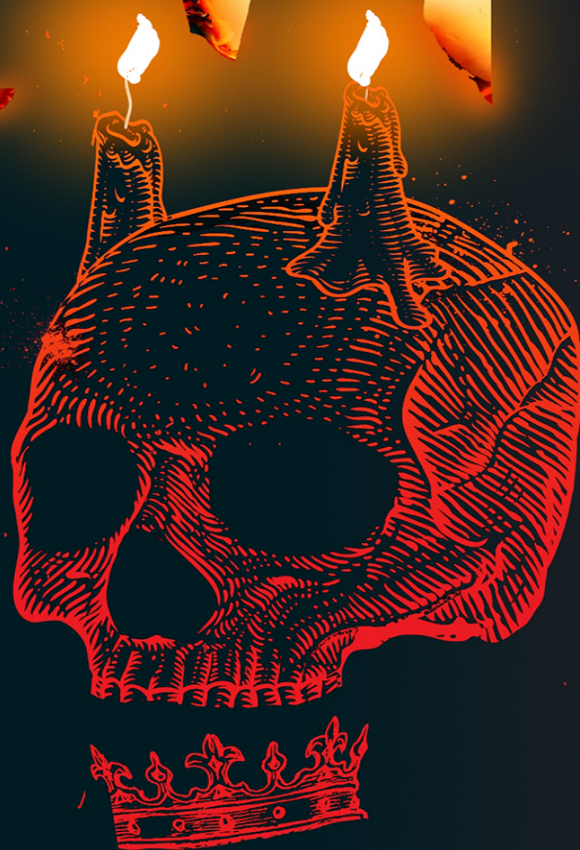


the DEVILS



NEW YORK
TIMES

JOE

BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

ABERCROMBIE



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*For Gillian,
Dragging fantasy fiction into the sewer
Since 2006*



part I

WORST PRINCESS EVER



Saint Aelfric's Day

It was the fifteenth of Loyalty, and Brother Diaz was late for his audience with Her Holiness the Pope.

“God *damn* it,” he fretted as his scarcely moving carriage was buffeted by a procession of wailing flagellants, their backs streaked with blood and their faces with tears of rapture, whipping themselves along beneath a banner that read simply, “Repent.” What one was called upon to repent *of* wasn’t specified.

Everyone’s got something, don’t they?

“God *damn* it.” It might not have been numbered among the Twelve Virtues, but Brother Diaz had always prided himself on his punctuality. He’d allowed a full five hours to get from his hostelry to his interview, sure that would leave him with at least two to piously admire the statues of the senior saints before the Celestial Palace. It was said all roads in the Holy City led there, after all.

Only now it seemed all roads in the Holy City led around and around in chilly circles crawling with an unimaginable density of pilgrims, prostitutes, dreamers, schemers, relic-buyers, indulgence-dealers, miracle-seekers, preachers and fanatics, tricksters and swindlers, prostitutes, thieves, merchants and moneylenders, soldiers and thugs, an astonishing quantity of livestock on the hoof, cripples, prostitutes, crippled prostitutes, had he mentioned the prostitutes? They outnumbered the priests some twenty to one. Their glaring presence at the blessed heart of the Church, screeching smoking come-ons and displaying goosefleshed extremities to the uncaring cold, was shocking, of course, disgraceful, undoubtedly, but also stirred desires Brother Diaz had hoped long buried. He was obliged to adjust his habit and turn his eyes heavenwards. Or at any rate towards the jolting ceiling of his carriage.

That sort of thing was what had got him in trouble in the first place.

“*God damn it!*” He dragged down the window and stuck his head into the frosty air. The cacophony of hymns and solicitation, of barter and pleas for forgiveness—and the stench of woodsmoke, cheap incense, and a nearby fish market—were

both instantly tripled, leaving him unsure whether to cover his ears or his nose while he screamed at the driver. "I'm going to be late!"

"Wouldn't surprise me." The man spoke with weary resignation, as though a disinterested bystander and not charging an exorbitant fee to convey Brother Diaz to the most important appointment of his life. "It's Saint Aelfric's Day, Brother."

"And?"

"His relics have been hoisted up the steeple of the Church of the Immaculate Appeasement and displayed to the needy. They're said to cure the gout."

That explained all the limps, canes, and wheeled chairs in the crowds. Couldn't it have been scrofula, or persistent hiccups, or some malady that left the afflicted capable of flinging themselves out of the path of a speeding carriage?

"Is there no other route?" Brother Diaz screeched over the gabble.

"Hundreds." The driver directed a limp shrug at the swarming crowds. "But it's Saint Aelfric's Day everywhere."

The bells for midday prayers were starting to echo over the city, beginning with a desultory dingle or two from the roadside shrines, mounting to a discordant clangour as each chapel, church, and cathedral added its own frantic peals, jockeying to hook the pilgrims through their doors, onto their pews, and up to their collection plates.

The carriage lurched on, flooding Brother Diaz with relief, then immediately lurched to a halt, plunging him into despair. Not far away two ragged priests from competing beggar-orders had been cranked up in telescopic pulpits, swaying perilously above the crowd with a groaning of tortured machinery, spraying spit as they argued viciously over the exact meaning of the Saviour's exhortation to civility.

"God *damn* it!" All that work undermining his brothers at the monastery. All that trouble preventing the abbot's mistresses from finding out about each other. All his bragging about being summoned to the Holy City, singled out as special, marked for a great future.

And this was where his ambitions would die. Buried in a carriage stalled in human mire, in a narrow square named after a saint no one had heard of, cold as an icehouse, busy as a slaughterhouse, and squalid as a shithouse, between a painted enclosure crammed with licensed beggars and a linden-wood platform for public punishments, on which a set of children were burning elves in straw-stuffed effigy.

Brother Diaz watched them beating the pointy-eared, pointy-toothed dummies, sending up showers of sparks while onlookers indulgently applauded. Elves were elves, of course, and surely better burned than not, but there was something

troubling in those chubby little children's faces, shining with violent glee. Theology had never really been his strong suit, but he was reasonably sure the Saviour had talked a lot about mercy.

Thrift most definitely was numbered among the Twelve Virtues. Brother Diaz always reminded himself of that as he gave the beggars outside the monastery gates a wide berth. But sometimes one has to invest to turn a profit. He leaned out of the window to scream at the driver again. "Promise to get me to the Celestial Palace on time and I'll pay double!"

"It's the Holy City, Brother." The driver barely even bothered to shrug. "Only madmen make promises here."

Brother Diaz ducked back inside, tears stinging his eyes. He squirmed from his seat onto one knee, slipped out the vial he wore around his neck, its antique silver polished by centuries against the skin of his forebears. "O Blessed Saint Beatrix," he murmured, gripping it desperately, "holy martyr and guardian of our Saviour's sandal, I ask for only this—get me to my *shitting* audience with the Pope on time!"

He regretted swearing in a prayer at once and made the sign of the circle over his chest, but while he was working his way up to pinching himself in the centre by way of penance, Saint Beatrix made her displeasure known.

There was an almighty thud on the roof, the carriage jolted, and Brother Diaz was flung violently forward, his despairing squawk cut short as the seat in front struck him right in the mouth.

How It Goes

Alex nailed the jump from window to carriage-roof, rolled smooth as butter and came up sweet as honey, but botched the much easier jump from carriage-roof to ground, twisted her ankle, blundered off balance through the crowd, bounced mouth-first from the dung-crusted flank of a donkey, and went sprawling in the gutter.

The donkey was quite put out and its owner even more so. Alex couldn't be sure what he was yelling over the wails of some passing penitents, but it was *not* flattering.

"Fuck yourself!" she screamed at him. A monk gawped at her from the carriage, with a bloody mouth and that look of sweaty panic tourists get in the Holy City, so she shrieked, "And you can fuck yourself, too! Fuck each other," she added, half-hearted as she hobbled away.

Swearing's free, after all.

She whipped a prayer-cloth from a stall while the merchant wasn't looking—which wasn't so much theft in her book as just good reflexes—wrapped it over her head scarf-like, and slipped among the penitents, doing her best pitiful moan. Not difficult given the pain throbbing up her leg and the prickle of danger tickling her neck. She raised her hands towards the jagged strip of blue between the mismatched roofs and mouthed a smoking prayer for deliverance. For once, she almost meant it.

This is how it goes. Start the evening looking for fun, end the morning begging forgiveness.

God, she felt sick. Stomach churning, burning up her sore throat, and there was the rumour of trouble at her arse-end, too. Maybe last night's bad meat or this morning's bad prospects. Maybe the money she'd lost or the money she owed. Maybe a little dung on the lips, still. Then the unholy stench of the pilgrims—bidden from washing on their long treks to the Holy City—wasn't helping

anyone. She twitched a corner of the prayer-cloth over her mouth and stole a glance backwards, peering through the thicket of arms raised to heaven—

“There she is!”

No matter how she tried, she never could quite fit in. She elbowed past a blindfolded pilgrim, shoved over another shuffling on his scabbed knees, and lurched up the street as quick as she could with a bad ankle, which was nowhere near as fast as she’d have liked. Over the noise of someone belting out hymns for coppers she could hear chaos behind. A fight, if she was lucky, those penitents could get pretty frisky if you came between them and the grace of the Almighty.

She skittered around a corner into the fish market in the shadow of the Pale Sisters. A hundred stalls, a thousand customers, the clamour of bad-tempered barter, the salty sea-reek of the morning’s catch, gleaming in the watery winter sunlight.

She glimpsed a flash of movement and dropped on a reflex. A clutching hand ripped a loose hair from her head as she went sliding under a wagon, was almost clubbed by pawing hooves, rolled away to wriggle between someone’s legs, through the chilly slather of guts and bones and slimes beneath the stalls.

“Fucking got you!”

A hand clamped around her ankle, her fingernails leaving worming trails through the fish mulch as she was dragged into the light. It was one of Bostro’s thugs, the one suffering from a three-cornered hat made him look like a failed pirate. She came up punching, landed one on his cheek with a sick crunch that she’d a worry was her hand not his face, and he caught her wrist and wrenched her sideways. She spat in his eye, made him flinch, booted him in the groin and made him stumble, flailing about with her free hand. They might put her down, but she’d never stay down. Her fingers found something and she shrieked as she swung it. A heavy pan. It smashed the pirate across the cheek with a sound like the bells for evening prayers, knocked his stupid hat spinning, and laid him out lengthways, customers diving away as hot oil showered everywhere.

Alex spun around, a fishy wad of her own hair stuck across her eyes. Staring faces, pointing fingers, figures forcing through the crowd towards her. She sprang onto the nearest stall, planks bouncing on their trestles as she kicked through the ocean’s bounty, fish flopping, crabs crunching, merchants roaring abuse. She sprang for the next stall, slipped on a huge trout, and reeled one more desperate step before she crashed down on her shoulder and went sprawling in a shower of shellfish. She struggled up gasping, limped for a rubbish-choked alleyway, and was about four steps down it before she saw it was a dead end.

She stood there in a horrified crouch, staring at the blank wall with her hands helplessly opening and closing. Ever so slowly, she turned.

Bostro stood in the mouth of the alley, big fists propped on hips, big jaw jutting, a blank slab of menace. He clicked his tongue with a slow *tut, tut, tut*.

One of his thugs joined him, breathing hard from the chase. The one with the grin full of brown teeth. God, they were a sight. If you had that grin, at least clean your teeth, and if you had those teeth, at least don't grin.

"Bostro!" Alex produced the best smile she could while panting for breath, which was a poor one, even by her standards. "Didn't know it was *you*."

His sigh was as weighty as the rest of him. He'd been collecting for Papa Collini for years and must've heard every trick, lie, excuse, and sob story you could imagine and no doubt quite a few you couldn't. This one didn't impress him.

"Time's up, Alex," he said. "Papa wants his money."

"Fair enough." She held out her bulging purse. "Here's the whole sum."

She tossed it to him then made a dash for it, but they were ready. Bostro caught the purse while his shit-toothed friend caught Alex by the arm, swung her around, and flung her against the wall so her head smacked the bricks and she went rolling in the rubbish.

Bostro opened the purse and eyed the contents. "Here's a shock." He dangled it upside down and dirt showered out. "Your purse is as full of shit as you are."

The aspiring pirate had joined the party with a pink pan-mark down his face. "Watch it," he grunted, knocking a dent from his fish-smeared hat. "She's vicious when cornered. Like a starving weasel."

She'd been called worse. "Now look," she croaked as she clambered up, wondering if they'd broken her shoulder, then when she tried clutching at it wondering if she'd broken her hand. "I'll get him the money. I can get him the money!"

"How?" asked Bostro.

She pulled the rag from her pocket and unfolded it with suitable reverence. "Behold the fingerbones of Saint Lucius—"

The one with the hat slapped them out of her hand. "We know dog feet when we see 'em, you swindling bitch." Which was quite upsetting after all the work she'd put into filing the claws down.

"Now look," she said, backing away with her battered, throbbing, fishy hands up but fast running out of the alley, "I just need a bit more time!"

"Papa gave you more time," said Bostro, herding her backwards. "It ran out."

“It’s not even my debt!” she whined, which was true, but entirely beside the point.

“Papa warned you not to take it on, didn’t he? But you took it on.” Which was also true, and very much on the point.

“I’m good for it!” Her voice was getting higher and higher. “You can trust me!”

“You’re not and I can’t, and we both know it.”

“I’ll go to a friend!”

“You don’t have any.”

“I’ll find a way. I always find a way!”

“You haven’t found a way. That’s why we’re here. Hold her.”

She landed a punch on Shitty Teeth with her good hand, but he barely noticed. He caught her arm and the pirate caught the other, and she kicked and twisted and wailed for help like a mugged nun. They might put her down, but she’d never stay

Bostro thumped her in the stomach.

It made a thud like a stable boy dropping a damp saddle and the fight fell straight out of her. Her eyes went wet and her knees went floppy and all she could do was hang there and make a great long vomity wheeze and think actually it might be best if she stayed down after all.

There really is nothing romantic about a punch in the gut from someone twice your size, specially when the best you’ve got to look forward to is another. Bostro caught her around the throat with one great fist and cut her wheeze off to a slippery gurgle. Then he took his pincers out.

Iron pincers. Polished from lots of use.

He didn’t look happy about it, but he still did it.

“Which’ll it be?” he grunted. “Teeth or fingers?”

“Now look,” she slobbered, near swallowing her tongue. How long had she been playing for time? A week or two more. An hour or two more. She was down to playing for moments. “Now look—”

“Pick,” snarled Bostro, his pincers getting so close to Alex’s face she went cross-eyed staring at them, “or you know it’s both—”

“One moment!” The voice rang out, sharp and commanding, and everyone looked around at once. Bostro, the thugs, and Alex, too, far as she could while half-throttled.

A tall, handsome man stood in the mouth of the alley. In her line of work, you learn to tell how rich someone is at a glance. Tell who’s rich enough to be worth

swindling. Tell who's too rich to be worth the trouble. This was a very rich one, robe worn around the hems, but good silk, stitched with dragons in golden thread.

"I am Duke Michael of Nicaea." He had a trace of an eastern accent, it was true. A bald fellow with sweat on his forehead hurried up beside him. "And this is my servant Eusebius."

Everyone took stock of this surprising turn-up. The so-called duke was looking at Alex. He had a kind face, she thought, but then she could put on a very kind face and she was a thieving bitch, ask anyone. "I understand your name is Alex?"

"You understand correctly," grunted Bostro.

"And do you have a birthmark beneath your ear?"

Bostro shifted his thumb and raised his brows at the piece of neck revealed. "She does."

"By all the saints..." Duke Michael closed his eyes and took a very deep breath. When he opened them, it looked like there might be tears there. "You're alive."

Bostro's grip had loosened enough for Alex to wheeze, "*For now.*" She was shocked as anyone, but the winners are those who get over their shock quickest and start working out where the profit is.

"Gentlemen!" announced the duke. "This is none other than Her Highness the Princess Alexia Pyrogennetos, long-lost daughter of the Empress Irene and rightful heir to the Serpent Throne of Troy."

Bostro must've heard every trick, lie, excuse, and sob story you could imagine, but this one lifted even his eyebrows. He squinted at Alex as if someone had told him the turd he'd just watched squeezed from a goat's arse was actually a gold nugget.

All she could do was shrug her shoulders very high. She'd been called a scammer, a fleecer, a cheat, a thief, a bitch, a thieving bitch, a ferrety fuck, a lying weasel, and those were only the ones she'd taken as compliments. She'd never, far as she could remember, been called a princess. Not even in the least funny jest.

Shitty Teeth's face twisted so violently that even shittier teeth came into view towards the back. "She's fucking *what* now?"

Duke Michael considered Alex, hanging there like a cheap rug halfway through its annual beating. "I will admit she does not appear ... *terribly* princessy. But she is what she is and we'll all have to live with it. I must therefore insist that you unhand her royal person."

"Unhand?" asked the would-be pirate.

"Let go of her." The duke's pleasant manner peeled back a touch and Alex caught a glimpse of something flinty underneath. "Now."

Bostro frowned. "Lying weasel owes our boss."

The pirate twisted a tooth from his bloody mouth. "Ferrety fuck knocked out one o' my teeth!"

"Shame." The duke raised his brows at the tooth. "It looks a really good one."

The man angrily tossed it away. "Well, I bloody liked it."

"I see you have suffered some inconvenience." Duke Michael reached into a pocket of his gold-threaded robe. "God knows, I am well aware how inconvenient princesses can be, *so...*" He held some coins up to the light. "Here is something..." He put a couple back, then tossed the rest onto the dirty cobbles. "For your trouble."

Bostro peered down, scarcely more impressed than he had been by the dirt in Alex's purse. "Thought she was a fucking princess?"

"When announced by a herald it is typically without the *fucking*, but yes."

"And that's what her life's worth?"

"Oh, no," said Duke Michael. His servant sank gracefully to one knee beside him, pulled open his coat, and produced a large sword, its stained sheath chased with shining wire, its battered gold pommel tilted towards his master. The duke rested one fingertip upon it. "That's what *your* lives are worth."