavy boots. Multiple people.

Casey pried the crystal from stiffening fingers. The moment her skin touched its surface, cold flooded through her palm. Not the cold of silver or stone, but something deeper. The cold of final breath. Of words spoken into silence, hoping someone would eventually hear.

She slipped it into the waxed linen pouch at her belt as the footsteps grew louder.

Captain Morris appeared in the doorway, one of her Sentinels. He read the room in a single breath, hand moving to his sword. His eyes tracked from the body to Everett to Casey, then swept the sanctum. The untouched shelves. The lack of struggle. The blood pattern.

He was looking for something.

"Alert the King," Casey ordered. Voice steady despite the chaos in her mind. "Archmage Veridian is dead. Seal the tower. No one in or out until we've examined every inch. Send word to Master Helene."

Morris hesitated. Just a fraction of a second, but Casey saw it. His gaze lingered on the murder scene. As if cataloging what should be there but wasn't.

"At once, Commander," he said. And vanished to carry out orders.

That hesitation stayed with her. What had he been looking for?

Casey helped Everett to his feet, supporting him as he staggered to the wall and slid down it. Face pale.

"My grandfather," he whispered, staring at the bloodstained floor. "Who would do this? Why?"

"Someone who wanted it quiet," Casey answered. "Someone who knew exactly where to strike." She thought of the stranger from Vivona. How easily he'd drawn the Archmage away. "Someone your grandfather trusted enough to follow."

The pattern was too clean to be coincidence.

King Halrik poisoned at the feast's height. Archmage Veridian murdered in his tower, lured away by a man no one could name. Both within hours of each other. Both during a feast meant to renew the very treaties that kept seven kingdoms bound.

And Enzo missing for three months before any of this began.

Not scattered tragedies. A pattern, methodical and patient, devastating in its scope.

King Halrik dead. Archmage Veridian murdered. Prince Enzo missing.

Three pillars removed from the foundation of peace.

This wasn't tragedy. This was war.

Somewhere in the darkness beyond the castle walls, enemies were moving pieces across a board whose boundaries she couldn't see. But they'd made one mistake.

They'd left her alive.

## Chapter 3: Everett: 1 - The Funeral of the Archmage



The bells of Palencia tolled only for the dead.

Bronze pulses hammered the marble streets. Solemn. Deliberate. Each strike a heartbeat the world would never hear again. They spoke what everyone knew. The last true Archmage had passed. Nothing would be the same.

Everett stood alone at the procession's head. His breath made pale ribbons in the morning chill. Three-and-twenty years old and heir to a legacy his grandfather had spent seven decades building. The irony wasn't lost on him. He'd always been gifted at magic. Wretched at timing.

The air tasted of ash and cold iron. Thick with spell residue from rites that bound soul to memory. Six crystal powered torches burned in slow pulses around the obsidian casket. The Anurilite light rose soft and blue, without heat. Each flame for one of the six gods. Six torches. Six temples. Six holy days. The number sat wrong in his mouth. Like a word he'd forgotten how to shape.

Not today, he told himself. Grief isn't the hour for counting discrepancies.

The casket bore no weight. Enchantments saw to that. But it was heavy in all else that mattered.

His grandfather had been so magnificently alive. Laughing with wit that could cut or comfort in equal measure. Teaching spells with sleeves rolled past his elbows and brows raised like he was daring the universe itself.

"Magic isn't about power, boy," he'd said once while teaching Everett to open his Fire Gate. "It's about precision. Any fool can set things ablaze. Wisdom lies in lighting only what needs burning."

Now he lay stone-still. Wrapped in the same silver-threaded robe Everett had hidden inside as a child. Playing at being a wizard while his grandfather labored late into night, candle flames dancing to equations only he could read.

Should he speak? The crowd expected words. Assurance that the realm's wards remained strong. That the new Archmage would honor old traditions. But what could he say that wouldn't ring hollow as echoes in an empty tower? Every phrase he considered turned to ash in his mind. Too formal. Too raw. Too much like a boy wearing robes cut for a man.

If he wept, would they name him weak? If he didn't, cold? Every choice felt wrong. Every silence too loud. He felt like a child balancing a crown made of glass. Knowing the smallest shift would send it shattering.

A sudden gust curled round the platform. Everett's Heart Gate answered without his willing it. Stirring as he steadied the air. The flames bowed low, flickering once before rising straight again. Several mourners glanced his way.

Perfect. Fiddling with weather at your predecessor's funeral. Nothing inspires confidence like a nervous wind-mage.

He forced his hands still at his sides. They ached to move. To do anything but hang there useless. The silence stretched taut as bowstring. Someone coughed. A babe cried somewhere in the back rows before being hushed.

When the last bell rang and the torches guttered to nothing, the crowd began to shift. The moment for speeches had fled. He'd said nothing. Done nothing. Simply stood while the kingdom watched and judged and found him wanting.

The procession continued its slow march toward the Pantheon, where the ashes would be interred. Nobles filed past in careful choreography. Each offering condolences pitched perfectly between genuine and performative. Queen Sandrella's embrace carried the scent of protective wards woven into silk. King Marcus gripped Everett's shoulder with hands that remembered sword-work. One ruler reading the cost on another's face.

Then came Casey.

Lady Cassienne moved through the crowd with practiced grace. Her mourning dress black and sharply cut. She carried a small bundle of white lilies. Funeral flowers. Nothing unusual. She didn't embrace him. Merely stepped close enough to feel familiar. Close enough he caught jasmine and steel.

"Despite my need to know all that passes in this kingdom... and others, truth be told... out of respect for him, and you, I thought you should see this first."

Her hand slipped beneath the flowers. Pressing something small and cool into his palm. An Anurilite shard. Clear save for silver mist at its heart.

"I took it from his hand before anyone else arrived," she said quietly. Voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't know who we could trust. Still don't. But you deserve to hear whatever he left behind."

Everett's throat closed. His grandfather's final moments... not peaceful in sleep but desperate. Urgent. Clutching magic to his chest with the white-knuckled grip of the dying. The soft pulse of light within the crystal suggested something had been pressed into it. A memory. A message.

"The signature suggests he pressed his thoughts into it as he..." She paused. Composure slipping just a breath. "As he took his last."

"My thanks, Case," he managed. Fingers curling round the shard's coolness. "I needed this."

"I know," she said. Stepping back into the crowd without another word. Casey always knew precisely how much comfort could be borne before pride made one refuse it.

As the crowd dispersed, a figure in deep gray robes approached from the eastern walk. The man moved with measured pace. Someone accustomed to walking beside grief. His hood was drawn back to show a face lined by years of presiding over endings. A silver pendant hung at his throat. The spiral and flame of Vuidwyn, God of Death.

"Archmage," the priest said. Voice like wind through dry leaves. "High Priest Ezra Astley of the Gray Temple. I wished to offer the Final God's comfort, if you'll hear it."

Everett inclined his head. His throat went tight. "High Priest."

"Death is the most natural force in all creation," Ezra said. Eyes kind yet unwavering. "The turning of seasons. The ebb and flow of tides. The passage from one state to another. Your grandfather's spirit has simply... moved to its next chapter."

The words scraped against raw grief. "Being murdered isn't natural."

Ezra's expression didn't shift. But something flickered in his gaze. Not offense. A kind of philosophical interest. "True enough. Murder is aberration. Violence against natural order. And yet..." He paused. Seeming to weigh words with care. "Even aberrations serve the greater pattern. Though we may not see how. A tree that falls naturally and one felled by steel both become soil in the end."

"That's meant to comfort?"

"No," Ezra said gently. "Comfort is for the living. I offer only truth." He studied Everett with those ancient eyes. "Your grandfather's death was wrong. But wrong things grow as well. Plant something worthy in its place."

He bowed and withdrew. Melting back into the crowd with that same measured stride.

The funeral wound toward its end. Mourners drifting away in small clusters. Everett stood a moment longer. Watching as the last Anurilite light died to nothing.

He was turning to leave when a voice, clear and certain, called his name.

"Archmage Everett."

The woman moved toward him with the bearing of someone who knew she belonged wherever she chose to stand. The crowd parted without seeming to notice. As though she carried her own unseen gravity. Dark hair caught lamplight. Held back on one side by a clasp of polished silver. Her eyes held that impossible shade between blue and green. Fixed on him with unsettling directness. Her dress was midnight blue. Elegant yet understated. Paired with boots meant for walking rather than show.

It wasn't her beauty that arrested him. Though she was striking. It was her poise. She regarded him the way a blade-dancer might study an unfamiliar weapon. Curious. Cautious. Faintly amused.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said. Stopping at respectful distance. Her voice was calm. Controlled. The sort that cuts through clamor without needing volume. "We've never met, but your grandfather and I corresponded. A handful of letters, no more. He was... generous with his knowledge."

Everett tilted his head slightly. Few outside the university ever wrote the Archmage and received reply.

"He mentioned you once," she continued. "Said his grandson had a gift for seeing patterns others missed. He told me I ought to meet you." A small smile touched her lips. "So here I am."

Everett wasn't certain whether to thank her or press for more. He settled for: "And what gates do you channel, miss...?"

"Nyssa." The name came lightly. But those strange eyes searched his. Testing. "I'm not merely a mage. I'm a sorceress. Illusion is my strongest working, but I'm versed across the schools. I've submitted application to the University... Department of Sorcery. Since you now oversee such

matters..." Her shoulders lifted in elegant shrug. "I thought it proper you at least know my face."

Everett studied her a moment more. Sorcery. Rare. Dangerous. Valuable. It wasn't what she said that struck him but how easily she said it. As though being among the few living who could speak power's oldest tongue was merely her trade.

"I see."

"Do you?" Her smile sharpened. Though not unkindly. "Perhaps in time. For now, I wished only to pay respects. Your grandfather gave me answers, even when they weren't the ones I sought. Such kindness deserves honor."

Her words held weight beneath them. But she didn't elaborate.

"I'll be in Palencia a while," Nyssa said. Smoothing her skirts as if to close the exchange. Every gesture deliberate. Unhurried. "I imagine we'll meet again... under less solemn circumstances."

"Well, sorcery instructors are always needed. Come by the tower in a few days and we'll discuss the position properly. Today..." He glanced at the dispersing crowd. "Today isn't the day for such matters."

She gave a gracious nod of understanding. Turned. Then paused. Glancing back over her shoulder. "He wrote to me once that magic's real power isn't in what gates we open, but in the words we choose to send through them. I never grasped his meaning. Perhaps you will."

With that she was gone. Weaving back into the dispersing crowd. Leaving only the faintest trace of lavender and Everett with the unsettling sense he'd just been measured.

The lift groaned beneath his feet. Rising slowly toward the tower's peak. Each gear-click echoed in the shaft like counting down to something he wasn't ready to face.

The Citadel of Anuza stretched above the city like an accusation carved in stone.

When the lift shuddered to halt, he stepped into polished corridors with legs that felt disconnected from the rest of him. Everything sat exactly as his grandfather had left it. Star charts on walls. Relics in their cases. The faint hum of layered magic singing harmonics in his bones. It should have comforted. Instead it felt like walking through a museum built to his own inadequacy.

Luna padded from shadows. Falling into step beside him. The silver jaguar's presence was the only thing that felt real. Solid. Trustworthy. Her amber eyes tracked his movement with understanding that needed no speech.

At corridor's end stood the dragonsteel door. Its sapphire lock pulsing with inner light. Everett raised his hand and spoke the word: "Secanuyor."

Heart's truth. In the old tongue. The irony wasn't lost. He wasn't certain he knew his own heart's truth anymore.

The locks unwound with a sound like resignation. The door groaned open.

His grandfather's study was unchanged. Circular chamber. Violet stone walls that seemed to breathe when looked at sidelong. The dome ceiling painted with crystal stars that tracked the real heavens above. Books most kingdoms had forgotten lined impossible shelves. His grandfather's desk

remained cluttered with half-finished workings and sky-maps.

The scent struck him like a blow. Lavender. Burnt parchment. That particular mix of ink and magic that had always meant grandfather. Meant safety. Meant home. Now it merely meant absence.

A flutter drew his eye. A book with blank pages accompanied by a quill that moved of its own accord. Quint descended from ceiling-height. Pages rippling as the sentient tome settled on the desk. Text flowed across his surface: *You look wretched.*

"My thanks. Precisely what I needed to hear."

*Would you prefer pleasant lies? I could write 'all will be well' in seven tongues.*

"Not now, Quint."

*As you wish. Though I should mention you're gripping that crystal hard enough to crack it.*

Everett glanced down. His knuckles had gone white round the shard. He forced his fingers loose. Moving to the scrying table at chamber's heart.

The crystal settled into the table's central hollow as though made for it. For a breath, nothing. Then light erupted. Not the controlled glow of practiced magic but something raw. Desperate. Forced into being by will alone.

"Everett, my boy. Listen close."

The voice was a blunt trauma. Desperate. Breathless. Nothing like the measured tones he knew.

The light steadied for one breath. His grandfather's face swam into view. Not calm. Not composed. But burning with urgency. Blood darkened his robes.

"If this reached you... I have only moments. The blade..." A violent flicker tore through the image. "...I never saw their face. Only a mask. An Orikuun. White and gold, those flame-horns curling. They must have been waiting. The scholar from Vivona had just left."

A cough wracked him. When he spoke again, his voice was weaker.

"You must protect the Crown of God."

The words hung strange. Six gods. Which crown?

"Our ancestor... by blood, by duty... the one history calls the Guardian. He served King Ashuryn in the final days. When Palencia fell, he hid something. A relic of terrible power. The Unity Jewel. He created trials to guard the path, then took his own life so none could ever torture the knowledge from him."

Static consumed the image. His grandfather's form broke apart. Reformed.

"Each Archmage receives only the first step. I never took it. I thought we had time." Grief cracked his voice. "I was a fool."

The projection flickered violently.

"The Guardian believed... both bloodlines would be needed. The blood of the Guardian. The blood of the King. Before the end, you will need both."

His face dimmed. Barely visible.

"The Sanctum. Behind the Southern Cross. Take the iron signet... seven stars. Wear it."

His voice grew distant. Fading.

"Eastern mirrors. Center stone. Speak: Secanuyor, tal anur, siris Anuza, veyl Anaranthal."

Distortion tore through the image. When it returned, only fragments remained. His grandfather reaching for something off-frame. A door slamming. Blood on vellum.

"I'm sorry. So sorry. You're stronger than you know. Remember..."

A final surge of clarity. Tears streaming down his face.

"Iluneth ethir'el venar. Always in Unity with you. I love you, boy. I love..."

Darkness. Silence. The crystal cracked through its heart and went black.

Everett stood frozen. His grandfather hadn't died peacefully. He'd fought. He'd been afraid. He'd died trying to preserve secrets now laid upon Everett's shoulders.

Behind the desk, the star-chart of the Southern Cross hung where described. Behind it, a hidden hollow. Inside lay a ring of black iron. Seven pinprick stars caught light and wouldn't release it.

He slipped it onto his right hand. Perfect fit. The weight of it felt like one more burden added to the pile.

Quint's script appeared: *Your grandfather just revealed your entire order exists to protect a fragment of a dead god's crown, hidden by a man who killed himself to keep its location secret. And you need the blood of a king who died seventeen centuries ago. Even I struggle to find humor in that.*

His heart hammered. Ancient relics. Hidden enemies. Seventeen centuries. The words circled endlessly in his skull. How was he to find something lost for ages? How stop threats he couldn't even name?

The blood of the King.

The thought was a sudden, freezing shock. Ashuryn's bloodline. Some believed the royal houses of Palencia claimed descent from lords of the old kingdom. Which meant...

Enzo?

If anyone carried the blood of kings, it was the missing prince.

The understanding settled slowly. Not merely the burden of being Archmage. His grandfather's murder was only the beginning. Somewhere, enemies moved. Searched. Plotted. And he was meant to stop them with knowledge he didn't possess and power barely leashed.

"One way to see it," Everett managed. Voice hoarse. His hands trembled. When had they started?

*Ancient relics, hidden temples, threats to reality itself... your grandfather never believed in simple inheritance.*

"He never did anything simply." Everett turned from the desk. Legs unsteady. He knew where the trials' entrance would be. Eastern wall. Three mirrors. But the thought of facing them now. With his mind reeling and hands shaking...

He moved without thought. Feet carrying him up the narrow stair hidden behind eastern shelves. An old brass door gave way with gentle push.

The rooftop garden was a small miracle. Carefully tended vines clinging to wrought iron. Lavender and mint stirring in evening wind. Below, Palencia glittered under dusk's purple veil. Ten thousand lights kindling as families gathered for supper.

He crossed to the stone rail. Gripped it with both hands. Needing something solid. A memory rose unbidden. Sharp as a blade.

"We're going to change the world, Ev."

He looked toward the old stone bench half-hidden among the hydrangeas. Time seemed to fold. Enzo. Barefoot and grinning. Arms spread wide like he meant to embrace the entire sky. Seventeen and absolutely certain the future belonged to anyone brave enough to seize it.

They'd shared a bottle of ancient Vivonan wine that night. Stolen from the royal cellars and opened with Enzo's knife because he refused to be delicate about anything.

"To the next age," Enzo had declared. Bottle raised starward.

"To light in darkness," Everett had answered. Meaning it wholly.

Instead, Enzo had vanished.

The blood of the King.

"Where are you, friend?" he whispered to the darkening sky. "If you're living, you're a selfish bastard for letting us worry. But please don't be dead. I'd rather curse you than mourn you."

*And I might need your blood to save the world.*

Everett bowed his head. The breath he loosed shook on its way out, and he let it. The tower felt too small suddenly. Walls pressed in. He could feel the wards humming round him. Protective yet isolating.

He needed wine. Several cups of it.

*Going somewhere?* Quint inquired as Everett descended.

"Out."

*Ah, the classic Wren approach: wine and avoidance. Shall I offer a jest? What does a mage say to his lady in bed? I'll show you my staff if you show me your gates. What does a mage do to his lady in bed? HElixir!*

Despite everything, Everett laughed. "Gods. That's wretched. I may have to retell it."

*The best strategies are conceived over good wine. The worst over bad. Try to discern the difference.*

Luna stretched and padded to the door. Glancing back expectantly. She, at least, understood the need to flee these walls.

They descended through the tower and stepped into Palencia's evening song. Distant laughter from taverns. Horses' hooves on cobbles. The watch calling hours.

The city streets offered a maze of choices. Dozens of taverns beckoned with warm light spilling from windows. Promising wine and blessed escape from ancient mysteries. But Everett's feet knew where they wanted to go. The same unnamed tavern off Scholar's Row where he'd spent too many nights as a student. Drowning in wine and philosophy with Enzo before responsibilities found them.

He pulled his hood up and began walking. Letting muscle memory guide him while his mind tried desperately not to think of relics that could reshape reality.

Behind him, the Citadel rose into darkening sky. Windows glowing with arcane light. Ahead lay the promise of common company. Wine that didn't taste of duty. And perhaps a few hours where he could pretend to be merely another young man seeking solace at cup's bottom.

The bells had finished speaking.

He wasn't sure he'd started.

## THE SEVEN GATES

The magic system of Anurzil is governed by seven energy centers within the body, called Gates. Most people are born with all Gates closed. A rare few are born with one or more Gates open, granting them elemental abilities.

Gates cannot be trained open beyond their natural limit.

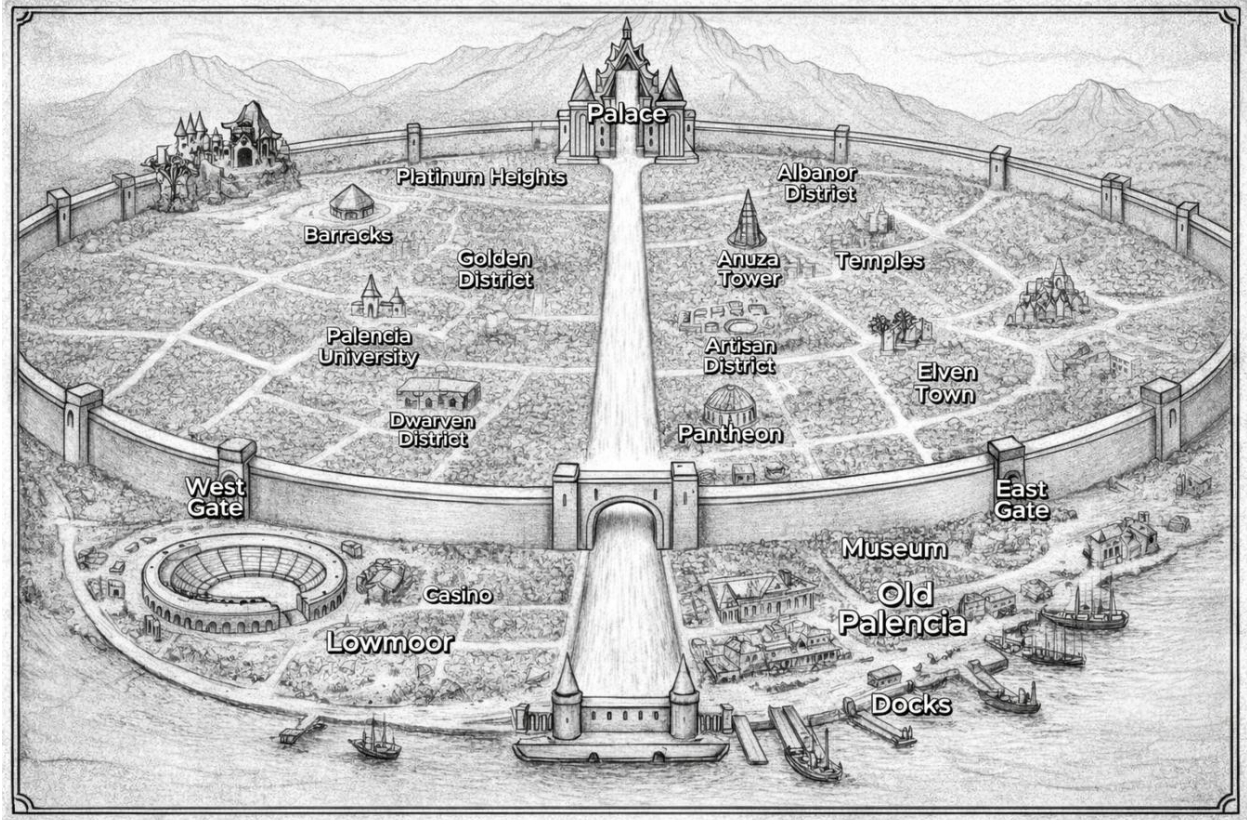
Gate	Location	Element	Powers
Mul-Geth (Root)	Base of spine	Earth	Stone shaping, tremors, armor
Van-Geth (Navel)	Below navel	Water	Ice, healing, drowning, blood
Sol-Geth (Solar)	Stomach	Fire	Flame, combustion, heat
Ar-Geth (Heart)	Chest	Air	Wind, flight, sound, breath
Thal-Geth (Throat)	Neck	Aether/Light	Illusions, veils, fear
Elan-Geth (Third Eye)*	Forehead	Mind	Telepathy, dream-walking
Seth-Geth (Crown)*	Top of head	Will	Telekinesis, force, sorcery

*\*Elan-Geth and Seth-Geth are inborn only — these abilities cannot be learned or trained.*

*The Crown Gate is required for sorcery, making true sorcerers extraordinarily rare.*

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