

THE CONQUERING DARK

Crown & Key Book 3

Excerpt

By Clay and Susan Griffith

CHAPTER ONE

The madman's boots rang heavily as he strode up the nave of Westminster Abbey. His embroidered attire was old-fashioned and unkempt, including ridiculously tasseled boots and lace cuffs. The fires of hell and damnation drenched his hands in a shimmering hot blaze, causing dignitaries on the aisle to stand and rear back while those farther away stared. Passing tomb by tomb, the red-haired man marched down the stream of time. Statues of marble men stood stoic while stone angels mourned the intrusion. An overdressed guard rushed forward. The intruder set him ablaze with a wave of his hand, then pitilessly sidestepped the flailing soldier.

The stunned throngs began to move in a panic toward the doors. The man with the burning hands swept under the arch of the choir screen and looked on the theater of coronation. His feet muddied the black-and-white-diamond floor as a squad of guardsmen formed a solid line between the intruder and the royal family, who sat facing forward on a raised dais in the spiritual center of the church.

King William IV rose from his chair, resplendent in an admiral's uniform, and turned with annoyance to view the disturbance. Beside him, the queen gained her feet as well, nervous and pale, contrasting against the white satin of her gown overlaid with a fine gold gauze. Her purple velvet train lined with white satin and a rich border of gold and ermine bunched around her legs as she twisted toward the line of soldiers standing with their backs to them.

King William motioned for the queen and the other grandees nearby to be removed from harm's way. More scarlet-breasted soldiers moved quickly to rush the dignitaries toward the north transept where they found their way blocked by a woman.

She had shocking short white hair and wore trousers with high boots and a metallic corset over her midsection. Even more shocking than her mannish attire and hair was the fact that she had four arms made of strong rods and struts of brass and steel. Two of her hands held pistols like some mechanical horror of a highwayman. In a third, she brandished a thin walking stick like a country squire. Her free hand gestured threateningly at the approaching crowd. "I suggest you all remain in your places."

"What is the meaning of this?" King William's voice echoed through the hallowed halls of the Abbey, even above the sounds of fear and shuffling feet. "You want to stop my coronation? So be it! But spare the lives of my subjects."

The redheaded man in the nave laughed, eyes crazed and hair wild. The heat radiating from his hands could be felt as he sneered, showing he was missing a few teeth. "You're all guilty of the same sins as the rest of us. Why should we let anyone go?"

"Enough ranting, O'Malley." The white-haired woman pointed at the king with her walking stick. "You have something we want, Your Majesty. We intend to take it."

From the shrine of Edward the Confessor located behind the altar emerged a tall, languid gentleman dressed in the finest black silks, a fashionable top hat gracing his head. His sophisticated attire was hardly complemented by the strange bulky steel gauntlets that covered his hands and forearms. In his steel-sheathed right hand he worked a thin-bladed sword that gleamed wickedly in the candlelight. Where all others fell back, only Simon Archer came forward.

“I think not,” was his calm reply.

One of the woman’s pistols swung with the clicking sound of a geared arm to cover the newcomer. The other gun lifted directly at the king. Simon Archer leapt onto the dais, seizing the sovereign and pushing him down behind the throne. Two lead balls slammed into the chair, splintering it across Simon’s back as he huddled over the king.

The sound of shots unleashed the panic anew. Hordes of people made for the closest doors, some shoving and pushing to save themselves, others shouting to allow the women to go first, struggling to assert a hint of civilization in the madness. Terrified crowds roared from the makeshift galleries in the north transept, swarming around the woman with the mechanical arms but fighting to keep their distance. She tossed her empty pistols aside and began to muscle her way through the panicked herd toward the dais.

“Baroness!” shouted the fiery lunatic, but turned as he heard the sound of weapons cocking behind him.

“That’s right, lad. Face yer better,” scolded a new voice, one laced with a thick brogue.

The wild eyes of the madman turned gleefully, pleased that someone had dared challenge him. His desire for violence was not going to be soothed quickly. “Who are you to say such? A pompous duke or lazy English lord?”

“A Scotsman!”

Laughter roared as loud as the flames around him as Ferghus O’Malley pointed a hand at the challenger dressed in a long frock coat striding up the nave toward him. “You’re a dead man.”

The Scotsman’s black hair was pulled back from his widow’s peak into a tight tail behind him. He sported a brace of four-barreled Lancaster pistols. Malcolm MacFarlane fired off two shots before he ducked below a bolt of fire that flared over his head. From his crouched position

Malcolm shot again, and the shells shattered near the cackling Irishman's head before the flaming target leapt into the surging mob that was only trying to escape him. Malcolm cursed and fought into the crowd to close on the Irishman.

Assured that the gun-wielding Scotsman protected his flank, Simon Archer drew the confused King William onto his feet. "Apologies for manhandling you, Your Majesty, but please follow the lovely lady behind you. She will lead you and the queen to safety." Though it was phrased as a polite request, the timbre of his voice brooked no argument. These two attackers—Fergus O'Malley and Baroness Conrad—were terrible threats with a legendary history of carnage and horror.

Simon didn't check to see if, in fact, the *lovely lady* was present; he knew she would be in the proper place. A tall regal woman with auburn hair was already busy herding bishops and earls and countesses under the shadows of the poet Chaucer in the south transept. She wore a full-length velvet cloak of royal blue trimmed with gold. Despite hurried gestures, her stature and grace depicted breeding and manners.

The king hesitated with fear in his expression. "My niece. I can't leave—"

Simon turned to the north transept where the king stared. Amidst the frantic mob being shoved aside by the annoyed Baroness, he noted the small shape of a desperate child nearly lost in the melee. No one paid the young girl any mind. Simon nodded sharply to the worried old man. "I'll see to her, on my word. You must go quickly, sir, before the Baroness can reach you." Simon signaled toward the woman behind them. "Kate, take His Majesty, would you?"

The auburn-haired woman finished giving an archbishop a shove through the door, sending his high mitre flying, then she put two fingers to her lips and let loose a sharp whistle at the king. She jerked her head at the exit behind her and tossed back her elegant cloak to reveal a calf-length wool skirt and a linen blouse across which was draped a soldier's bandolier. In place of ammunition, the leather slots held numerous glass vials. From her belt, she pulled a length of metal some two feet long with a curved grip at one end. With a flick of a finger on an unseen switch, two prongs unfolded from its front. It was a strange crossbow. She came toward the king, impatient that he was barely shuffling in her direction.

King William regarded her suspiciously until his eyes widened in recognition. "My word. Katherine Anstruther." Then he started to turn away. "But I can't leave that poor girl."

Kate grabbed the king by the arm and yanked him to the exit. She spared only a brief glance at Simon before giving the king another more gentle shove out. "Simon Archer will fetch your niece. Now come on, a little faster would be better."

With the king safe, Simon spun to the Baroness, watching the stark white of her hair as she came closer through the mob. Finally the last of the stumbling nobility cleared and the strange woman with four arms stood facing Simon twenty yards away. Something moved beside her. One of her metal hands was clamped around the lacy wrist of the small girl Simon had been after.

Princess Victoria, the niece of the king and queen and the heir to the realm.

The Baroness lifted the girl, who was barely eleven years old, off the ground like a fresh-bagged quail. "The king left something important behind. Now stand aside or I'll kill her."

Simon kept his sword raised but froze in his tracks.

"Run her through!" the young princess shouted, grasping the Baroness's goggles and wrenching them aside.

Simon gave only the barest thought to the bold attack of the little girl before he was on the Baroness, the point of his sharp blade aimed at her heart. The half-mechanical woman flinched aside, sweeping up another arm to block the thrust. Gears and pistons in the arm clicked and a series of spinning blades ratcheted out along her forearm. Sparks flew and Simon leaned forward, forcing the deadly appendage back. Princess Victoria yelped in alarm and kicked at her captor, who finally tossed the troublesome princess aside.

He fell back now, ducking under her arm with the whirring blades. He instantly returned to the attack. Although he weaved his sword with masterful precision, Simon lamented that he couldn't speak the power of aether into the blade. His skill allowed him to counter and riposte the swipes from the woman without fear if she had just the one weapon. However, all four of her arms struck at him. Simon almost smiled at the challenge as the steel fists came at him with incredible speed. He parried and ducked and whirled across the floor, trying to draw the Baroness away

from the winnowing crowd and the small girl, who came forward rather than retreating with the mob. The ring of steel meeting steel echoed through the church.

As he deflected one mechanical arm her bladed limb drove at him from the other side. Simon grabbed it and instinctively whispered a word of power. Her incredible strength smashed through his feeble defense and the lethal blades whirred inches from his cheek before he realized his idiocy. Only months ago he would have been able to fight back by summoning magic from the aether. No more.

He flexed his fingers wide, as Penny has shown him, to activate the small power source inside his gauntlet, and electrical current rippled over his knuckles. A shower of sparks brought the spinning blades to a whining halt. The Baroness screamed as the current coursed along the length of her metal arm and surged into her body. That shock should have dropped a draft horse, but she still moved forward with a face contorted by pain and bloody fury. Her mechanical body was clearly insulated.

One steel arm clamped around Simon's lower back and locked into place. Then he felt her walking stick pressed against his throat. She pushed down into him. He felt the merciless strength of the Baroness bending him over backward until he feared his spine would snap.

"Surrender!" Simon croaked with a ludicrous confidence he didn't feel.

The Baroness smiled at him, enjoying the pain she brought and the flash of worry that crossed his features. She licked her lips with pleasure.

Simon reached up and clutched the walking stick with his metal gauntlet. He stared directly into her goggle eyes as he twisted his arm and snapped the stick. He was a bit surprised it was just a simple walking stick, a mere affectation. But the action caused the Baroness to look at her shattered accouterment with both rage and confusion. The pressure against his backbone slackened slightly.

Simon took advantage of the brief delay in her murderous attack and immediately fell back, bringing her down with him. His legs jammed into her stomach and leveraged her into the air, stunned at the difficulty of such a feat without magic to fuel his strength. With a shriek of

alarm, she made to grasp at him, but he gave her no opportunity, slamming her into the high altar. The impact rang throughout the church.

She took a deep breath, seemingly stunned by the unexpected resistance, and eyed Simon warily as she pressed a small device on her belt. There was an inhuman roar from the north transept. When it was echoed by a child's scream, Simon smashed his steel fist into the Baroness's face. Her head slammed into marble and she slumped against the altar. He left her there and ran toward the scream.

Princess Victoria stood facing a massive manlike shape crowding the doorway of the north transept. The hulking thing dwarfed the girl like an Alp towering over a tiny chalet. The brute was huge and muscular, hunching forward and pounding the floor with bulging arms. Its head turned and a great toothy mouth opened in a snarl. Small sharp eyes peered angrily from under a heavy brow. It was a huge ape.

The monstrous gorilla rammed its way through the small door, breaking the frame with sheer will and muscle as it fought to answer its mistress's call. Once inside, it rested its bulk on steel knuckles. Its spine was exposed and bristled with wires and metal rods like a horrific streak of silver running along its back.

"Run, Your Highness!" Simon shouted as he raced toward her and the monster. The child backed away.

The great ape came at Simon like an avalanche, scattering chairs in its wake. The man leapt to the side and, as the beast's momentum took it past him, his arm fell like a piston on the back of its wired skull. The gauntlet crackled and arcs of electricity scurried like spiders from his hand to its metallic silver back. The ape crashed heavily to the stone floor in a heap, sparking and twitching.

Victoria stopped at the edge of the choir to watch Simon's confrontation with the gorilla. She instinctively reached up to Simon, who gathered the young child into his arms on the run. He sprinted past the dais, sparing a glance at the Baroness, who was beginning to struggle to her feet. Simon wanted to get the girl into trustworthy hands.

A column of blistering flame rose before them. Simon covered Victoria. The copper-headed Ferghus glared at them from the nave, his fiery hand feeding the flames that blocked their way.

“This line ends here!” Ferghus laughed. “If I can’t have the king, I’ll take the wee one.”

“We’re not done!” came Malcolm’s ragged voice as he kicked his way free of a barricade of smoldering chairs beneath the burning choir screen. He aimed his heavy pistols.

Fire shot out of Ferghus’s gesturing hand to form a barrier between him and Scotsman. The bullets never reached him but melted into slag and went astray.

“Bloody hell!” Malcolm cursed.

“Malcolm, get out of the way!” shouted a woman’s voice from the tiers of graceful arches above. A pert figure aimed a long tube at the Irishman amidst the flames.

Malcolm MacFarlane dove between the empty pews as Penny Carter fired a canister. Ferghus flared again, renewing the wall of flame around him. The canister struck the barrier and exploded. The concussion blasted Ferghus off his feet.

Young Victoria looked up at Simon. “He breathes fire like a dragon.”

With the princess still in his arms, Simon ran past the guttering fire column into the south transept. “Have no fear. We’ve slain many.”

Victoria’s eyes widened farther when Simon deposited her in front of a young girl not much older than the princess herself, slender and dressed in a simple white shift. The blond-haired girl was staring angrily into the church as if straining to join the fight herself. “Mr. Simon, the lady with the arms is up. Do you want me to—”

“I’ll see to it, thank you, Charlotte.” Simon coolly took up his sword and started toward the Kaliesque woman whose form wavered beyond the flames. She had seized hold of the legendary chair of King Edward. “That won’t do.” He nodded knowingly to himself and called back to Charlotte, “Take Princess Victoria to Kate.”

Charlotte gasped at the princess and attempted a panicked curtsy. “Your Majesty!”

Victoria kept her eyes locked on Simon as he charged back into the fiery maw. “Who is he? Who are you all?”

Charlotte was already pulling the princess out the door, away from the blistering heat of the flames. “His name is Simon Archer. I’m Charlotte. We fight monsters.”

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