

# EQUINOX

DAVID TOWSEY



*An Ad Astra Book*

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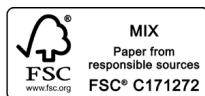
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Head of Zeus Ltd  
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I have seen the sun, despite what my day-brother might say.

The night of the summons I was watching the sunset. The orange sky turned to red behind the tiled roofs and cracked chimneys of Esteberg. I wondered what the warmth of a midday sun would be like on my face, on the back of my neck, on my hands. Then the stars blinked into existence and, in child-like imitation, so did the street lamps.

When the knock came at my door, I turned and crossed our room. The room I shared with my day-brother.

I opened the door to find a messenger – one in the King’s livery no less. The short boy had one hand against the wall as he caught his breath. The other hand he raised to forestall me. I gave him a moment.

My day-brother, Alexsander, and I rented the top of a boarding house, and in all fairness the steps *were* steep. Our position also benefitted from the heat and stench and endless noise of those below; all of which would have been lessened if everyone lived alone, as my day-brother and I. But there were many married couples living on the floors beneath us. In those first few minutes of the night, at least, there was quiet as people woke to the familiar disappointment lying next to them.

When the boy had quite recovered, he straightened his coat and asked, ‘Special Inspector Christophor Morden?’

‘The same,’ I said.

‘At the King’s pleasure,’ he said. With great care he produced a sealed letter, the paper pristine despite the boy’s own rumpled appearance.

‘We live to serve,’ I said. Something in the boy’s eyes echoed my feelings on *that* particular matter. At least I was nearing the end of my service; he had a lifetime at the King’s pleasure. One more small charge complete, he braved the descent back to the streets of Esteberg.

My own charge rested heavily in my hand. I closed the door and placed the letter on my writing desk. Doing so, I passed my day-brother’s modest collection of instruments which, after all our years together, he had finally agreed to keep tidily. As much as they frustrated me, with their strange echoing and phantom notes that would sound as I went about my business, I understood they were not the easiest items to keep in order. It was as if they actively resisted it. Those bulbous stringed ones, and the flutes and trumpets with more cranks and knobs and moving parts than a water mill. Our low, sloping eaves didn’t allow him to hang them. Hang them all, I said, but of course he was deaf to my poor pun.

I broke the King’s seal and read the summons. It was as functional and bereft of detail as they typically were: I was to present myself to the warden of St Leonars prison at my earliest convenience. There was nothing convenient about St Leonars, not least it being at the other end of the city.

Before I left, I remembered to water and mist our small ettienne plant. Alexsander had forgotten to do so for as long as I could remember. Or perhaps he simply remembered that it was part of my nightly ritual: one more little, vital excuse to avoid the city. The ettienne’s leaves immediately rose, its

summer flowers doing their best to add some colour to the room. I mostly saw them by candlelight.

There was such a plant in every room, in every house all across the Kingdom of Reikova – and likely beyond. It was not entirely understood why, but chewing ettiene aided the transition from day to night, and from night to day, for every man, woman, and child.

Ettiene was not the cause of the change. Just an aid.

The transition was inescapable for everyone. But it could be disorientating, uncomfortable, a fracturing rather than a smooth slide from night-brother to day.

There were children, fools, and worse who tested the change – those that tried to forgo sleep. But who could escape such a thing as sleep? And no one can escape themselves. Those that did try found their way, one way or another, to places like St Leonars prison more often than not.

I gathered my hat and cloak, mindful of the gathering clouds to the south. My notebook and pencil were already in my pocket, to which I added the summons. I closed the window and spared a glance at the mirror before fleeing the old man that looked back.

On my way down the steep stairs I heard the opening salvos of an argument. A young clerk and his wife lived there by night and, from what I could remember from my day-brother, the same marriage held during the day. That was increasingly uncommon in Esteberg, and likely the whole of the Kingdom of Reikova; there were even rumours of the King's daylight dalliances. I hurried on my way.

Blank faces looked up from their meals as I strode past the dining room and out of the boarding house. The evening air had lost the day's heat, instead holding a taut anticipation

of a clearing storm. I pulled up my collar as much for the small anonymity it provided as its protection against the first sputters of rain. Felden Street and those nearby were starting to fill with the night's workmen and women, many mirroring my own sense of weary purpose. Stalls and shops were slowly opening for the night; the same stalls and shops that opened during the day, perhaps run by night-brothers and night-sisters but perhaps not. Like my day-brother and I, others did not necessarily share the same occupation both night and day, both sides of the *ettiene*. Not all were suited to honest labour. I passed hawkers setting out their trays in the street. They looked up at me, bleary-eyed, yet to find the wherewithal to call out their wares – some consolation for an early summons.

Though St Leonars prison was inconveniently placed on the other side of the city, I was called there so regularly I knew the way well enough. I had, on occasion, paid for a carriage during the winter months but that had necessitated collection of certain other revenues; a Special Inspector's salary was not as generous as most people assumed.

Incorrect assumptions were a fairly common occurrence with regards to the King's Special Inspectors. We were just one small branch of the constabulary, not many in number, and not so visible as our uniformed colleagues. A branch formed nearly a hundred years ago, not long after Reikova was formally ratified as a state. The Special Inspectorate was, at the time, considered a more *modern* response to certain questions raised by the arcane and the unknown. Before, such things were dealt with in a more ad hoc, individual, and, dare I say, chaotic way.

Special Inspectors were assigned cases, and we completed them to the best of our ability. But to many citizens we

were still a delicious mystery. *Witch hunter*, they whispered, *demonologist*, *inquisitor*, and more such words they didn't really understand. Every Special Inspector was different – specialising as many in the constabulary did. Though throughout my years I had arrested and hanged a number of men and women guilty of witchcraft, I had also arrested and hanged men and women guilty of murder, of arson, of treason; all of the mundane variety. Citizens were quick to forget this when *Special Inspector* was uttered, assuming I was only interested in the arcane. Something I found advantageous at times.

The cobbled, mercantile Felden Street was soon behind me and I entered the slums. The street lamps were sporadic here, many glass cases broken or simply stolen. I was in no hurry for a better look along the squalid alleyways; I would be no help to the mange-ridden cats and hollow-cheeked children that loitered there. Both would flee from me even had I wanted to help them. I told myself it was an inspector's duty to be seen *in*, if not to see *into*, the darker parts of the city. But I knew this to be flimsy at best, vanity at worst. There was no way to St Leonars that didn't cross paths with the politely ignored underbelly of the King's city.

Entering a square, I happened upon a crowd in its early stages of formation and, like others, became part of its invisible pull. I drew no one's attention, my cloak and hat working to hide my badge and any hint of my office: just another early riser seeking distraction on an otherwise routine night. Given what I saw at the front of the crowd, this was just as well.

A rope separated us from a low, shabbily-curtained stage. The curtain twitched with a clumsy flash of fingers and an enormous, watery eye took in the crowd. A child at the

front squawked and backed away but I knew the effect to be an artless use of thick glass. The adults and older children tittered, unwilling to take their cue from one so young but otherwise unsure of what to make of it. Old Tanter must have been working the northern part of the city these last months.

The squat trickster sprang out from behind the curtain, his flourish of a worn velvet cape an attempt to hide a wobble in his knees.

‘Laugh if you must,’ Tanter called to one and all. ‘But is there anything more pure, more sincere than a child’s fear? Anything at all, in this Esteberg, this forsaken city?’ For emphasis, the stage lamps – pilfered street lamps – were put out by an assistant.

Tanter had misjudged this crowd, who didn’t take kindly to the sudden darkness. For myself, I put a hand on my coin purse just as the afeared child himself brushed past me, his fingers probing my cloak. I caught his arm and, meeting his now wide eyes, shook my head.

‘But...’ he whispered.

‘But nothing. No purses tonight.’

A flash lit the stage, followed by a plume of green smoke. Tanter did his best not to cough. We were both too old for this dance. I waited through his laughably short routine, noting when he sawed his assistant in half that he had finally taken my advice and put shoes on the fake legs. A blind drunkard could see fake feet, especially fake toes, from thirty paces. I also noted his flagrant use of pig’s blood and fester-root. But, for Tanter’s sake at least, he did not use even a modicum of *actual* magic. He was finally seeing sense in his later years.

When the show was over and the departing crowd had been pressed for a few undeserved copper kreers, I stepped



beyond the curtain. I found Tanter shaking down the boy, who was hurriedly trying to explain.

‘What do you mean, someone stopped you?’ Tanter hissed.

‘Exactly that,’ I said.

‘And who— Hello, Inspector.’

‘Put the boy down.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ He brushed at the boy’s ill-fitting coat. ‘You didn’t happen to see the show?’

‘The fester-root. Now.’ I held out my hand.

‘Would you believe—’

‘No, I wouldn’t.’

Tanter’s ingratiating smile turned to a more sincere grimace. ‘How am I supposed to do justice to the dread queen’s memory without the root? Nothing smokes so strong, so despicably coloured, so true to her character. You’re denying people their history, Inspector.’

‘I’m on my way to St Leonars. I could deny *you* more than history.’

The showman hopped to, rummaging among crates I had neither the time nor the inclination to search. He eventually produced a leather pouch tied tighter than my own coin purse. As I looked inside at the sickly green shavings, Tanter fidgeted.

‘Is this all of it?’ I said.

‘Yes.’ He nodded emphatically. He was a poor liar and a poor magician. Ultimately, he was just poor. ‘You... you wouldn’t make a King’s matter of me having that, would you?’

I paused long enough for Tanter to picture the gallows. ‘No,’ I said, and he all but collapsed. ‘Pay the boy, even though he didn’t lift a purse.’

I continued on through the slums towards St Leonars, the pouch of fester-root secure in my increasingly burdened pocket. When burned, fester-root created a harmless, though acrid, green smoke. When ground and put in food, a pinch could kill a man *and* the horse he rode. What that same ground powder did to metal, when a little water was added, was a sight one couldn't un-see. It was a good thing a man like Tanter wasn't important enough to have real enemies.

St Leonars prison was an appropriately imposing building. It rose out of the surrounding shacks and huts, solid stone with a singular, unified purpose – one building in the centre of a scattered jigsaw. The walls were easily twenty feet high, and gave the impression they were twenty feet deep. Guard towers stood at each corner of St Leonars' great square, with mounted muskets pointing both inwards and outwards.

At the entrance, night-releases were still coming out. They looked tired, beaten, and those that met my eye recognised the same when they saw it. They knew what I was.

In its way, despite the walls and guards and muskets, St Leonars prison was entirely escapable. The night-brothers and sisters of those incarcerated were, before my very eyes, walking out of prison. There were those relatively rare people who were convicted criminals day and night, both sides of the etienne. But the rest were released at either sunrise or sunset when the change occurred. They willingly returned just the same because the King's Justice *wasn't* escapable: the King couldn't hang just one brother or sister. Hanged at night was still dead come sunrise, and vice versa.

I presented the summons at the gates, where it was read. And read again.

‘Bad business,’ one guard muttered, showing the utterly functional script to his partner.

‘Excuse me?’ I said.

‘The warden’s in her office, Inspector.’ He waved me through the main gates. He smelled of cooked cabbage and pipe smoke.

I knew the way well enough, through long straight corridors with bars every twenty paces. My summons garnered unfathomable looks of sympathy, at the last of which I snatched the envelope back and demanded the man hurry up. He just shook his head and let me through. All these gateways and checks seemed unnecessary for an administrative wing, but I supposed the warden knew what she was about. She had been there long enough, day and night.

She didn’t look up as I entered her office. I waited as she squinted at letters an inch tall, in a room with more candles than a cathedral. Stacks of papers took up every available surface, including the floor, where there was an obvious path that made me feel like a soaring bird looking down on a mountain road.

‘Special Inspector Morden,’ she said. She carefully signed whatever she was reading, then sat back and took my measure. I shifted, as cattle shift under the butcher’s gaze. ‘How’s Alexander?’

I shrugged. ‘Busy, I think.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Are you going to tell me why I’m here?’ I said, trying to keep my voice even.

‘You’re here for the same reason I’m here: because you were told to be.’

‘And tonight?’

‘That’s not so good,’ she said softly. She stood, her aches and pains as evident and heavy as the keys around her neck.

I followed her down and down again, deeper into St Leonars than I had ever been before. Despite the warden’s presence, the guards at each gate made no effort to hide their pity.

A narrow staircase led us finally down to a damp, dark corridor. The walls and floor were formed of large, sweating stones, and the ceiling was low enough to force me to hunch uncomfortably. This felt like an older part of St Leonars – a building I’d always assumed had sprung into existence all at once, at the beginning of time when God created man, woman, and prison. There was an unexpected quiet as we passed door after door. Just as I was beginning to think the cells were empty, the warden stopped.

She started to speak, but caught herself. She came to some kind of decision, wincing at her own noise as she whispered, ‘See it first. Then I’ll explain what I can.’

I glanced at the iron-studded door. The boards had warped considerably and beads of water ran down their uneven surface.

‘What—’

The warden took a key from around her neck and, with a rhythm of clunks that sounded like the tolling of a mourning bell, unlocked the cell door.

The room was utterly black. I took a step back.

‘We removed the candle. It only seemed fair,’ the warden said.

I waited a moment, and my eyes adjusted enough to make out a figure huddled in the far corner.

I said something to the prisoner. Words that must have been comforting in both their sound and their meaning, but I wasn't really aware of either. He started to sob, which silenced me. I felt a gap between us, then, yawning up like a chasm. This boy, no more than sixteen years old with a life yet to be lived, and I... a man with little left. But what separated us was more than simple time, the chasm was a depth of suffering. The boy had suffered more than I ever could. I nearly turned and fled.

Instead, I felt compelled to step further into the room. The light from the corridor gave the young man shape: short hair, cut back like most prisoners; a thin, prominent nose; and holes where there should have been eyes.

He trembled violently.

Crouching, I cleared my throat and said, 'Hello?'

He flinched and tried to bury himself further into the corner of the room, but St Leonars' stone offered only resistance.

'He's become mute,' the warden said.

I glanced back to see her haloed in candlelight.

'Tongue's still there, mind.'

In another situation I may have been shocked by her casual delivery, but I had little shock left. I turned back to the boy, who wore a rough-looking smock but no shoes. He smelled faintly of lavender. 'Can you hear me? Do you understand?'

He continued his struggle to put a distance between us. I waited for him to calm himself, but eventually it became obvious I would only be a continuous source of agitation. I stood to leave.

'Inside the sockets,' the warden said. 'You need to... You should see.'

I could tell nothing from the warden's expression, except

that there was no room for argument. Tentatively, I stepped towards the boy as I would a dangerous animal; I felt shame at that thought, but it was there nonetheless. He was shaking his head with such force, his scalp ground against the stone wall and filled the cell with the smell of blood.

There was something else where there should have been eyes, just as the warden had said. A white pip lurking in each of those pools of darkness. Drawing closer, I took them to be bone – perhaps the boy had shattered a bone in his face and that had ruined his eyes. With such poor light it was hard to be certain and I found myself inexplicably reaching out a finger. My hand, my whole arm shook. As if sensing my intent and giving what permission he could, the boy stilled.

I touched the hard white pip, feeling a slight serrated edge. I withdrew quickly, hurried out of the room, and slammed the cell door shut.

‘Teeth?’ I said, incredulous, but the warden was nodding before I even finished.

‘Likely the cause of it; the pain becoming too much.’

‘I’m sorry?’ I said.

‘The teeth. That’s why he tore his own eyes out.’

We returned to the warden’s office in silence. I tried and failed, over and over again, to imagine how it would feel to have teeth growing behind one’s eyes. To imagine your own body turned against you in such a manner, and the pain that would produce. So much, it evidently drove the boy to pull out his own eyes just to be rid of it. As a King’s Special Inspector, I had witnessed many terrible acts. But rarely had I seen anything like that.